*Robert Mole aged 36 years*

# *The Temple Bells are Calling*

*A Personal Record of the Last Years of British Rule in Burma*

*by*
*Robert Mole*

**Pentland Books**

## Chapter Eleven

# North Arakan and the Refounding of the Old Town 1944-45

We travelled by road from Palasbari over the Khasi Hills, through the Assam capital of Shillong, and down again into the heat of the plains to Sylhet, where we boarded the train for Chittagong. We arrived the next day and spent the night in an Army rest camp. There was an office of the Civil Affairs supplies branch in Chittagong, which provided a truck to take us on to Bawli Bazaar, the headquarters of the Military Administration in North Arakan and some one hundred miles distant. We arrived in the late afternoon of the 30th April.

The area which was at that time under British administration was a small portion of the extreme north of the Akyab District, consisting of little more than the two narrow and parallel valleys of the Pruma and Kalapanzin Rivers. The Civil Affairs organisation in North Arakan provided both territorial and formation CAOs; there were no fewer than four divisions operating in the area, each with a CAO attached to it. Bawli Bazaar was a small village on the Pruma, which in peacetime had been of absolutely no consequence. The Senior CAO was Apedaile, and there was a territorial CAO, Peter Murray, stationed over the hills to the east at Goppe Bazaar in the Kalapanzin Valley. Peter had done his Burmese course with me at Oxford; after the outbreak of war he had joined the Burma Navy, and he continued to wear his naval badges of rank in the Civil Affairs Service, causing some confusion to military personnel. As a result of the communal disturbances which occurred in 1942 after the British evacuation from Arakan and to which I have referred before, the entire population of this area was now Muslim. They were Chittagonian by race and spoke a type of Bengali. Only a very few could speak Arakanese, a dialect form of Burmese, and we relied almost entirely on interpreters for communication with them.

Our camp at Bawli was on the river bank and consisted of a

miserable collection of bamboo huts. The one allotted to me looked as though it might once have been a cattle shed. Another camp was, however, being built a little further up the river, and it was not long before we moved to it. The size of the Civil Affairs staff in our headquarters astonished me after what I had been used to in Tamu. In the early days the Service had consisted almost entirely of Burma civilians or Burma police officers. But now new branches were being formed: Supplies, Relief and Labour (also known as Welfare) and so forth; and all sorts of people who had come out of Burma were drafted into them as officers or civilian subordinates. Indeed it was not long before about three separate branches were employed on the type of work which I had been doing single-handed in Tamu.

I was told by Apedaile that he proposed to use me to relieve the formation CAOs as one by one they went to India for some leave. I was first posted to 36th British Division; as it was just leaving Arakan, I did not go to live in its camp, but paid an occasional visit during the week or so before it went. I was then sent over to Goppe to relieve Peter Murray, so that he could go to Bawli for a short rest. The Kalapanzin Valley seemed a very peaceful spot at this time. Peter had built himself a bamboo bungalow on a slight eminence, from which he looked down over the sunny valley. We used to hear the birds singing, especially the Indian cuckoo with its tuneful song of four notes. The people went about their business in the normal way, and once a week there was a market day in the little bazaars of the valley. There was a refugee camp at Goppe, under the charge of one of our welfare officers. We also had fairly large stocks of paddy, which had been requisitioned after the previous harvest; this was used to feed the refugee camp, and from time to time we sent supplies of it over to Bawli for use in the Pruma Valley. When Peter came back after about a week, I returned to Bawli, a depressing place by comparison with Goppe, with evidence of the Army everywhere.

My next job was to relieve John McTurk, who was now in Arakan attached to the 26th Indian Division. The divisional headquarters was withdrawing for the rains some miles inside the Indian frontier, but some of its units were to remain in Burma, and there was a brigade headquarters in Bawli. We suggested that there was little point in the CAO living outside Burma with the divisional headquarters, and were told that Corps insisted that he should move there. But when we went to see what accommodation was available, the Army quickly changed its mind. There was a great shortage of building materials and accommodation was already very cramped, and within a few hours 26th Division persuaded Corps that the CAO

would be far more useful in Bawli. It was agreed that I should continue to live in our own camp and should go about twice a week to brigade headquarters to liaise with the Intelligence Officer and see if there was anything for me to do. And so I used to plough across the waterlogged fields every three or four days, have a cup of tea with the Intelligence Officer and trudge back again.

