



A Disciplined Service

John Chiles MBE (*Emanuel 1934–1939*)

At School John Chiles joined the Subsidiary Corps which was for boys too young to join the OTC but when he was old enough he became a Corporal in the OTC. On leaving School in 1939 John joined the Local Defence Volunteers in Reigate with the rank of Sergeant.

After volunteering for the Royal Armoured Corps in 1941 John was posted overseas to the Indian Armoured Corps Tank School. He was then transferred to the Probyn's Horse Regiment, where he maintained the regiment's tanks during the gruelling Burma Campaign. John has written a short account of his experiences in the Second World War:

It was not long after leaving school that I decided that tanks looked exciting and I volunteered to join the Royal Armoured Corps. I found myself in the 61st Training Regiment RAC at Assaye Barracks, Tidworth and facing discipline even greater than that at a pre-war school.

Most of the officers and senior NCOs were 8th Hussars and expected the highest of standards in everything. I was in a barrack room with about twenty-five other Troopers. We slept in two-tier bunks around the room, where the floor in the centre had to be kept highly polished and never trodden on.

I trained as a tank wireless operator, but I also had to be capable of driving tanks and operating their guns. We trained on Matilda and Valentine tanks. Our live firing was carried out at Castle Martin in Pembrokeshire, where we also undertook coastal defence. It was my turn. I aimed and fired the 2-pounder gun of the Valentine tank on the range, but as I did so the tank gave a huge lurch and the shell hit the nearby lighthouse, taking a lump out of its side!

I was later interviewed as a possible candidate for a commission by the CO, an elderly cavalry colonel who had obviously been recalled at the outbreak of war. The first question he asked me was –'Do you have a private income?' I immediately replied 'Yes, sir.' Fortunately he did not seek details, or I would have had to own up that



it was the few pence that I received in interest on my Post Office Savings account!

I got through that interrogation and also the War Office Selection Board that I had to attend at an Oxford college. It was there that I was told that my services were required in the Indian Army. A kindly brigadier, who had obviously spent very many years out East, walked



me around the college grounds to give me advice as to what I should do when I became an Indian Army officer, such as 'Don't forget my boy, don't have your first noggin until after sundown!' (Sound advice when fighting the Japs).

We sailed from Glasgow on the *Stratheden* in a large convoy escorted by the aircraft carrier HMS *Eagle*, the battleship HMS *Malaya*, the cruiser HMS *Newcastle* and a considerable number of destroyers. We crossed a stormy north Atlantic in mid-winter to within 24 hours sailing of Canada to successfully avoid U-boats, before going south and then east into Freetown to refuel.

On gaining my Commission in the Guides Cavalry, I was sent to Lucknow and almost at once ordered to take a convoy of lorries, driven by Sowars under training, up to Raniket in the foothills of the Himalayas. I was just a 2nd Lieutenant and hardly able to speak any Urdu. In the Indian Army you were given a lot of responsibility at an early age. At Raniket we loaded all the lorries with large containers of resin from the pine forests and took them down to the railhead in the plains. The only good thing about this four-day trip was the Chevrolet limousine I was given, still in civilian maroon colour, with the driver.

The Indian Armoured Corps Tank School was being set up at Babina, a very hot place in the Central Provinces, where prickly heat was all too common. I was sent there with another young officer, as we had been with a UK training regiment, to set up the Driving and Maintenance Wing and organise the training of the first intake. At the same time I had to learn Urdu and pass, within six months, the oral and written examinations. Failure to do so would have meant I would have had to leave the Indian Army.

I was posted to Probyn's Horse (5th King Edward VII's Own Lancers), an outstanding regiment with whom I spent the rest of my army service. We fought the Japanese in Burma, where we were one of only four regiments equipped with Sherman tanks. We took part in the crossing of the Irrawaddy river, then seized and held Meiktila, the vital centre of communications of the Jap 15th Army. The Japs threw everything

A Japanese Officer's sword – acquired by John Chiles after the Japanese surrendered.

they had at us for three weeks until Mandalay, in the north, was taken.

