Karl James, "Commandos and the SOE", *In the Fight: Australians and the war in Burma 1942–1945*, Military History and Heritage Victoria, Caulfield RSL, Vic., 16 November 2024

"Commandos and the SOE"[1]

Karl James

"Along with forty-odd other Diggers from various units in Malaya, I was in a temporary camp. We had been selected for a secret mission," wrote Bill Noonan. "All were single men with no dependants. There was a touch of adventure about volunteering for the unknown."[2] So began the 22-year-old private's adventures with 204 Mission, a British military mission to aid and train Chinese forces in their war against Japan. It was 27 July 1941 and Noonan was one of a small group of soldiers from the 8th Australian Division who were about to board ship for Rangoon. Their ultimate destination was China. Later dubbed the "Lost Legion", they were among the first train in the techniques and methods of Special Operations, and were the first Australian soldiers to serve in Burma and China.[3]

Other Australians also served in this theatre with the secretive British Intelligence organisation, the Special Operations Executive (SOE). This clandestine organisation initially recruited men and women with knowledge of the peoples, languages, and cultures of the region. In time, SOE seconded personnel from Special Operations Australia (SOA) and those with experience from Australian forces.[4] SOE's activities in India, Burma and south-east Asia were veiled under the cover of the "India Mission" and later "Force 136". The exact number of Australians engaged in Special Operations is unknown, but they were present across SOE's various elements and operations. The vignettes presented in this paper offer a taste as to the variety of Australian experiences.

Tulip Force and 204 Mission

In 1941 the British were preparing to provide technical aid and training to Chiang Kai-shek's embattled Chinese Nationalist forces. The Chinese agreed to raise six guerrilla battalions, known as "Surprise Battalions", with the intention of sabotaging or destroying bridges and railways. British officers and soldiers would be attached to each unit. Preparations included establishing a Bush Warfare School in Central Burma, and recruiting volunteers from British and Commonwealth forces in Hong

[1] Following is a summary of the chapter first published as: Karl James, "Special Operations: India, Burma, China and Malaya" in Andrew Kilsby and Daryl Moran, (eds.), *In the Fight: Australians and the war in Burma, 1942–1945*, Big Sky Publishing, 2024, pp. 19–50.
[2] William Noonan, *The Surprising Battalion: Australian Commandos in China*, NSW Bookstall Co., Sydney, 1945, p. 29.
[3] "Lost Legion is home–returns from China", *Smith's Weekly*, 19 December 1942.
[4] For more on SOE's influence in SOA, see Lynette Ramsay Silver, *The Heroes of Rimau: Unravelling the Mystery of one of World War II's Most Daring Raids*, Sally Milner Publishing, Birchgrove, NSW, 1990; Christine Helliwell, *Semut: The Untold Story of a Secret Australian Operation in WWII Borneo*, Penguin Random House Australia, Victoria, 2021.

Kong, Burma, Malaya, and the Middle East. The school trained a force about 250-strong, organised initially into six contingents.[5] Forty-eight Australians from the 8th Division joined the mission. They were dubbed "Tulip Force".[6] Months of strenuous training followed, with instruction on intelligence, demolitions, sabotage and guerrilla tactics.

The mission set out for China in late January 1942, making the perilous mountain journey along the Burma Road. But Chinese reluctance or lack of interest sapped the mission's momentum. Plans changed regularly, while language and cultural differences between the Australian advisors and Chinese recruits were barriers. Isolation and boredom, combined with limited rations and illness, eroded morale.[7] It was not until June that the force, now three contingents – two British and one Australian – moved to south-east China for an operational role. They travelled by railway, river sampans, and eventually on foot. After seven weeks they arrived exhausted in Chiu Chia Kai, Kiangsi Province. Cases of malaria, dysentery, beri-beri, and typhoid were numerous. There were deaths from typhus. Rations and medical supplies were scant, and there had been no mail from Australia for over six months. The promises of operations against the Japanese came to nothing, though one Australian party reportedly skirmished with the enemy while patrolling.

The British and Australians went to China to blow up railway bridges and conduct surprise raids on isolated Japanese garrisons. Yet to do so brought down savage reprisals on the civilian population. "At that time that was the last thing the Chinse wanted", Kevin Stevens assessed sympathetically.[8] This is the paradox of Special Operations. Throughout the war acts of sabotage and raids by Allied Special Operation Forces invariably saw brutal Axis reprisals against civilian populations.

