



Alan Jeffreys. *Approach to Battle: Training the Indian Army during the Second World War.* Delhi: Primus Books, 2019. 249 pp. \$69.95, cloth, ISBN 978-93-5290627-7.

Reviewed by Arjun Subramaniam (Indian Air Force [Ret.])

Published on H-Asia (August, 2021)

Commissioned by Sumit Guha (The University of Texas at Austin)

Subramaniam on Alan, *Approach to Battle: Training The Indian Army during the Second World War*

Approach to Battle is an excellent and meticulously researched narrative of pure vanilla military history. It explores the transformation of the Indian Army from a bloated, undertrained, and poorly led force during World War I and the early years of World War II into a fighting machine that gave the British Empire one of its most comprehensive military victories of WWII at the Battles of Kohima and Imphal during the Burma campaign in 1944. Breaking new ground and embarking on research that would otherwise seem dull for military historians who revel in writing about the heat and the dust of actual battle, Alan Jeffreys, an accomplished British military historian who specializes in the study of Britain's colonial Indian Army, has probed the heart of any fighting force that goes into battle—its doctrine, training, and leadership.

The book is neatly structured along two concurrent themes. The first theme is a chronological examination of the performance of the Indian Army during World War I, happenings during the interwar years, and the army's transformation into a professional fighting force through World War II. The second theme offers deep insights into the circumstances, methodologies adopted, and

the officers who were involved in the evolution of doctrine, tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs), with specific emphasis on desert, mountain, and jungle warfare. Much credit must go to the author for showcasing the steady evolution of an ecosystem that made it possible to disseminate these to the Indian soldier in the field in a way that improved their fighting effectiveness exponentially and sparked the revival of the Indian Army in several theaters from 1943 to 1945.

The core ethos of the Indian Army—*Naam, Namak, aur Nishan* (individual honor, integrity, and loyalty to the regimental flag)—emerged from the bloody battlefields of World War I and remains a defining benchmark for service in the Indian Army. Poorly trained, equipped and led, several Indian Army formations were hastily inducted into battle in large numbers across sectors in Europe with little or no acclimatization during the early years of World War I. Deployed initially in large numbers as an Indian Expeditionary Force after the initial reverses faced by the Allies in Europe, the Indian Army performed gallantly, particularly in the early battles of France and the deserts of Egypt, Palestine, and Mesopotamia. However, it paid a heavy price in terms of casual-

ties, particularly during fierce frontal battles and withdrawals until the tide turned at the Battle of the Somme.

While Jeffrey's opening chapters are soft on the Crown and its callous use of Indian troops as cannon fodder during the First World War, beyond suggesting that the reputation of the Indian Army took a blow (p. 32), they offer excellent insights into how the processes of recruitment, training, and Indianization of the Indian Army gained momentum in the interwar years. Core issues such as retention, role definition, and responsibilities that were assigned to Indian Commissioned Officers, Viceroy Commissioned Officers (VCOs), and Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) are explained in great detail as a backgrounder to Jeffrey's subsequent foray into the creation of institutions such as the Indian Military Academy and the Senior Officer Training School (pp. 43-47). Jeffrey suggests that the creation of these institutions with committed British officers of the Indian Army played a critical role not only in the creation of a new generation of well-trained Indian officers but also encouraged the development of a blueprint for training, exercises, and doctrine specific to the operational needs of the Indian Army (pp. 52-55).

The Indian Army of World War II, with approximately 2.5 million officers and men, was the largest volunteer army of all times. Nearly 50,000 Indian troops and officers lost their lives in the war.[1] Of the nearly 6,300 awards won by the Indian Army for gallantry during WW II were 31 Victoria Crosses, 4 George Crosses, 252 Distinguished Service Orders (DSOs), and 1,311 Military Crosses.

Resisting the temptation to focus primarily on jungle warfare and the Burma and Malaya campaigns as many historians have done in recent decades, Jeffreys offers deep insights into mechanized, desert, and mountain warfare (chapters 3 and 4). Weaving in the training and formation of the Indian Army's only armored division and its

amalgamation later with British armored divisions, the narrative meticulously highlights the failures and successes of the Fourth Indian Division and other Indian divisions in the North African campaign right up to the Battle of Al Alamein. Highlighting the dissonance in operational orientation between the Montgomery-led British Eighth Army and the Indian divisions assigned to him, Jeffreys argues that it was fresh training and orientation that led to success in the desert.

