

From Colonel D F NEILL, OBE, MC [1941 - 72]

Colonel Nick Neill kindly supplied the obituaries of Colonel Philip Panton and of Colonel Philip Panton and of John Gamble and he was most generous in including detailed accounts of the battles 3rd Battalion fought under Panton's command. There was insufficient space to include these accounts in the obituary and so they feature separately. In the next Sirmooree will be the account of the 3rd Battalion's part in the battle of Tamandu, 'Snowdon East' and Bhanbhagta Gurung's VC under command of Philip Panton.

Given here is Colonel Nick Neil's account of the 3rd Battalion's actions in the year March 1944 to March 1945 leading up to Tamandu.

Philip Panton was posted to the 3rd Battalion as Second-in-Command just after the new Commandant, Lieutenant-Colonel Reggie Hutton [1918 - 48] had arrived to command. The 3rd Battalion was still partly on leave when Hutton and Panton came to Dehra Dun, the regimental home.

The month's leave in Nepal and India had made a tremendous difference to the state of health of all in the Battalion. They had been with Brigadier Orde Wingate's operation behind enemy lines across the Chidwin and then the Irrawaddy rivers. Heavy casualties had been suffered by all battalions in Wingate's First Chindit Expedition, and two battalions had lost their commanders, 2nd Battalion Burma Rifles and 3rd Battalion 2nd Goorkhas, and a quarter of officers and men had died in battle.

There had been no rations for anyone once Brigadier Wingate had ordered the retreat from the far side of the Irrawaddy to begin. Huge mileages had been covered by many men up to 1,000 miles, for instance, and many had died in the Japanese ambushes, carefully laid to destroy the maximum number of Wingate's men in their retreat. Training and administration had now to start at once - the latter being under the direct supervision of Panton.

In March of 1944, 3rd Battalion entered Burma again, this time it was to be to Arakan to fight first Japan's 55 and then 56 Divisions. Patrolling started at once, with many successes being recorded at section and platoon level. 25 Indian Division, in which 3rd Battalion were now serving, soon became proud of the achievements of its only unit of Gurkha soldiers.

3rd Battalion were now given the task of carrying out a battalion attack on two enemy-held features, Tiger and Point 1433, on the Mayu Range. At 0500 hours, on 8 September, 1944, our field artillery opened fire on Japanese defences and A Company attacked the southern-most enemy position of Point 1433; C Company attacked the spine between 1433 and Tiger and B Company assaulted Tiger itself. Furious battle now erupted along the whole of the Battalion's front, with screams of fury coming from the mouths of the charging and fighting Gurkhas. Those listening to the sounds of the battle thought that our men had taken their objectives. However, it was defeat, rather than victory, that appeared to be our fate by last light on 8 September. Fortunately, this first assumption proved to be incorrect. By first light on 12 September, our fighting patrols found that the soldiers of 1st Battalion, 143 Regiment, were no longer holding their ground, but had gone - never to return. Our casualties had been 17 killed and 74 wounded. Colonel Reggie had won the first of his two DSOs - and Philip Panton had won the thanks and admiration for his plans to re-supply the whole of his grateful Battalion throughout the course of this savage battle.

After the 1433-Tiger battle, Reggie Hutton was promoted to Brigadier, and transferred to command 51 Brigade in the Division. Philip Panton was promoted to lieutenant-colonel to command 3rd Battalion on 27 October, 1944. The next objective was to advance south to capture Akyab Island. Akyab was taken without any fighting.

The enemy had withdrawn. Myebon Peninsula was the next objective for 3rd Battalion's 74 Brigade and 3 Commando Brigade. This operation was well opposed by Japan's very tough 56 Division. 3 Commando Brigade seized 'Easy Green Beach' against heavy opposition on 12 January 1945, followed by 3rd Battalion who led the advance northwards up the Myebon Peninsula. D Company, under Major Oldrini, now crossed the Kantha Chaung and advanced to reconnoitre Point 262. 16 men were wounded by enemy mortar and machine-gun fire. The Divisional Commander came forward and ordered Panton to take Point 262 without delay. On Point 262, the enemy had transformed the brick stump of a pagoda into a formidable bunker position. A force of RAF Thunderbolts was made available for the attack and RN sloops on the Myebon River, together with recently landed field guns were also put on stand-by.

