

The Phantom Army of Burma

Text of an article on V Force written for a Government of India publication in 1945 by Lt Col Gordon Graham MC*, The Cameron Highlanders. No surviving copies have been found, and this text was taken from an uncompleted draft given to me by Gordon in 2009. It is not clear whether this was ever published.

Emendations have been added from various contributors in letters contained in the National Archives.

In April 1942, the Burma Army, a gallant but worn-out remnant, was fighting its way back to India. In a few weeks, Burma would be completely lost, and the victorious Nipponese Army would be standing at the gateway to India. Somehow the Indo-Burma border, a thousand miles of trackless jungle-covered mountains stretching from China to the Bay of Bengal, must be held until a new army was ready to undertake the defence of India and the reconquest of Burma.

It was held by slender regular forces of the Indian Army, aided by Levies raised among the hill tribes to operate in those areas of the frontier mountain ranges which were not readily accessible to the regular troops. Largest of these Levy forces was V Force, a guerrilla army consisting of ten thousand hill tribesmen and some platoons of the Assam Rifles, commanded by a handful of British officers.

V Force began as a reference in GHQ orders, headed "Guerrilla Forces, Eastern Frontier, - Plan V". Part originator and enthusiastic supporter of Plan V was Field-Marsal Lord Wavell, then Commander-in-Chief in India. When the plan was put into operation, the Roman V was used to make the title V Force.

The man to whom the organisation of V Force was entrusted was **Brigadier A. Felix-Williams**, DSO MC. Summoned to Delhi from Ceylon where he had been training his battalion of Frontier Force Rifles, he was given an ad hoc staff of officers and a hundred thousand pounds, promised immediate delivery of 6,000 rifles and told to get on with the job. His orders were: "Hold the border for six months."

As commander of the Tochi Scouts in Waziristan for 15 years, he had been pitted against such noted outlaws as the Fakir of Ipi, and knew nearly everything there was to know about guerrilla fighting. He armed himself with books on Nagas, Chins and Kukis, and made for Jorhat accompanied by Col J White, who had previously been an Intelligence Liaison Officer in the Chittagong area.

At Jorhat, late in April, the commander of V Force found himself commander of a headquarters, and nothing else. He had neither guerrillas nor officers to command them. He had no guns or ammunition. On the other hand, it was known that the tribes would fight in defence of their land, if properly led, and in some areas, notably around Fort Hertz and Sumprabum, where **Lt Col Stephenson** of the Burma Political Service was in charge organising Kachin guerrillas were already operating. In the Chin Hills, the Chin Levies – raised by the Burma Army – were still operating. One of Brigadier Williams' tasks was to coordinate their efforts with those of the newly-raising V Force.

Ideal officer material for the new guerrilla army was ready to hand, and a month of hectic travelling and organising brought the V Force staff into contact with them. Planters, political officers and men of the Burma Forest Service who knew the country and the people intimately, were given army commissions and under them V Force began to take shape in five distinct zones. Forces of approximately 2,000 irregulars each were formed among the Nagas, Lushais, Chins and the Tripura tribes, these tribal areas covering the length of the Indo-Burma border from north to south.

Brigadier Williams was now able to formulate a definite policy. The role of V Force was to provide intelligence for the army, and to harass the enemy on all routes leading from Burma to India. A further task was the preparation of an efficient organisation to operate after the Jap invasion of Assam, which then seemed imminent. When that happened, V Force would retire to jungle hide-outs and act a Guerrilla force on the Assam frontier, to operate behind the enemy lines in the event of a Jap invasion of India..

Guerrilla training schools were established at Kohima, Sadiya and Haflong, with the object of training V Force men in jungle warfare and the use of explosives. Ambush methods were to be adopted, a quick fight and a quick getaway. The guerrillas, lightly armed and outnumbered, could risk no more. Later on, when local encounters began to take place between V Force and the Japs these hit and run tactics of the guerrillas may have led the Japs to overestimate the strength of the army of tribesmen opposing them. But it was an army with which he could never come to grips, an army which struck and then melted into the jungle from which it came.