Eventually, the mission was abandoned. An ambitious and possibly naïve undertaking, it achieved little. The Australians were evacuated by air to India, flying over the Himalayas. Four Australians died serving with Tulip Force and 204 Mission.[9] Others later became involved with SOA operations and Z Special Unit.[10] The British contingents were later merged with British units in Burma, some of whom served with the Chindit expeditions.

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[5] Lionel Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1957, p. 643.
[6] William Noonan, *Lost Legion: Mission 204 and the Reluctant Dragon*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1987, p. xiii.
[7] Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust*, p. 644.
[8] Keith Stevens, "A Token Operation: 204 Military Mission to China, 1941–1945", *Asian Affairs*, 36, 1, 2005, p. 71.
[9] Figures based on those commemorated on the Australian War Memorial's (AWM) Roll of Honour, https://www.awm.gov.au/commemoration/honour-rolls/roll-of-honour, <accessed 22 May 2024>.
[10] Two men were killed on operations. On 14 April 1945, Sergeant Malcolm Francis Max Weber was killed by the Japanese during Operation Copper on Muschu Island, New Guinea. Lieutenant Walter George Carey participated in Operation Rimau but was captured during the failed raid on Singapore and executed by the Japanese on 7 July 1945. The author thanks Dr Andrew Kilsby for making this connection.

Force 136

Meanwhile, SOE had began its activities in the Far East in May 1941 with the creation of the Oriental Mission in Singapore and the India Mission. The Oriental Mission was to organise "left-behind parties" across Malaya to raid, harass, and conduct guerrilla operations should the Japanese invade. Agents were also sent from Singapore to Thailand, French Indo-China, Hong Kong and China.

Australians were present within the organisation from the outset. An entomologist before the war, Captain George Windred had studied in Sydney before becoming a scientist for a sugar company in Fiji in the 1930s. Later moving to London, he enlisted in the British Army in 1940 and quickly moved into military Intelligence. He joined the Oriental Mission in Singapore in May 1941.[11] Six months later, he was sent to Bangkok, Thailand, to secretly investigate recruiting Asian agents for SOE. Windred travelled incognito as a journalist, carrying "discreetly-forged correspondence" from his supposed newspaper employer.[12] A small number of people were recruited but such efforts were too little, too late. The Japanese occupied Thailand on 8 December. Over 100 Europeans were evacuated but 10 SOE agents were killed and the rest, including Windred, were captured.

The rapid Japanese advance across south-east Asia quickly overwhelmed Allied forces. SOE personnel who were evacuated or escaped from Singapore moved to India with the India Mission absorbing the Oriental Mission. In November 1943 the India Mission came under the control of South East Asia Command (SEAC), led by the Supreme Allied Commander, Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten. On 16 March 1944, the India Mission was redesignated Force 136.[13]

During the war, SOE agents were dropped by aircraft or landed from submarine in Japanese-occupied territory in Burma, Thailand, Malaya and elsewhere. Patrols operated from isolated mountain bases or deep in the jungles. These agents endured physically and mentally demanding environmental conditions: rain, monsoons, and isolation while recruiting and training local Asian fighters to resist and report against the Japanese. Those in the field were backed up by an extensive network of training, planning, and logistic support.

Secretaries and cipherettes

[11] "George Windred", Special Forces Roll of Honour, https://www.specialforcesroh.com/index.php?media/george-windred.30574, <accessed 15 May 2024>.
[12] Charles Cruickshank, *SOE in the Far East*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1983, pp. 71–72.
[13] Cruickshank, *SOE in the Far East*, p. 88 and p. 83.

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Amongst those who served with SOE in Asia were over 720 Western women. Historian Richard Duckett has shown that just over half of these women were employed by the Signals establishment, becoming known as "cipherettes". They were responsible for cipher groups in the field, sending and receiving messages from across south-east Asia. Other women worked in clerical and secretarial roles. These women came from Britain, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, and South Africa. Among them were at least five Australian women who had lived and worked in Asia before the war.[14]

Australian-born Joy Studholme-Wilson (née Harris-Walker), for example, had ties strong with Hong Kong, where her husband, Geoffrey Studholme-Wilson, was an Assistant Superintendent of Police. She left the island ahead of the Japanese invasion, moving to Macao, then a Portuguese colony, and worked with the British Consul to assist refugees from Hong Kong.[15] Her husband, with other Europeans, however, was interned in Hong Kong.