At noon on 17 January, the Thunderbolts started their assault on Point 262. At 1300 hours, D Company, with a troop of tanks from 19 Lancers under command, began their attack. An assault platoon reached the pagoda bunker on the summit. The charge was led by a wounded rifleman, Dalsing Thapa, who, on his own, won the bunker position. Dalsing then brought his Bren into action against the defenders on the reverse slope beyond the pagoda position. This brave soldier then collapsed from loss of blood, to be promptly relieved by his platoon commander, Havildar Bhopal Ale. Bhopal started firing with his tommy-gun, hurling grenades and brick-bats from the shattered pagoda. By his vicious attack he beat back all counter-attacks to re-take the pagoda position. Amongst other decorations - 2 MCs and 1 MM - won by D Company on Point 262, Bhopal and Dalsing both won the Indian Order of Merit.

By 1530 hours D Company had taken 262. They then dug in and consolidated their position by nightfall. During the night, four fierce counterattacks were made by the enemy. All were beaten back with heavy loss to the enemy. Next morning, D Company counted 62 dead enemy bodies and picked up a prisoner from 111 Regiment, and a spiked field gun, an undamaged 90mm mortar and a large dump of ammunition were also taken. Colonel Panton was pleased with his Battalion's work.

The next operation was the landing at Ru-ywa. On 22 February, 74 Brigade landed at oboe 'Red Beach' with 3rd Battalion leading. 3rd Battalion moved eastwards to base up across the jeep-track which led north to Tamandu. Enemy were reported to be holding a nearby feature, nicknamed *Gurung*. Panton ordered Major Neill's B Company to capture *Gurung*. Neill took his Company forward to carry out a reconnaissance of *Gurung*. He detailed 6 Platoon for this task. No sooner had the reconnaissance started than the enemy opened fire at under 50 yards' range with 4 MMGs, 1 LMG and numerous rifles. The enemy then counter-attacked with the bayonet four times with 20-30 men. 6 Platoon beat back all attacks with heavy casualties and the platoon commander sent his runner back to Neill with his report. 6 Platoon's casualties had been, Lance-Havildar Sastaram Pun, 1DSM, killed and 2 riflemen wounded.

Neill now withdrew 6 Platoon, prior to mounting an attack. He then reported the situation by radio to Panton, who now came forward to talk to Neill. Panton said he would arrange a limited bombardment by a troop of 25-pounders after which B Company would attack and capture *Gurung*. H Hour was to be at 1400 hours, after the bombardment had finished. Neill had planned a two-platoon attack on *Gurung* and, at H Hour, 5 and 6 Platoons crossed the start line. As before, the same 5 enemy machine-guns opened up on the attacking Gurkhas, but without results. With many acts of gallantry, both Gurkha platoons, with daring use of fire and movement drills, were able to drive all Japanese off the objective, without suffering any further casualties. No enemy bodies were found on *Gurung* itself, but patrols, after reorganisation, found 4 Japanese bodies dumped 60 yards to the north, together with signs of many blood trails. Panton now ordered the Battalion forward to the area of *Gurung* to dig in.

On the morning of 24 February, Panton passed C Company, commanded by Major Clarke, through *Gurung* to seize the *Pun* feature, 600 yards to the north. Clarke found that there were two hillocks on the ground as opposed to merely one on the map. Both hillocks were held in strength by the enemy. Clarke decided to attack first *South Pun* and then to assault *North Pun*. The attack on *South Pun* now started. It was met by fierce resistance from the Japanese and it was not until the afternoon that Clarke finally captured his initial objective. In this attack, the Battalion encountered a new enemy practice of fastening their normal hand grenade to a Hako-Bakurai armour-piercing magnetised bomb or mine, normally intended for use against armour or pill-boxes. C Company's casualties on *South Pun* were 12 soldiers wounded - the majority having been hit by grenades and mines.

On 25 February, diversionary and probing attacks were made to the east of *Pun* against the enemy-held spur, *Rana*, by B and D Companies. As light was failing, B Company bumped a dug-in Japanese company on the high ground above

Rana. A furious fire-fight erupted and lasted well into the night. Reconnaissance patrols from B Company the following morning established that the enemy position was strong and well-established. These facts were reported to Panton by Neill and both B and D Companies were withdrawn to lower ground. A strong artillery bombardment was arranged with *North Pun* as the target. After the artillery fire had lifted, Clarke's C Company was launched against *North Pun*. This time, C Company was successful and, after hand-to-hand fighting, drove the enemy off their objective. Once again, the enemy used, to good effect, their hand grenades and Hako-Bakurai mines. C Company's casualties amounted to one NCO killed and 12 riflemen wounded. Enemy losses were, again, hard to determine, as they had made every effort to drag away their killed and wounded on withdrawing.

74 Brigade's next objective was the destruction of the Japanese garrison holding the features of Snowdon West and Snowdon East both features dominating the village of Tamandu. *This account will be carried in the next Sirmooree.*