Several platoons of Assam Rifles formed the nucleus of the V Force organisation in each zone in Assam. The Assam Rifles were then a quasi-military Police Force, paid partly by the Provincial Government, partly by the central government. Composed mainly of Gurkhas, with a sprinkling of locals, they were normally well-trained and capable of supporting themselves in the jungle for long periods, in fact, ideal men for the job. But at that time, due to recruiting for the army, many of the platoons were new and untried. Despite this, they were to give sterling service. The four platoons from the Sadiya Frontier Tract, who despite semi-starvation and lack of equipment hung out in front of Gen. Stilwell's forces for a whole year, holding the mountain passes into northern Burma. In the Arakan Zone, the nucleus was formed by platoons of the Tripura Rifles.

Now, who are these Nagas and Chins and Lushais on whom so much was to depend? Dwelling on the Indo-Burma border, they are neither Indians nor Burmans. Their slant eyes and squat faces show that their nearest ethnological affinity is to the Tibetan races. Like all hill-peoples they are virile races. Broad, stalky, cheerful, they are headhunters.

While nominally subject to the British crown, in fact their loyalty and goodwill are quite voluntary and dependent on the efforts of the British political officers. To at least one of the tribal chiefs, the Wong of Nangsam, the British government pays a yearly tribute of six pounds of lead and some ounces of powder! That these tribes should have fought in defence of their homeland, and incidentally in the defence of India, is due to the friendly policy of the Government of India in pre-war years and to the British political officers, whose tact and patience now paid high dividends.

The Border between India and Burma is a natural one, formed by an offshoot of the Himalayas, a giant watershed dividing the basins of the Brahmaputra and the Irrawaddy. The highest mountains approach 13,000 feet and are snow-covered in winter. For the most part they are covered with tropical jungle, and in the valleys, are bamboo forests. At least one of the higher mountains, Kennedy Peak, was later to become a battlefield.

In its early days, the only things V Force was not short of was money. To obtain arms and ammunition, food and clothing, without which it was unreasonable to ask men to fight, they had to rely on their own initiative. A supply HQ was established in Calcutta, and dumps at Jorhat and on the Dimapur-Kohima road. Various Calcutta firms worked hard to produce such odd requirements as rock salt, spare iron, beads, red blankets, osprey feathers, Union Jacks, opium and elephant tusks. With the hill-tribes' gifts in kind talk louder than currency.

Even the Assam Rifles were short of necessities. When V Force commander first contacted the commandant of the Sadiya battalion, the four platoons he asked for were readily made available, but they were deficient of 300 rifles, 600 shirts, 300 pairs of trousers and 400 raincoats. Despite this, **Major NLC Irwin** DSO MC, the commandant, wanted to take his entire battalion up the track and into Burma to smash the Japs!

Although the chief task of V Force was to obtain information, they had at the beginning only seven wireless sets for the whole of their 1,000-mile front. Equipment which in 1944 was regarded as a necessity was in 1942 an unlooked-for luxury.

The greatest shortage was the most urgent necessity of all – rifles. The 6,000 promised from GHQ never turned up. Many of the arms originally used by the guerrillas were bought in the bazaars of Calcutta, Bombay or Delhi. To help solve the shortage, Brig Williams made a flying trip to Peshawar and appealed to His Excellency Sir George Cunningham for Pathan tribal guns. Before the war, these guns had been made in the Kohat Pass and smuggled into Waziristan for use against the British. Guns and gun makers were now in the hands of the Peshawar police. Brigadier Williams got his guns and booked a first-class compartment to Assam to deliver them!

Officer provision too was difficult. An appeal to Delhi obtained six attached army officers for each zone. These and those who came after them were to prove invaluable. The idea of V Force appealed to many younger officers who were spoiling for a fight.

In the month of May, 1942, certain tiny places on the Indo-Burma border were assuming a strategic importance, and it was to these places, to Ledo, to Kohima and to Imphal, that the organisers of V Force went to begin the fight. Then everyone was interested only in getting out of Burma. V Force alone wanted to get in.