On my arrival in Calcutta from the Kabaw Valley I had written to ask if I could go on home leave. I had not been in England for five and a half years, and it seemed unlikely that there would be much work for me during the coming rains; there was clearly going to be no offensive on the Arakan front. But several months later I was told that I could not yet be spared. Meanwhile my services had been in such great demand at Bawli that I was able to do a good deal of reading, and even started to teach myself shorthand. My work with the troops – apart from my regular social visits to brigade headquarters – included such matters as agreeing in what areas civilians could carry on their cultivation without endangering the security of any units, dealing with complaints that they were cultivating too near to military camps, warning the local villagers when a unit wanted to do some firing practice, investigating complaints when their cattle were hit in such practices, and arranging for the maintenance of the airstrip at Bawli. None of this took up very much of my time. On the purely civil side, I had occasionally a few petty cases to try. Most of these arose out of an order issued by Apedaile that all civilians were to declare what stocks of paddy they held, for a number were prosecuted for making false declarations. We were now well into the rains, and the Arakan coast had an annual rainfall of about 200 inches. There was therefore little question of our doing any touring save by boat, and we had only open boats driven by outboard engines. Among our civilian staff were a number of Township Officers appointed by the Military Administration. They were local men who spoke English. Some had been government servants before the war, but they were schoolmasters or clerks, not administrative officers. With few exceptions they did most valuable work, and they were particularly useful to us in an area where we could not converse directly with the people.

I took over the commissariat side of our camp, as I had done in Tamu, and was the officer in charge of the mess. Some weeks later we were fortunate in acquiring five Burmans to work as mess servants. They had been picked up by the Navy while fishing off the Bassein coast and had been brought back for interrogation. The Army then handed them over to us, and I found that they were about to be sent to the Arakanese refugee camp at Dinajpur in

Bengal. I suggested keeping them and training them as mess servants and, since we were the only people in the area who could speak to them in their own language, they accepted the proposal with alacrity and served us cheerfully and well.

One grew rather tired of seeing only Chittagonian civilians, wearing their little white Mohammedan caps, and with their shirts invariably hanging outside their longyis. They were not a people who could inspire much affection, but they had their good qualities, and I was told of Chittagonians who went unconcernedly about their work in the fields while fighting raged around them. Across the Indian border there were some settlements of Arakanese Buddhists, whose forbears had fled into British territory during the Burmese invasions of Arakan at the end of the eighteenth century. They spoke their own dialect of Burmese and dressed in the Burmese fashion, and it was something of a paradox that we in North Arakan should have to cross into India to see Burmese villagers and to hear Burmese spoken.

Though on the Arakan front nothing of military interest was happening, things were going very well for the Allied forces on the other two Burma fronts. In northern Burma the area round Myitkyina and Mogaung was recaptured by the combined action of Stilwell's Chinese-American forces and the Chindits, while the Chinese had mounted an offensive from Yunnan to the east. Mogaung was taken before the end of June; Myitkyina was besieged for two and a half months, and fell at the beginning of August. On the Assam front the great Japanese offensive was halted by the middle of May, and on the 23rd June the road from Imphal to Kohima was cleared. Then began the pursuit of the Japanese by the troops of the 14th Army, which continued till the end of the war; Tamu was re-entered at the beginning of August. Sitting in what seemed to me a foreign country, I hoped – but with little optimism – that someone might realise that I knew the Mogaung area well and that I might be posted there; or at least that I might be sent back to the Kabaw Valley. But I spent the rest of the war in Arakan.

When John McTurk arrived back from leave towards the end of July, I went south to relieve George Merrells, who was CAO with 25th Indian Division. The divisional headquarters was at Maungdaw, some twenty miles south of Bawli, which in peace-time had been a township headquarters, but Merrells was living with an Engineer unit on Kappagaung, an island north of Maungdaw and joined to it by a bridge. We were here virtually on the shore of the Bay of Bengal, for Kappagaung and Maungdaw lay on the wide estuary of the Naf River, the boundary between India and Burma. Here I had

a much busier and more interesting time, for my job included elements of the duties of both a formation and a territorial CAO. The central part of my area, which included Kappagaung and Maungdaw, had been cleared of civilians, and consisted only of military units. To the north there were some villages, and a large refugee camp at Balukhali, where the people evacuated from the Maungdaw area had been settled. To the south again there were a number of villages. Merrells had evolved a routine whereby he visited Balukhali and the southern area – called Fadaungza – on a fixed day each week, allotting the whole day to the visit. The rest of the week was occupied with office work, trying cases and going into Maungdaw to keep in touch with divisional headquarters, and in particular with the Field Security Section, whose work was very much connected with ours.