All our petrol (a Sherman does three gallons per mile!), ammunition, etc., was dropped to us from the air, as happened during our subsequent race to Rangoon, which we had to reach before the monsoon broke and air support would become impossible. We had many tough battles against suicidal Japs at many places en route. Some times we would by-pass a 'tough nut' and leave it to follow-up troops. We took a route west of Pyawbwe in order to attack this town from the South. We waited on a hillside, overlooking the main road, with 6/7th Rajputs, a company of 4/4th Bombay Grenadiers, a self-propelled gun battery and two armoured car squadrons of 16th Light Cavalry. The Japanese had no idea that we were there and during the night a convoy of Jap lorries came from the south and some Japanese tanks from the opposite direction. Every tank and artillery gun opened fire and the enemy was destroyed.

I knew nothing of this battle until I woke at dawn! I was the Technical Officer of 'C' Squadron responsible for 15 Sherman tanks always being fit for battle. This meant that I spent many nights, hidden from the Japs under a tarpaulin sheet, undertaking major replacements of suspension, etc., by torchlight, with my excellent Muslim fitters. On the night of the battle at Pyawbwe I had been able to stretch out in my slit trench, in front of the tanks and artillery and had been so tired that I did not hear a thing!

Of the original British officers in my Squadron I was the only one who was not killed or wounded. There were several occasions when I thought that I had run out of luck.

By the time we had fought our way to Rangoon most of us were showing signs of vitamin deficiency for we had been on half rations or less for several months and had not had any fresh food. It was due to the good discipline and training of the excellent soldiers of Probyn's Horse, that complete success was achieved by the Regiment in its demanding role in clearing the Japs out of Burma. I was also mentioned in Despatches for distinguished services.

When VJ (Victory in Japan) day came, we were waterproofing our tanks in readiness for the invasion of Malaya. That night all the officers, including the Commanding Officer, climbed on or into a Sherman tank and we drove into town to Government House which was being used as an Officers' club. We drove up the stone steps to the entrance, but did not actually drive through the entrance doors. When visiting Burma three years ago with my wife Pam, I wanted to see if the marks of the tank tracks were still on the steps but we found that Government House no longer existed!

In more recent years I was appointed MBE for service to Commonwealth ex-servicemen, women and their families.



John Chiles, (centre, front row) with men of Probyn's Horse (5th King Edward VII's Own Lancers)

The Interview

In 2013 Daniel Kirmatzis interviewed John Chiles in which he explored further John's encounter with Japanese forces during the Burma Campaign.

Daniel: Can you run me through your personal experiences on the road to Meiktila?

John Chiles: Well the first thing when we set off I put a tin helmet on and it was the only time in the campaign I ever wore a tin helmet. Forever after that I just wore my black beret and one of the first villages we had to capture was a place called Sittang.

Daniel: How were you travelling at this time, were you in a jeep?

John Chiles: I had a jeep and a T16 carrier. A carrier was rather like a Bren Gun carrier but it wasn't, it was a T16 carrier which had tillers to steer it rather than a wheel and my own wireless operator was a Indian Corps of Signals technician who was my mechanic for looking after all the wirelasses in my squadron. I had an electrician and two mechanical fitters. Sometimes I might travel in that and they would be in my jeep but those were my two vehicles. It was on that first day when we ran into Jap suicide people who would dive under a tank with picric acid to blow it up and we went through a village called Sittang and in 2005 my wife and I went back to Burma. We went along that same route and we stopped in Sittang and I asked the interpreter to ask the villagers where they were when we were fighting that battle. They replied that they were either hiding in the jungle or in temples and an elderly woman piped up and she said she was just a child at the time but she said she remembered our tanks going

through their vegetable garden so I was able to apologise after all those years.

Daniel: Can you describe going through the village?

John Chiles: Well I wasn't with the leading vehicles but I always kept up very close to the tanks because I reckoned it was safer in an open vehicle like a jeep or a carrier to be fairly close to them rather than way back. Then of course we would harbour at night and that was where we had to do all the necessary repairs and maintenance and if tanks broke down through petrol or blockages or anything like that then we would have to deal with that and get them going again. I also at times had to command a troop of tanks so I had a fairly wide brief as far as an officer was concerned.

Daniel: When did you first engage the Japanese?

John Chiles: There was fighting all the way there but in relatively small pockets because I think the Japs began to realise what our target was, what our aim was and they brought in every possible man to defend Meiktila and it was quite a major battle to capture Meiktila, we went round to the North and came in from the North East and managed to capture the air strip.

Daniel: What was the terrain like?