At Ledo, a railhead town, from which General Stilwell was to start his Chinese-American drive on north Burma, refugees were pouring in daily. The rains had started and thousands were dying on the Ledo track. Two V Force agents were struggling across the Chaukkan Pass from Fort Hertz. To rescue them and many others who made this impossible journey was one of the first jobs of the Assam Rifles in that area.

In these northern areas, many of the natives were opium eaters and of very poor quality. They were not worth arming. Accordingly, the responsibility of watching the passes fell on the four Sadiya platoons of the Assam Rifles, aided by as much local espionage as could be organised. Latterly, however, the Kachin Levies, although not part of V Force, gave good service and killed many Japs.

At Kohima, there was better guerrilla material. District Commissioner Pawsey, who had won a double MC in WW1, was one of the select band of civilians who became honorary members of V Force. He quickly organised the Nagas of his district and volunteered to remain with them. When Kohima was all but overrun two years later, and DCs bungalow became a famous battleground, he was still with them.

His V Force agents moved south eastwards from Kohima. Whole villages gave their fighters of men to swell the ranks of the new guerrilla army. In the remote Somra Tracts and near the Chindwin, officers of V Force took up their station in the jungle, some to remain there for two years. Rifles, rice in waterproof bags and lakhs of silver rupees came up and were hidden away for the day of need. The Kohima zone of V Force, organised by **Lt Col Lightfoot** of the Assam Police, became one of the most efficient of the entire organisation.

Imphal, capital of Manipur state and base of the 4th Assam Rifles, was also busy receiving thousands of refugees in the month of May. It was the Indian end of the one road out of Burma, and this was the way the army was going out. But something else was going on too. General Savory's newly formed 23rd Indian Division was preparing to hold the frontier. Here V Force could perform an invaluable service by screening these preparations and providing intelligence information, thus allowing General Savory to concentrate his troops. The Imphal Zone was formed that same month under Major E.D. 'Moke' Murray, 2nd in Command of the Assam Rifles, and developed quickly on the same lines as the Kohima organisation.

Lord Wavell was there at that time. He listened in silence for twenty minutes as the commander of V Force explained his ideas. At the end, he said, 'Good. Remember I back you. Make and commission your own officers. If you want help let me know. Good night.'

Further south, at Aijal in the Lushai Hills, the Lushais were being armed and organised, stiffened by men of the 1st Assam Rifles. The Lushais were a fighting race, but like many others required much tactful persuasion to take up arms against the Japanese. Among these peoples there is no sacred flame for the defence of hearth and home.

The build-up in all areas was growing. Night after night, trucks loaded with explosives and stores and driven by the British officers of V Force, splashed through mud and darkness. From merely seeking information in 1942, V Force graduated to fighting for it.

At the end of May, as soon as the Burma Army had pulled out, a V Force patrol made the first long-distance reconnaissance back into Burma. Capt. Bruce Sutherland, who had joined from the Gurkha Regimental Centre at Shillong, crossed the Yu River and made for the Chindwin, accompanied by a small party of Assam Rifles and some Kuki V Force scouts.

As he was being followed by hostile Burmans, he split his party and went on with his orderly. Reaching the Chindwin, they chose a hideout and watched several parties of Japs moving on

the river. Three boatloads came ashore just beside them. On his return, he found that some of his party had been caught by the Burmans. His Jemadar had had his eyes gouged out. Near him, tied to a tree, were two dead Kuki scouts. To get back, Captain Sutherland and his orderly had to swim the Yu in flood, and his orderly pulled him out of a whirlpool.

For his reconnaissance, which obtained valuable information for the Imphal area commander, Captain Sutherland gained the MC. The decoration was the first of many to go to officers and men of V Force.

V Force was now a going concern and the regular commanders began to appreciate the possibilities of an irregular organisation. Guerrillas cannot fight by the book and cannot be given a set task. But once given the intention of his higher command, the guerrilla commander will work it out with what resources he has.

So, under the operational control of the regular commanders V Force became an integral and indispensable part of the defence of India's eastern frontier. Later, when defence charged to attack, they were to prove equally valuable.

From the beginning V Force and everything to do with it were kept completely secret, and they remained a secret till the end of the war. With an organisation, which worked unsupported in enemy country and employed agents whom the Japs might know in another guise, information let slip meant certain death for someone.

