

WINGATE: Strange Genius of Jungle Wars

by Joseph Stocker

IN MAY, 1943, a ragged column of British soldiers emerged from the Burma jungles and the veil was lifted from one of the best-kept secrets of World War II. For three months these audacious fighters had roamed behind the Japanese lines, wrecking bridges and airfields, blasting ammunition dumps, spreading confusion and panic among the enemy. They had surmounted incredible hardships, even subsisting—when their aerial supplies failed—on boiled python meat, elephant steaks and grass soup. The news of their exploits, released only when they were safe at their base in India, thrilled the Allied world. Since Pearl Harbor, the Japanese had been having things pretty much their own way throughout Asia and the western Pacific. Now they had been forced to swallow some of their own medicine. It marked a turning point of the war.

The man who planned and led that bold thrust into Burma was Orde Charles Wingate, one of the most colorful and controversial personalities in British military history. He went to war wearing a full beard and a pith helmet, carrying a Bible under his arm and dangling an alarm clock from his little finger. He ate onions in prodigious quantities, claiming that they had special health-giving properties.

In the rare moments when he rested, he liked to lie naked in his bunk, reading Plato and scratching himself with a stiff toothbrush. He had contempt for most of his fellow officer, referring to them as "military apes." Wingate even kept a special grease-stained uniform to wear when meeting VIPs, to show his indifference to them.

HE WAS a slightly built, intense and moody man with thick, shaggy hair and piercing

blue eyes. Born in India in 1903, he grew up in an environment dominated by the Bible. His father, a retired army colonel, belonged to a sternly Puritan branch of English Protestantism. Young Orde Wingate committed large portions of the Bible to memory; and in later years, in the quiet of a jungle night, he could be heard reciting Biblical meditations in his tent. He also liked to use Biblical language in battle. Once in Burma he radioed his subordinate commanders: "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might."

He was given a military education and, after graduating, entered the Army. His first major assignment, in 1928, was to the Sudan, in northeastern Africa. Bored by this peace-time duty, he staged a one-man expedition in search of a legendary lost oasis. To save money for the hunt, he gave up smoking. He didn't find the lost oasis, but on a liner taking him back to Britain shortly afterward, he found a bride.

She was Lorna Patterson, the beautiful daughter of a Ceylon tea planter, and one story—possibly apocryphal—has it that she introduced herself to him by saying, "You are the man I'm going to marry." To which Wingate is supposed to have replied, "You are right. When?" Two years later (the story goes) she wrote him a letter which contained one word: "Now."

Wingate was sent next to Palestine. And it was there that the rebellious pattern of his career began to take shape. The British authorities were pro-Arab. But Wingate sympathized with the Jews. In their restless struggle to carve out a homeland, he saw the fulfillment of Biblical prophecy.

Wingate was only a captain. But with typical brashness he wrote directly to Winston Churchill to urge that the Jews be armed. The British finally agreed to let him organize "Special Night Squads" of Jews and British soldiers for a campaign of guerrilla warfare against marauding Arabs, who had been financed by Axis funds.

Wingate saw himself as a modern Gideon, commanded by God—like Gideon before him—to "go in this thy might, and thou shalt save Israel." His tactics even paralleled those of Gideon. Gideon fought by night and so did Wingate. Gideon sent 22,000 men home for cowardice and fought with 300 chosen warriors. Similarly Wingate, instead of using a large force, led 300 carefully trained men against the Arab insurrectionists.

In a short time the Arab revolt was broken. Captain Wingate was given a DSO and a promotion—and then recalled from the country for being too friendly to the Jews.

IN 1940 HE WAS assigned another important mission. It was to retake Ethiopia from the Italians, who had bombed the helpless natives and toppled Emperor Haile Selassie from his throne. Again he took command of a "Gideon's force," this one comprising about 1,800 Sudanese, Ethiopian patriots, British officers and Palestinian non-coms. And again he used Gideon's tactics of dividing his men into small units for swift guerrilla raids at night.

Although vastly outnumbered, Wingate's half-pint army soon had the Italians in wild retreat. They fell back so quickly that he captured one enemy command post while its field telephone was still functioning.

"You speak Italian," Wingate snapped to a newspaper correspondent. "Call them up and tell them that a British division, 10,000 strong, is on its way." The correspondent cranked the phone and conveyed Wingate's message.

"What shall we do? What shall we do?" wailed the Italian who answered at the other end.

"If you want my advice," said the correspondent, "clear out as quick as you can."

The Italians thereupon evacuated an impregnable position at a vital river crossing and Wingate captured it with a small detachment.

