

The V Force In The India-Burma Campaign Of 1942-1944

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Abstract: Burma fell into the hands of the Japanese 15th Army in 1942. There was impending danger of Japanese entry into British India from the northeastern part of the country. The British government was not only facing shortage of soldiers but also the resources to raise more troops at that time to safeguard her eastern frontier. It was under such circumstances that Wavell, the Commander-in-Chief of British-India armed forces, initiated the formation of a native force which came to be known as the 'V Force'. The tribesmen in the Force were not formally enlisted in the regular army and were made to operate behind the Japanese line to gather intelligence and provide early warning to the British 4 Corps at Imphal. The fighting elements of the Force were the Assam Rifles, Tripura Rifles and the Lushai Brigade. The Force operated all along the Indo-Burma frontier and beyond. They played crucial roles in the Imphal-Kohima battle and to the extent of safeguarding the Ledo Road. This paper is an attempt to highlight the importance of the Force and some of its roles which contributed in the victory of the British over the Japanese in 1944.

Keywords: V Force, Japanese, British, Assam Rifles, Burma, Imphal, Nagas

I. FORMATION AND ORGANIZATION

The V Force played important and risky roles in the India-Burma theatre of the Second World War. Field Marshall Archibald Wavell took charge of British-India armed forces as the Commander-in-Chief in November 1941 and also as the Supreme Commander of the Allied forces in the Far East, the same year (Keegan, 2002, pp. 172-173). In April 1942 (after the British withdrew from Burma), he organized a body of hillmen of the Lushai, Chin and Naga hills called, the 'V Force', to conduct operations against the Japanese lines of communication. The V Force functioned under a central headquarters and was divided into six groups with its own headquarter and operated on the frontier areas with the services of up to 1000 tribesmen (Colvin, 2012, p. 38). These tribesmen were not formally enlisted in any military setups and the Force was commanded by former Burma police officers, British civilians (for instance, the former employees of the teak industry) with local knowledge and volunteers from the army. The V Force operated across the approaches of British positions to gather intelligence and provide early warning of Japanese movement. The Z Patrols (also known as Z Force), operated almost like the V Force but the former was

drafted from the army and the units were fighting patrols that worked immediately behind the Japanese positions and their lines of communication (Callahan, 2017, p. 72).

The initial plan of Wavell was to raise 2000-10,000 men from Tripura Hills for the V Force. The organization, raising, arming and training of the Force was carried out with the help of the Assam Government and built on the foundation of platoons loaned from the Assam Rifles. The Force was to be self-supporting and live on the country. Wavell made Brigadier Felix Williams of the 2nd Battalion, Assam Rifles, the commander of the Force but officers of the Assam Rifles were restricted to serve with their men in the Force which displeased the Rifles' personnel and officers (Palit, 1984, p. 106; Woodburn, 2004, p. 192). The V Force was organized and divided into two zones- Assam and Arakan. The Assam Zone was divided into six groups and operated on the Northern and Central fronts while the Arakan Zone had three, with one which acted as a link between the two zones. Platoons of Assam Rifles formed the fighting elements of each group in the Assam Zone and in the Arakan Zone the fighting elements were the Tripura Rifles (Kirby, 2004, p. 136). With the formation of the 4 Corps at Imphal, the V Force was brought under its command (Palit, op.cit., p. 108).

The original purpose of the V Force was to organize the tribes on the borders of Assam because of which the hill tracts were divided into different areas under a brigadier in charge of guerillas. The officer-in-charge of each area/group trained the guerillas and armed those desirable ones in demolition and sabotage works while the others in observation and collection of information. Therefore, the V Force was created to fulfill two specific objectives- collection of information and the second, to harass the Japanese (who cross the border) and making the country inhospitable to them (Prasad, p. 55). Allen, who had served as a Japanese speaking intelligence in Southeast Asia during and after the war stated that the V Force information was usually of tactical and short-term value, as the teams operated behind the movements of Japanese troops and transport in order to provide identifications and general order of battle formation. Ursula Graham-Bower, one of the commanders of a V Force unit, had set up extensive network in the hills around Imphal with Naga informers and provided long range strategic and intelligence which were political in nature (Allen, 2002, p. 574). Slim, the top brass of the British 14th Army had mentioned that "the Japanese had much the same spy system- often employing the same men- and a fascinating duel developed between the rival organizations" (Slim, 1961, p. 121). The Nagas and the other hill peoples who had worked with the V Force played a key role in the fight against the Japanese when the latter pushed towards Manipur and more British soldiers could not be spared for the Assam front due to paucity of resources (Bayley et al., 2005, pp. 384-385). In fact, this factor necessitated the formation of the V Force by Wavell to rein in the natives for self-help against the impending danger from Japanese 15th Army.