Even at the beginning, however, the press and public had an inkling of what was going on. At Dimapur in April, Mr Alfred Wrigg, Far East correspondent of the Chicago Tribune, burst into a conference room and asked Brig Williams who the new guerrilla commander was. He smiled blandly and said he didn't know!

Later, the name and purpose of V Force became well-known, but the names of individuals concerned were never published. Even so, the Japs found out a lot and more than one V Force agent paid the reckoning for somebody's carelessness. The Japs knew the name of the commander of V Force and at Falam in the Chin Hills, put a price of Rs10,000 on his head. A further result of the clandestine nature of V Force is that, until 1944, no comprehensive historical record was kept. Many of the V Force's most exciting stories were never set on paper and exist now only in the memories of those who lived them.

When Brig Williams went to Delhi to inaugurate V Force, he met another guerrilla warfare expert, a thick set, sandy-haired, piercing-eyed brigadier, who had won the DSO in Abyssinia. He was Brig Wingate, then engaged in the early planning of a scheme for long range penetration into Burma.

The two brigadiers exchanged ideas and later that year Wingate sought the advice of V Force officers about routes into Burma, the state of the country and so on. When the first Wingate expedition went in to Burma, V Force helped them both on the inward and outward journeys, and supplied them with explosives, shotguns and other stores.

This aid was never publicly acknowledged for V Force, the secret army, remained unsung when the Wingate story was published. Among other tasks undertaken by V Force was that of

searching for allied planes which had crashed inside India, under the very nose of a Japanese government.

V force attracted many colourful personalities. None has caught the public imagination more than Miss Ursula Graham-Bower, who from a hideout in the North Cachar Hills, directed a tribal espionage system which was able in 1944 to give warning of enemy approach to the Assam railway in that sector. She first went to Assam in 1939 as a student of anthropology. When Burma was threatened, the mission with which she worked withdrew. She came back and was first employed by V Force in September 1942. In August 1945, she married Lt Col FN Betts, one of the officers of V Force.

Another very different V Force personality was Captain Khathing Tangkhal, the only tribesman (Naga) to hold a King's Commission.

Arakan

Each zone of operations presented the organisers of V Force with a different problem. The Chittagonians and other tribes who inhabit the Arakan coastal area were unsuitable guerrilla material. Accordingly, the area had initially been entrusted to guerrillas recruited from Tripura State, aided by some platoons of the Tripura Rifles, with their headquarters at Agartala.

Meanwhile, in May 1942, on the Burma side of the border, the Mughls, under Jap influence, started troubling the coastal Mohammedans. The Mohammedans retaliated, and with British air support captured Buthedaung. General Slim, then commander of 15th Corps, decided to exploit this situation, and a boatload of V Force arms was sent from Calcutta to the aid of the Mohammedans in July 1942. This eventually led to the formation of the Arakan zone of V Force, where Colonel Donald and Captain Foster and others were to make names of themselves.

In those days, the Arakan was not yet a general battleground. The new V Force organisation edged skilfully forward, and obtained some intelligence of the Jap dispositions in Akyab. They even sent men in sampans, disguised as fishermen, into the Baronga Islands, though the guerrillas themselves suffered heavily on one occasion by putting in an attack on a strong Jap position. They soon learned that direct attack was outside their scope.

When the Japs first attacked in the Arakan, in spring of 1943, V Force had an efficient espionage system ready. Throughout the campaigns of 1943 they continued to operate, carrying out many raids and ambushes and supplying commanders with a large proportion of their tactical intelligence.

The Arakanese Mohammedans who worked as guerrillas on this front were totally different types from their counterparts in the Chin and Lushai Hills. Many of them worked on tramp steamers, Colonel Donald had nicknames for them all, such as Arizona Joe or Californian Bill. Asked to authorize an item of V Force expenditure, the Chief Military Accountant once enquired acidly who Sinbad the Sailor was.

The Chin Hills

Along with the tribal areas from which V Force operated, the Chin Hills lie wholly within Burma. In the nineteenth century, the Chins, who are racially Tibeto-Burmans, raided the plains and valleys of Burma with impunity, carrying off captives for slavery and ransom. They were finally subjugated in 1896 after the British annexation of Burma.