It took him just six months to vanquish Mussolini's African

pro-consuls. When they requested an honor guard for their surrender, he had to refuse because he didn't have enough men; and he was reluctant to humiliate a beaten enemy by disclosing the real size of his force. Later, on a white horse, he escorted Haile Selassie through the streets of Addis Ababa back to his throne.

But Wingate paid a price for his Ethiopian victory. He had incurred the disfavor of superior officers by ignoring messages and obeying only those orders with which he agreed. He arrived at General Headquarters in Cairo to find—not a hero's welcome—but cold indifference and even hostility. One night in his hotel room, worn out by the months spent in the African bush and deeply depressed, he slit his throat with a rusty Ethiopian knife. He eventually recovered from the wound and from his depression.

In 1942, Field Marshal Sir Archibald Wavell summoned Wingate to India. The Japanese had driven the British out of Burma and were getting ready to invade India. Wingate was made a brigadier and given the job of organizing a guerrilla force to go behind the enemy lines and sabotage their invasion preparations. His guerrillas, whom he called "Chindits" after a mythological Burmese dragon known as the "chinthā," numbered only about 3,000 and had little actual battle

experience. But they were honed to a fine edge by months of training.

On February 7, 1943, wearing his familiar pith helmet, Wingate led them into the Burma jungle. He knew that their only security lay in speed, and he ordered that all their waking hours be spent in marching and fighting. They were forbidden even to shave, for that would waste about ten minutes a day.

Supplied by air drops, co-ordinated by Wingate with a radio mounted on a mule, the guerrillas penetrated a full 300 miles behind the enemy's lines. It was a grueling campaign. Wingate had no field hospital with him and thus had to abandon his sick and wounded. But he effectively harassed the Japanese, probably staved off an invasion of India and, in the end, brought two-thirds of his force out of the jungle.

This marked the first time that the sorely pressed British lion had turned on its Japanese tormentors. Orde Wingate became a British hero—a man hailed everywhere as “the Lawrence of Burma.”

WINSTON CHURCHILL sent for Wingate to accompany Churchill to his Quebec conference with Franklin D. Roosevelt and other Allied leaders. There Wingate was made a major general and assigned the job of open-

ing the road from northern Burma to the Chinese border so that American and Chinese forces might pour in against the Japanese.

The U. S. Army Air Force was to support Wingate's jungle fighters. Command of the air element was given to Philip Cochran, a good-looking young colonel from Erie, Pennsylvania. Cochran already had gained considerable renown from having inspired the character of Flip Corkin in “Terry and the Pirates,” a comic strip drawn by his friend, Milton Caniff.

Wingate originally had thought of using planes to fly supplies to his new army of Chindits and bring out the sick and wounded. But Cochran came up with a far bolder idea: use gliders to fly in not only supplies, but the Chindits themselves. Wingate was delighted, although some of his native troops had misgivings. “We aren't afraid to go,” said one Gurkha soldier to a British captain, “and we aren't afraid to fight. But we thought you ought to know—those planes don't have any motors.”

At dusk one day the initial wave of planes and gliders took off for a jungle clearing 165 miles behind the Japanese lines. Wingate, nervously combing his beard, waited beside a radio to hear how they fared. For the first time he was not at the head of his troops.



At 4 a.m. a single word came crackling out of the loudspeaker: "Soyalink!" It was a prearranged code, meaning disaster. (Soyalink actually was a wartime ersatz sausage which the British hated.) Then, for long hours later, came another code word: "Porksausage!" This meant that everything was all right—carry on with the operation.

SOON WINGATE learned what had happened. The clearing, which had appeared smooth from photos taken by reconnaissance planes, actually was full of holes. Numbers of gliders in the first wave had crashed and 30 men had been killed. But the wreckage was cleared away, the holes were filled and planes and gliders came swooping on in until near-

ly 10,000 troops had been moved into the heart of enemy territory.

Wingate's second Burma expedition was successful beyond all expectations. Enemy supply lines were cut and the Japanese withered on the vine. One-fifth of their air force in Burma was destroyed. Finally all of northern Burma fell to the invading Allies.

Orde Wingate lived long enough to know that victory was in the making in this, his greatest military adventure. Then, on March 24, 1944, he took off in a B-25 bomber for a tour of inspection. The weather was bad. The plane became overdue. Next day its wreckage was found in the Burma jungle.



For days Wingate's death was kept a military secret, lest the news cause his men to lose heart. Then it was announced. "With him," said Winston Churchill, "a bright flame was extinguished."

Wingate's ambition had been to go back to Palestine after the war and help his Jewish friends win their independence. They won it without him, but the encouragement he had given them, with tactics he had taught them and with military commanders whom he had trained. Thus, in spirit at least, this 20th century Gideon—a man who ranks among the most romantic warriors ever to stride across the world's stage—finally did lead the forces of Israel to victory.