Balukhali was run by an officer of the Civil Affairs welfare branch, with his staff, and medical arrangements were in the capable hands of the inimitable Arakanese doctor, Captain Kyaw Zan. One of our township officers also had his headquarters in the camp. My work with the Army was mainly of a security nature, issuing passes to Army contractors to enter protected areas, restraining civilians from cultivating too near to military camps, and so forth. Security was a matter of some importance for the Japanese were only twenty miles to the east of Maungdaw at the end of a motor road. My dealings with the staff of 25th Division were very amicable. The commander, General Davies, who did not arrive back from leave till I had been in the area a month, at once invited me to tea, and showed a considerable interest in my work and the greatest willingness to give me any assistance possible. For the first time I felt that I was part of the Army and working in co-operation with the other branches, and I should have liked to remain with this division. But I was told that my destination was 26th Division, which was said to have asked for me.

I enjoyed my short time in the Maungdaw area. There was plenty to do and the work was interesting. The main drawback was the weather: on a rainy day the flat expanse of Kappagaung, with the Naf estuary on one side of it and the wind whistling over it, could be most depressing. But north of the island on a fine sunny day the scene was a very pleasant one, with the dark-green mass of the Mayu range standing out in the distance against the blue sky, and in the foreground the light-green carpet of young paddy plants and green trees with white paddy birds perched on their topmost branches.

Merrells went into hospital in Calcutta with suspected sprue and

his leave was extended. One of our police officers was therefore sent down towards the middle of September to relieve me. I had been informed that the period which I had spent in India in March and April after leaving the Kabaw Valley would not be regarded as leave, and I was therefore now entitled to take the regulation twenty-eight days. I spent three nights in Bawli, where Leo Edgerley of the Burma Forest Service had now succeeded Apedaile as SCAO. Here I met an American civilian engaged on what he called 'black' radio propaganda; I understood this to mean propaganda purporting to emanate from enemy stations (such as Rangoon or Saigon), as opposed to 'white' propaganda, which is straightforward propaganda. He had come to learn something of the Burmese, presumably from us as he would not have found any Burmans at Bawli apart from our mess staff.

I left for Calcutta with Tun Che on the 11th September. The journey involved travelling by road to Chittagong, where we spent the night, by rail the next morning to Chandpur, by river steamer all the rest of the day and all night up the Brahmaputra and Meghna to Goalundo, and finally another five or six hours in a train before we reached Calcutta, where I again stayed in the Civil Affairs rest house.

I had made no arrangements in advance for my leave, not having been certain till nearly the last moment when I should be able to take it. I should have liked to go to Darjeeling, but that was a very popular leave resort for Army officers and I should have had little chance of obtaining accommodation there at such short notice. I heard, however, that Merrells was at the Himalayan Hotel in Kalimpong, so wired and asked him to arrange accommodation for me. I went up with no firm booking a week after arriving in Calcutta, and found that Merrells was just leaving and had arranged for me to take over his room – or rather, half room, which he had been sharing with an American captain.

Kalimpong lay nearly 4,000 feet above sea level in the Himalayas, not far from Darjeeling. We travelled by train all night from Calcutta, and the next morning reached Siliguri, where we changed to the comic Darjeeling-Himalayan railway. This took us to a station twelve miles from Kalimpong, whence we were given a lift in a military truck. Kalimpong was a quiet little place, lying on the saddle between two ridges (Deolo and Rinkingpong), and the hotel looked out over a green valley towards the protected state of Sikkim. One of the overland trade routes to Tibet started here. The Tibetans came in with mules laden with wool, and went back with tea. They were rather dirty-looking people, wearing long gowns with high collars and long sleeves, which were tied tightly round the waist and looked