In 1917, a thousand Chins were sent to France as part of the Burma Labour Corps. A battalion of regulars (the 4/20th Chin Rifles) was started in 1922. Like all the other V Force guerrillas they are by nature wild and primitive. The Haka Chins are very fond of biting each other, which is considered more satisfying than a mere vulgar brawl with knives.

Undoubtedly the efforts of V Force saved the Chin Hills from falling to the Japs in 1942. During and after the general evacuation of Burma Lt Colonel Haswell was organising a force of levies, later to become the famous Chin Levies. There was also the regular Chin Battalion in the area. But there was dissension among the Chins, and in July 1942, after a Council of War, they asked the British administration to withdraw. This was nearly done.

To meet the emergency, Brigadier Williams set out from Imphal with a small Gurkha escort on a 600-mile tour of the area. His arrival with stores, and the appearance of British planes overhead, helped to turn the scale. The chiefs were told that the great Lord Wavell would send planes and guns to their help. The Chin character is a curious mixture of trust and suspicion. Suspicion allayed, they trust readily and are easily led. The faint-hearted took courage and soon the tribesmen were ambushing hard.

Typical ambush story is told by Captain Davidson. Dropping an old purse and some coins on a road as 'bait' he retired to a hideout with his party of Chins. Two Japs came along, and as they bent down to pick up the coins, Davidson crept up behind them. As he was about to lay them gently out, his Chins gave a Chin yell. The Japs turned and fired, but they had not loaded their rifles. He killed one and shot the other in the right arm. The Jap ran and tried to load and fire with his right hand, but Davidson got in first.

Here, and all along the front, the actions fought by V Force were on a small scale. But in aggregate they helped to dissuade the Jap from making a push at a time when it could have been extremely awkward to stop him. The Jap knew and respected V Force.

When frontier activity flared into invasion in 1944, the Chin Levies (under the name Hasforce) remained on the flanks of the advancing Jap 33rd Division. And when the 5th Indian Division advanced six months' latter to take Tiddim, Fort White and Kalemmyo, the Levies operated as a roving column widely on the front and flanks, ambushing and killing the retreating Japs.

Another force which rendered invaluable service in the 1944 campaign was the Lushai Brigade. This too was started as part of V Force. The Lushais, though of similar stock to the Chins, are a more advanced people, largely due to the work of the Welsh mission, which has Christianised many of them in recent years. A guerrilla organisation was gradually built up under Major McCall, Political Agent, and in the absence of a direct threat, kept Watch and Ward until 1944.

In the spring of 1944, it became necessary to prevent any advance to the west by the Jap division in attacking Imphal from the south. On 30th March the Lushai Brigade was formed under Brigadier Marindin MC, who relinquished his role as commander of V Force when he

took over his new brigade. (The Lushai Brigade was never part of V Force, although the Lushai Scouts were raised by V Force). Brig Williams had left to command the Kohat Brigade in May 1943, and Col White who had succeeded, had died of overstrain at the end of that year.

The new brigade was based on the old V Force organisation, plus three battalions of infantry, the 1 Jat, 7 Punjab and 1 Bihar. Initially they held the Burma border, west and north west of the Chin Hills. Their presence there helped to bolster the morale of the Chin Levies, which naturally declined considerably as the Japs overran their country.

When the Jap retreat began, the Lushai Brigade crossed the Manipur River south of Tiddim, and began raiding the Japs in the Fort White area. By 30th September the Brigade had killed 1354 of the enemy, and General Slim, in a special order of the day, said: 'The Lushai Brigade, overcoming the great physical difficulties of the country, have made the Tiddim road a nightmare for the Japanese, and very largely contributed to the defeat of the enemy in this area.'

The brigade continued to take part in the general advance of the fourteenth Army till January 1945, when they were withdrawn to India, with the exception of the Chin Hills Battalion and the Chin Levies (who had joined the Brigade during the advance) and the Lushai Scouts.