In Macao, Wilson was a contact agent for the British Army Aid Group (BAAG). Working under the cover of an aid organisation, the group supported escaped British prisoners of war and internees, gathered intelligence, and ran operatives against the Japanese in Hong Kong and southern China. It was part of British intelligence service MI9. In 1943 Wilson was with a party who escaped Macao and went into China.[16] At some point she undertook cipher training. Fluent in Cantonese and French, the 28-year-old was recruited by SOE for the India Mission in August 1943. Three months later, she became the Head of the Cipher Section in Calcutta.[17]

Service with SEAC

Members of the Australian forces were also seconded and posted to Special Operations in SEAC. Colin Bell, for instance, had been a company executive before the war, joining the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) in September 1940.[18] He focused on Intelligence duties and had a brief period with the RAAF in Ambon, in the Netherlands East Indies before it fell to the Japanese. Specialising in psychological warfare, he was promoted quickly. By 1943 he was the Deputy Director of the Far East Liaison Office (FELO), essentially a military propaganda

[14] "Females in the Far East", https://soeinburma.com/females-in-the-far-east, <accessed 8 May 2024>.
[15] The couple seem to have used "Wilson" rather than "Studholme-Wilson". John Powell Reeves, *The Lone Flag: Memoir of the British Consul in Macao during World War II*, Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong, 2014, p. 16.
[16] Reeves, *The Lone Flag*, p. 183.
[17] TNA, HS 9/1605/6, Joy Noel Studholm-Wilson personnel file.
[18] NAA, B884, V52034, Colin Carstairs Bell service record.

section, with the rank of wing commander.[19] He travelled widely in this role, liaising and visiting Allied counterparts in Britain and the India Mission.[20]

Bell must have made a favourable impression on his hosts in New Delhi. Following his visit, he was essentially head-hunted by Lord Mountbatten to become the Director of Psychological Warfare. Writing to Generals Douglas MacArthur and Sir Thomas Blamey in November 1943, Mountbatten said that Bell's knowledge of British and American psychological warfare organisations in different theatres "would not only be of great advantage to us", "but [it] would also bring together the Psychological Warfare activities of both commands." Mountbatten realised "the difficulty of finding officers experienced in these duties" but "this aspect of warfare is so important and its integration between adjacent commands so necessary that a really good man here would be godsend."[21]

Promoted to Group Captain, Bell took on the role in early 1944. His new Psychological Warfare branch became part of Force 136. Like FELO, it consisted of an Indian Field Broadcasting Unit, Mobile Printing Sections, and a Training Camp.[22]

Operation Pontoon

Force 136's first infiltration operation into Malaya was conducted in May 1943, when a group was landed by submarine in Perak, on the north-west coast. This operation proved deep insertions were possible. But it was only when long-range four-engine Consolidated B-24 Liberators became available to Force 136, that maintaining insertion parties became practical. Thereafter, beginning with Operation Carpenter in September 1944, Force 136 conducted another 12 major infiltration operations with parties operating along the west and east coasts of the Malay Peninsula. Their roles were principally to gather intelligence and to train and equip Malaya guerrilla groups, mostly from the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA).[23] Two of these missions, Operations Carpenter and Pontoon, had an Australian presence with personnel from SOA and Z Special Unit.

Operation Pontoon operated in the mountainous region of Pahang, in central Malaya. Led by Major George Leonard, the group included Captains Noel Robinson, Jack Chapman and John Morrison, along with radio operators and Chinese interpreters. Leonard, Robinson, Chapman and two others parachuted into Pahang

[19] Australian War Memorial (AWM), Canberra, AWM94, B5, FELO organisation chart, 19 October 1943.
[20] TNA, HS9/118/4, Colin Carstairs Bell personnel file.
[21] NAA, A9300, Bell C. C., Message, Mountbatton to MacArthur, 23 November 1943, Colin Carstairs Bell service record.
[22] Cruickshank, *SOE in the Far East*, p. 266
[23] Rebecca Kenneison, *The Special Operations Executive in Malaya: World War II and the Path to Independence*, Bloomsbury, London, 2019, pp. 42–43.

on 24 February 1945. Morrison followed during the next full moon on 26 March. Their objective was to contact the local regiment of the MPAJA to equip and train it as a force to fight the Japanese in central Malaya in anticipation of a future British landing along the Malayan coastline.[24]

Major Leonard had been born in India to British parents and worked as a game warden in Malaya before the war. He had served with the Federated Malay States Volunteer Force and later became an intelligence officer attached to an Indian division. He was fluent in Malay, Hindustani and Telugu.[25] He came to Australia on leave in 1941 and joined the Australian army meeting Robinson, Chapman and Morrison.