John Chiles: By the time we got to there we were more or less on more open country, not so wooded. There were a fair amount of trees around but nothing like a jungle, more open and the Japs threw absolutely everything at us to try and get rid of us there but we managed to hang on. We were being shelled a lot – we would go out on armoured sweeps sometimes for a day, sometimes for two days, to find their guns and destroy them.

Daniel: What were your feelings at that time?

John Chiles: One had a lot of responsibility and that I think affected one's attitude. You've got a job to do and you had to get on with it. There was one morning when we were going off on one of these armoured sweeps when as soon as the tanks showed their noses just North of Meiktila they were very heavily shelled and then I arrived with my 6 wheel Dodge trucks loaded with ammunition and petrol and my fitters to go to the forming up point and immediately we were heavily shelled and I had to make a quick decision. My fitters you couldn't replace them easily so I decided to leave those behind and I asked for volunteers to drive these trucks of ammunition and petrol through this shelling to where we had to get and I had no problems with that all, I drove the first one myself with my head down with my foot flat down and when we got to where the tanks were forming up I got a tremendous rocket from the Colonel who said 'Where are your fitters?' I told him what had happened and I didn't want to risk losing them in the shell fire and he said shelling's nothing to worry about and I must say I rather laughed like a drain later that morning when I heard over the regimental wireless that he had been hit by shrapnel from a shell that had gone through his nose.

Daniel: Can you tell me what it was like capturing Meiktila?

John Chiles: Well we sat there for about a month going out on these armoured sweeps and being shelled and being bombed with them trying to recapture Meiktila but I think we were quite confident we would hang on and of course everything had to be dropped to us by air. We had no line of communications at all and that didn't worry us at all. We still had the air strip so planes could fly in with fuel and ammunition but then we lost that for a while.

Daniel: Can you take me through your experiences after Meiktila?

John Chiles: Well, as I said earlier, we were completely surrounded by the Japs. There were two lakes there. We were harboured by the southern lake because of all the shelling we had to dig in all our soft vehicles, you can imagine having to dig a huge hole in the ground with a ramp and drive a truck down into it, that was the only way we could shelter the vehicles from the shelling. If one wanted a wash, one went into the lake and it was quite amazing being in the lake with shells bursting in the lake. It was rather like being in a Jacuzzi.

Daniel: How did you get sleep?

John Chiles: Wherever we were through the whole campaign each officer had to dig his own slit trench so that you were just below the surface of the ground and then you had a

bedding roll and you stretched that out which was a canvas bedding roll with a blanket inside and you stretched out just below the surface and hoped it didn't rain.

Daniel: When you were fixing tanks and doing them up, just run me through that process, what were conditions like, did you do that at a particular time of day?

John Chiles: The main problem was the suspension, particularly the bogey wheels on the tanks and they would break and we frequently had to spend nights replacing these and it was quite a job because you would have to jack up the arms which were under considerable spring pressure and then remove a large shaft, take out the damaged bogey wheel, put the fresh one in and then get that shaft back lined up with the two arms. It wasn't easy at all and we were having to work with torches under a sheet of canvas and then not far away you would hear the Japs calling out 'Hello Tommy, where are you Tommy?' and the odd firing going on and that sort of thing.

Daniel: How did you regard the Japanese soldiers?

John Chiles: They would come at you in a continuous scream like ants across a floor and you could stamp on them and then more would come and that's how they operated. I've spoken to Japanese since the war and they were acting under orders, the same way as we were acting under orders. The only thing is that their behaviour at that time was acceptable to them but wouldn't be acceptable I don't think now and certainly wasn't acceptable to us but they were soldiers and they were doing what they were told to do.

Daniel: You've been involved in lots of veteran activity over the years. Can you just tell me which Veteran Associations you've been involved with and why has that been important to you?

John Chiles: I've been very much involved with the Royal British Legion, I'm still on the County Committee and a Vice President of the Surrey Royal British Legion. I am Chairman of the Epsom Branch of the Burma Star Association and for the past twenty years I've been on the Commonwealth Council of the Royal Commonwealth Ex Services League representing the Ex Services Association of Pakistan. I have also given my services as a Borough Councillor and served as a Mayor of my borough but the reason I think behind this was, as I mentioned earlier, that although I am a pretty poor Christian, knowing all my faults and there are many of them, I've got a tremendous faith in God and a tremendous faith in prayer and in my own squadron in the war I was the only one who was not killed or wounded and I believe rightly or wrongly that I was saved to serve others and that is what I've tried to do and what, in spite of being 91, I am still trying to do.