In the Naga Hills of Assam and around Manipur, V Force had its earliest beginnings, and it was in these areas that it was put to its hardest test, when the Japs invaded India in 1944. It was mostly through advance information of the Japanese offensive given by V Force scouts operating beyond the Chindwin, that Fourteenth Army was able to regroup for the battle of Kohima and Imphal. During these battles, the Assam zone of V Force not only took part in the fighting, but acted as a first-class intelligence organisation.

The material available to V Force in these areas consisted of Nagas and Kukis, both warrior races. Though most of their primitive customs are now outgrown, as late as the beginning of the century no young man could find a wife for himself until he had taken a head and thereby won the right to wear the warriors kilt. Their favourite weapon is the Dao, a heavy, square-ended knife, which can give a blow of almost incredible power.

Sometimes V Force were drawn beyond their principal role of intelligence and harassing into a straight fight with the enemy on a large scale. When this happened, the young British officers of V Force, the men of the Assam Rifles and the tribesmen invariably acquitted themselves well and gave the Jap more than he bargained for from a lightly armed and isolated enemy.

On one occasion, a strong Japanese fighting patrol attacked a small V Force sub-area headquarters at Manpa, near the Chindwin. It was a surprise attack at 3.30am. The enemy quickly made a gap in the perimeter and four Japanese made for the wireless station. They already had the wireless in their hands when a havildar and a rifleman killed all four with their kukris.

The attack went on for two hours, during which the Japs continually attempted to rush the gap, but were driven off with Bren gun fire and hand grenades. The V Force commander, Lt JR Godfrey, was wounded three times, but continued to take command until he received his fourth wound. This Jap force was finally driven off at daylight with many killed and wounded at the cost of 2 killed and 11 wounded of the V Force men.

At the battle of Kohima too, where V Force drew back to form part of the garrison, they showed what they could do in straightforward defence and attack.

This far-flung branch of V Force continued active until Stilwell took Myitkyina and the whole of north Burma was conquered.

In the course of its three-year history, V Force considerably changed its form and took many different names. Originally designed for post-occupational work, it quickly changed to a more offensive role in order to obtain intelligence for the army. With its HQ first at Jorhat and later at Comilla, it consisted of seven self-contained areas, covering the Burma border from [Fort Hertz?] to Arakan. V Force areas, as they were called, were based as follows: Ledo No 1; Kohima No 2; Imphal No 3; Lushai Hills, No 5 and 6; Arakan. This set-up continued until August 1944, except in the case of the Ledo area which was handed over to the United States Army Command in January of that year.

After August 1944, V Force operated in two groups – the Assam Group and the Arakan Group. By the end of the year, however, Fourteenth Army was well into Burma and guerrilla warfare in the border hills was no longer necessary. The guerrilla forces were therefore disbanded, though many of the tribesmen were allowed to keep their arms as a reward for good service.

In January 1945 V Force was reorganised and began to operate as a mobile intelligence screen on the flanks of the regular troops. With the Fourteenth Army constantly on the offensive, they were no longer expected to harass the enemy and disrupt his communications.

This new V Force was in at the finish of the war in SEA, still drawn largely from the Assam Rifles, whose service in the Burma war thus extended from April 1942 until the reconquest of Burma was completed, a record of which they may well be very proud.

V Force was a military adventure. Not all such are sound military projects. Did V Force in fact contribute substantially to the defeat of the Japanese in Burma, or was it merely a romantic, but ineffectual idea, which now makes a good story?

Two opinions at least subscribe to the former view. General [name?] a Japanese commander in the Arakan, asked by his superior to explain why he had not attained his objective, said he attributed his failure to a mysterious force which continually anticipated his plans, jittered his ration parties and harassed his lines of communication, and which seemed omnipresent. The other opinion is that of General Sir William J. Slim, who in a letter to the commander of V Force said: I fully realise the magnificent and vital part V Force played in our victory.'

The Statesman newspaper ran a story in early 1945 that promised: 'In the fullness of time' they would 'publish the account of the gallantry of these lonely fighters who hit back with pluck unsurpassed in the dark days.'

There perhaps lies the key to a true estimate of V Force's achievements. The accomplishment in itself was great; performed against odds, it became many times greater.