II. SOME OF THE IMPORTANT ROLES PLAYED BY THE V FORCE

The first task of the V Force was in helping out the refugees coming from Central Burma to the frontiers near Tamu; from Myikyina and Fort Hertz to Ledo and in the Arakan and Akyab. The Force patrolled across the frontier to locate, guide and assist the refugees who entered India from Burma (cited in Palit, op. cit., pp. 107-108). The Japanese activity and strength all along the 4 Corps fronts were on the rise and the plan of the Japanese 15th Army became clear to Slim and Mountbatten. The Intelligence Screen of the V Force reported the massing of transport, mechanical and animal, including elephants, south of the Uyu and near Thaugdut on the Chindwin, by the Japanese. On the basis of the intelligence reports from the V Force and other agents, the British 14th Army could fairly assess the tactical and strategic planning of the Japanese 15th Army and planned out its own counter offensive strategy (Swinson, 1966, p. 43; Slim, op. cit., pp. 248-249).

The fighting elements of the V Force also took part in several battles. During the battle of Kohima, some of the V Force men were with the Indian, Gurkha and Assam Regiment soldiers at General Purpose Transport (GPT) Ridge while some of them were attached to the other British troops at Detail Issue Store (DIS) and Field Supply Depot (FSD). The Kuki Piquet was solely defended by some V Force personnel

(Assam Rifles) (Swinson, 1966, pp.75-76). The Mahratta Light Infantry and V Force detachments also fought at Detail Hill (DH) at Kohima and the Force's detachments were on various sectors during the battle (Warner, 1973, pp.134-135). Lieutenant Colonel Lightfoot commanded the V Force unit, "V" Op Command No 2, at Kohima (Palit, op. cit., p. 135). On the basis of intelligence reports, the 50th Indian Parachute Brigade was rushed to Ukhrul (35 miles NE of Imphal) with the order to guard all exits from the Somra Tracts east of Kohima. The Brigade established its bases at Jessami, Kharasom and Phek. The 1st Assam Regiment, the 1st Burma Regiment and the Parachute Brigade maintained a very close liaison with the forward screen of the V Force and the Assam Rifles (Swinson, op. cit., p. 46). However, it was found out that the Japanese 15th Division crossed the Chindwin only on 15th March and there was no threat then on the northern flank and the reports sent to the British army by the V Force in this regard from the frontier were found to be negative (Steyn, 1959, p. 57). The resistance put up by the Assam Rifles platoons of the V Force and the 1st Assam Regiment at Jessami and Kharasom against the Japanese 31st Division enabled the British 33 Corps to reinforce the Kohima Garrison which remained almost undefended at that time.

In Manipur, the V Force under the command of Captain Murray, in-charge of "V" Op Command No. 3 unit, acted as the eyes and ears of the British 4 Corps. The Force operated along the stretch of the Chindwin from Homalin down to Pantha, one of the most vulnerable points from where the Japanese were expected to launch their offensive against Imphal. The No 3 V Force unit had its headquarters in Sensam and Sakok in Angouching and the Kabaw Valley and operated on both sides of the Chindwin in Burma. During mid February 1944, the Force had reported to the 4 Corps at Imphal the collection of a large number of rafts and power boats near Homalin by the Japanese. The outposts of the V Force in Kohima and Manipur sectors were ordered to withdraw from their forward positions soon after the entry of the Japanese because it became difficult to maintain their forward positions (Palit, op. cit., pp. 141-142). In fact, the Japanese overran most of the defensive positions of the British army, including the V Force outposts on the frontier, during their offensive against the 14th Army.

The V Force operated with the Lushai Brigade in South Lushai Hills, Aizawl, Lungleh, Chin Hills and on the fringes of the Kaladan valley while the Tripura V Force operated with the 14th Indian Division in the Arakan and provided critical intelligence on Japanese locations (Ibid. p. 116). In 1944, the V Force element of the Lushai Brigade which operated with the British 5th Division captured the first Japanese prisoner of war in the Tiddim sector. The Force laid ambushes, killed the Japanese soldiers and destroyed a few Japanese vehicles on its way to Imphal (Ibid. pp. 122-125). The "V" Op Command No 1 unit of the V Force operated with the Assam Rifles in the northern sector at Ledo and beyond where the Americans were engaged in the construction of the Ledo Road to Yunnan through Myitkyina (Ibid. p. 133). The Force had many encounters with the Japanese-levied guerilla unit- the Chin Defence Army and Japanese patrols (Barker, 1963, p. 64) from its inception in 1942 and up to the termination of the war in the Indo-Burma frontier.

III. CONCLUSION

It has been observed that the V Force found very less or no mention in the official records after the British 14th Army started the counter offensive against the Japanese. Following its inception, the V Force operated almost throughout northeast India down to the Bay of Bengal and Burma. Like Brigadier Orde Wingate's Chindits, which operated behind the lines of the Japanese in northern Burma and Myitkyina, the V Force not only provided vital intelligence to the British army before and during the Imphal-Kohima battle, but had played crucial roles during the reconquest of Burma. It is to be noted that the intelligence on enemy movements provided by the tribesmen in the V Force and others that the British 33 Corps was able to destroy the Japanese positions at Kohima.

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