

LT COL I D MACHORTON

Ian MacHorton's death on 8 Aug 1990 was missed. The following is an extract from Harold James' obituary for 8GR newsletter.

"We were at OTS Bangalore in 5 Company, and commissioned in October 1942 in the 8th GR. As my mother had her home in Poona, we spent our joining leave there before travelling up to the Regimental Centre at Quetta.

Some two months after our arrival in Quetta, mysterious orders were received posting Ian, Alec Gibson and myself to Jhansi in Central India. Everyone in the Centre was foxed, and as it appeared to be a permanent posting, we took, as was the custom in those days, all our gear in steel trunks, the usual portable gramophone, and our Indian bearers.

After the traditional long, complicated train journey, with several changes, and hours spent on deserted platforms, we reached Jhansi and were transported to a vast camp. Arriving in the darkness, we were met by the adjutant of the 3/2nd Gurkha Rifles who asked us if we had made our wills. Only then did we discover that we were going into Burma in a matter of days on what turned out to be the first Chindit operation.

Our bearers were promptly returned with practically all our luggage to Quetta where its subsequent arrival, we learned later, caused even more consternation as to our fate. Being very young men of nineteen, we failed to really perceive the dangers that lay ahead, in particular should any of us be wounded. The order was that any wounded unable to keep up with the column would be left behind - in a Burmese village where possible. But if a soldier was seriously wounded, and stood no chance of surviving - perhaps a hundred miles or more of jungle from the nearest hospital and no air-lift - he was to be treated with compassion: for which purpose every officer was given a supply of morphine phials.

The Chindit columns crossed the Chindwin in the middle of February 1943, and by early March were across the Irrawaddy. On 15th March, 3 Column bivouacked near Southern Group and 1 Column, and so I met up with Ian again.

I was very relieved to find him still alive, and told him to take care when we parted again, our columns going their various ways. But Wingate had made a mistake: by crossing the Irrawaddy he had disclosed his position to the enemy. We were now trapped in the triangle formed by the Irrawaddy and the Shweli and the east-west

roads from Mongmit and Mogok to the Irrawaddy - a hot, waterless and depressing area.

In his exciting book SAFER THAN A KNOWN WAY, Ian describes the horror of the days that followed. During a fierce battle with the enemy he was badly wounded in the leg by a mortar splinter, and as he could not keep up with the column had to be left behind. "It was only then, when I was all alone", Ian wrote, "that the utter hopelessness and desperation of my predicament really overwhelmed me. My stomach curdled with the gall of my bitterness against the circumstances that had brought me there. Wrong though it was - for I understood fully well the 'drill' regarding leaving wounded - I felt bitter anger against Colonel Alexander for having given the order to leave me. In my self pity I felt he might have risked it and given instructions for me to be carried at the rear of the column".

A nineteen-year old officer, lying there alone and wounded on a hill deep inside occupied Burma, he could have been forgiven for giving up in despair, and to use the revolver placed at his side. But Ian was made of much stronger stuff. Following a narrow escape from capture, he somehow crawled his way through the hot tangle of dry bamboo jungle, until he was fortunate to be found by some Burma-Gurkhas who hid him in their village and helped him to regain his strength. But he was determined to rejoin his column, or find his way back to the British lines across some 150 miles of Japanese occupied country.

When the Brigade became trapped, Wingate gave the order to disperse and the columns returned to India as best they could. I reached Imphal with my dispersal group about a week before Ian. Men were arriving in groups or single, and I remember waiting anxiously for word of Ian and Alec Gibson (who was taken prisoner). But suddenly came the news that Ian had, against all the odds, reached the Mahrattas on the Yu after many hazardous adventures and was on his way by road to Imphal.

Some years after the war, Bernard Fergusson was most impressed by Ian's story and obvious courage, and recommended him for an award, only to be told that it was too late. So Ian never received the Military Cross he so obviously deserved. But those of us who were there, and served with him, knew that he had earned the decoration; and perhaps, in the long run, that is what really counts.

Harold James