The three Australians were among the original officers on the formation of the 2/8th Independent Company in July 1942. They were joined a few months later by Leonard. They transferred together to Z Special Unit in early 1944.[26] They were later seconded to Force 136 and in August sailed for Colombo for an additional six months of specialised training in India before their parachute drop into Pahang.

Leonard had selected the drop zone in Malaya, as he was familiar with the area.[27] Once on the ground, however, he discovered the MPAJA regimental headquarters was over 400 kilometres away. The Pontoon men broke into patrols and trekked across Pahang to reach the guerrillas' headquarters, sometimes travelling by raft or canoe. They regularly moved camps, recruited local Malays and made contact with different bands of Chinese guerrillas. At times the guerrillas were unco-operative or just hostile. At one point Robinson and his party were held "virtually as prisoners" by the guerrillas.[28] Conditions were Spartan. "As I had been in the Boy Scouts," noted Morrison in his diary, "I was appointed Doctor, Surgeon and Dentist, so I checked the medical stores. It contained a good pair of surgical scissors so I also became barber for beard trimming."[29]

Despite the difficulties, by the war's end Leonard had established a comprehensive intelligence network and had control of over 350 guerrillas. They were armed and dangerous, but their military effectiveness was questionable, as Morrison noted in August 1945:

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[24] AWM, PR87/131, 2, "Operation Pontoon lecture" by John Robert Morrison, p. 1. Pontoon's secondary role was to gather information and contact several people of interest to Force 136 but whose whereabouts were unknown. These included the British officer Colonel Freddie Spencer Chapman who had remained in Malaya throughout the Japanese occupation and Franklin J. Bithos, an American OSS officer who had jumped into central Malaya in December 1944 but had not been in radio contact since.

[25] AWM, PR87/131, 2, "Operation Pontoon lecture", p. 1.

[26] Astill, D., *Commando White Diamond: Memoir of Service of the 2/8 Australian Commando Squadron*, Australian Military History Publications, Loftus, 1996, p. 14.

[27] AWM, PR87/131, 2, "Operation Pontoon lecture" p. 2.

[28] AWM119, 188, Robinson recommendation for the MC.

[29] AWM, PR87/131, 1, Morrison diary, 15 April 1945.

> Took 50 men for firing. The safest place was in front of them. Have generally no idea of safety and coupled with extreme nervousness, [they] are a menace. I finished the firing exercise by choosing men for future warlike roles by appearance only.[30]

Conclusion[31]

South-east Asia was not a theatre where Australian Special Operations Forces deployed during the war as discrete units or distinctive formations. There is no single story. Instead there was a diverse variety of unique personal narratives, highlighting the depth and diversity of Australia's wartime experience. Individual Australians served in British forces, either directly or after being seconded or loaned from Australian units. They were agents, secretaries, cipherettes, and staff officers. They led guerrilla units deep behind the lines in Japanese controlled China and Malaya; and they were airmen who supported Allied Special Operations in India, Burma, Malaya and elsewhere.

Dr Karl James is the Head of Military History at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. His research has focused on Australia's experience during the Second World War and, more recently, on Australia's commitment to the conflict in Afghanistan. Karl has published three books on Australian military campaigns in the Second World War and contributed to other publications. He has also curated several permanent and temporary exhibitions at the Australian War Memorial.

[30] AWM, PR87/131, 1, Morrison diary, 17 August 1945.

[31] Fourteen Australians died serving in the RAF's Nos 357 and 358 (Special Duties) Squadrons, based at RAF Jessore, in Bengal (now Bangladesh). These squadrons supported Allied Special Operations right across the region, from India across Burma, Thailand, Malaya, to Indo-China, and into China.