Not written about so far in much detail are the exploits and expertise of the Indian Army in mountain warfare in both the European and East African theaters of WWII. It is quite remarkable that twenty Indian Army officers with fighting experience in the North-West Frontier Provinces (NWFP) were seconded to the British Army as advisors during the Norwegian Campaign of 1940 (p. 109). It would have been even more interesting to learn whether any Indian officers were part of this group. Some of the early successes of the Indian Army in World War II were in the mountains of East Africa, and the exploits of the Fourth and Fifth Indian Divisions with an emphasis on TTPs, leadership, and fighting as cohesive formations come out clearly in chapter 4. Relentless in its adaptation to warfare in diverse terrains, Jeffreys highlights the path of Fourth Indian Division as it was moved around from East Africa to North Africa and then to Sicily where it acquitted itself creditably along with the Eighth and Tenth Indian Divisions. In comparison to Field Marshal Montgomery's and Field Marshal Alexander's lukewarm opinions of the Indian Army (p. 127), other Allied commanders were more appreciative, with the American commander of the 15th Army Group, Lieutenant General Mark W. Clark, commenting in the foreword to *The Tiger Triumphs*: "I have had the distinction of having under my command a trio of great Indian divisions—the Fourth, Eighth and Tenth—whose fighting record in Italy has been a splendid one. No obstacle has suc-

ceeded in delaying these Indian troops for long or in lowering their high morale or fighting spirit.”[2]

Jeffreys does justice to the five Victoria Crosses won by the Indian Army in the mountains of Italy by acknowledging begrudging comments by senior British commanders that “betrayed the traditional prejudice against the Indian Army” (pp. 128-129). He ends chapter 4 by highlighting the importance of leveraging the training and experience acquired by Indian divisions in the Middle East in improved operational performance in Italy.

Ever since Lieutenant General (later, Field Marshal) Bill Slim’s Fourteenth Army, mainly comprising several divisions of the Indian Army, was immortalized by several books over the last few decades, there has been much writing on the victorious Burma campaign. However, little has been written about the reasons for the disastrous performance of several Indian divisions in the fall of Singapore and the Malayan campaign that stretched through 1941 and 1942. Attributing this to mass recruitment and poor training at inadequately structured training establishments, Jeffreys suggests that a series of Army in India Training Memorandums (AITMs) were generated to disseminate the lessons from the Malayan campaign across all units. Officers from units that were well led and acquitted themselves with distinction in a losing campaign were deputed to share their lessons with formations that were earmarked for the Allied push into Burma in 1944. Jeffreys argues that at the heart of this transformation was a comprehensive training structure that flowed from robust doctrinal thought based on a careful examination of all the campaigns involving the Indian Army during the early years of WWII, most of which ended either in a retreat or defeat at the hands of tactically proficient adversaries.

Jeffrey is at his best in chapter 6, as he describes the revival of the Indian Army’s fighting prowess between 1942 and 1944 by concentrating on issues such as the issuing of 45,000 detailed, 75-

page training pamphlets that stressed understanding Japanese tactics and derailing the myth that they were “supermen.” Helping readers understand tactical concepts such as the creation of “defensive boxes” and explaining jungle craft, map reading, and concealment indicates the author’s comfort with the operational environment of the time and stands out along with his subsequent treatment of leadership and doctrine in Slim’s Fourteenth Army.

If there is bone to pick with Jeffreys, it is the absence of a detailed examination of the role of the Indian King’s Commissioned Officers (KCOs) in the revival of the fortunes of the Indian Army. A unique experiment was tried out during the recapture of Burma in 1944-45 to validate the military prowess of a *purely* Indian brigade. The 51st “All Indian Brigade” was formed in the 25th Infantry Division to allow the Indians to either “leap high or drown.” The three battalions in the brigade were commanded by three accomplished KCOs, Lieutenant Colonels L. P. Sen, S. P. Thorat, and K. C. Thimayya.[3] The brigade distinguished itself in the Battle of Kangaw in early 1945, which none other than Field Marshal Slim called “the fiercest battle fought in Burma.” All the three Indian battalion commanders were decorated with DSOs for their outstanding leadership during the Kangaw operations.[4] Surely, these officers and others, like “Sam” Manekshaw, were beneficiaries of the robust training regimen and contributed significantly in imparting such training at the battalion and company level.

Overall, *Approach to Battle* is a superbly researched and lucidly written piece of military writing that remains relevant when it comes to reiterating the importance of training and doctrine in war fighting, particularly for large militaries that are confronted with the difficulties of wide-spectrum operations in different terrain.

Notes

[1]. Latest figures from the Commonwealth Graves Commission brochure issued during the centenary commemoration of WWI in early 2015.

[2]. Mark Clark, unpaginated foreword to G. R. Stevens, *The Tiger Triumphs: The Story of Three Great Divisions in Italy* (Uckfield, UK: Naval and Military Press, 2014).

[3]. C.B. Khanduri, *Thimayya: An Amazing Life* (New Delhi: K. W. Publishers, 2006), 83.

[4]. D. R. Mankekar, *Leaves from A War Reporter's Diary* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishers, 1977), 120.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-asia>

Citation: Arjun Subramaniam. Review of Alan Jeffreys. *Approach to Battle: Training the Indian Army during the Second World War*. H-Asia, H-Net Reviews. August, 2021.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=56539>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.