

## The 20th Indian Division in French Indo-China, 1945-46: Combined/joint Operations and the ‘fog of war’<sup>1</sup>

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‘Wars do not come to a clean end.’<sup>2</sup>

This essay focuses on a difficult and controversial aspect of the Second World War and its immediate aftermath: combined, joint operations and combined arms warfare at the end of Second World War. These will be considered in this case study through the prism of occupation responsibilities in French Indo-China (FIC) in the immediate aftermath of the Japanese surrender.<sup>3</sup> This case study highlights the themes of this conference, as well as the ensuing discussions.

The FIC campaign was different from most others of the period. It had the hallmarks of a joint operation<sup>4</sup> within the British military system, with British Army, Indian Army, Royal Air Force, and Royal Navy units working cooperatively.<sup>5</sup> The coalition operation was more complicated. One major reason for this was the role played by the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA); so recently a British enemy, the IJA was to perform as, in effect, a British ally in imposing law and order against the Vietnamese nationalists, the Viet Minh. At the same time, IJA troops remained a conquered enemy and a potential threat—a pointed example of the complexities which accompany the ends of wars. Further compounding the complexity was the return of French military forces, and their subsequent involvement in the coalition.

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<sup>1</sup> A different and more expansive version of this essay, encompassing a discussion of operations in the Netherlands East Indies (NEI), appears in my book, *The Indian Army and the End of the Raj* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Louis Allen, *The End of the War in Asia* (London: Hart-Davis MacGibbon, 1976), p. 267.

<sup>3</sup> The Royal Air Force, Royal Navy, and French military forces would all be involved in the multi-layered operations in French Indo-China (FIC).

<sup>4</sup> The current US military definitions for combined arms, combined and joint operations are as follows: Combined arms: ‘The application of the elements of combat power in unified action to defeat enemy ground forces; to seize, occupy, and defend land areas; and to achieve physical, temporal, and psychological advantages over the enemy to seize and exploit the initiative. See US Army *3-0 Unified Land Operations* (2011). ‘Joint operations is a general term that describes military actions conducted by joint forces and those Service forces employed in specified command relationships with each other, which, of themselves, do not establish joint forces. A joint force is one composed of significant elements, assigned or attached, of two or more Military Departments operating under a single joint forces command.’ See *Joint Publication 3-0 Joint Operations* (2011). Combined or multinational operations are ‘operations conducted by forces of two or more nations, usually undertaken within the structure of a coalition or alliance. Other possible arrangements include supervision by an intergovernmental organization (IGO) such as the United Nations (UN), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), or the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Commonly used terms under the multinational rubric include allied, bilateral, coalition, combined, or multilateral. However, within this publication, the term multinational will be used to describe these actions.’ See *Joint Publication 3-16 Multinational Operations* (2013).

<sup>5</sup> Space does not allow for a more detailed discussion of the role of French forces when they returned to FIC and began to take command of the situation.

In this essay I intend to demonstrate the following contentions:

1. That the British/Indian elements of the joint military operation performed to a high standard, demonstrating the professionalism and adaptability gained from three years of active service in the Burma campaign.
2. That, despite this, the British/Indian forces were hampered by the complexities of their relationships with Japanese and French forces, as well as by the lack of a clear strategy for the mission itself from HMG.
3. That, as a result of these factors, some notable successes in combat actions and completion of the mission in 1946 did not render the overall mission a success, particularly given that clear outcomes for a successful mission had never been articulated.

## Background

In July 1945, His Majesty's Government (HMG) in London agreed to expand the area of responsibility for South East Asia Command (SEAC), a joint allied HQ, with regard to occupation duties. This put SEAC in the position of relying upon the largely volunteer Indian Army<sup>6</sup> to carry out the mission. The conscript British Army could not meet this need, as it was having great difficulties keeping numbers high enough amid demobilisation pressures at the end of the war in the east. In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, the Indian Army found itself carrying out occupation duties not only in British colonies such as Burma and Malaya, but also in the colonies of FIC and the Netherlands East Indies (NEI; later Indonesia).

The Indian Army's involvement in FIC and NEI was to prove one of its most controversial assignments.<sup>7</sup> In both places, Indian Army divisions found themselves, as one officer would

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<sup>6</sup> All the senior officers mentioned in this chapter were Indian Army, except for Mountbatten.

<sup>7</sup> There has been extensive research into this period in the last 20 years, mostly within the context of the post-Second World War political environment; there has not been much specific emphasis on the Indian Army's role as distinct from the larger strategic context of British decolonisation and the impending conflict in FIC that would engulf the French (and later the Americans) in two costly wars, as well as the Indonesian war of independence. For further details on the larger issues surrounding this chapter, see the following: John Springhall 'Kicking Out the Vietminh: How Britain Allowed France to Reoccupy South Indo-China, 1945-6,' in *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol 40 (1), January 2005, pp. 115-30; Ronald Spector, 'After Hiroshima: Allied Military Occupations and the Fate of Japan's Empire, 1945-7,' *Journal of Military History*, Vol 69, No. 4, October 2005, 1121-36; Peter Neville, *Britain in Vietnam: Prelude to Disaster, 1945-6* (London: Routledge, 2007); Peter Dennis, *Troubled Days of Peace: Mountbatten and South East Asia Command, 1945-6* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987); Geraint Hughes, 'A "Post-War" War: The British Occupation of French-Indochina, September 1945-March 1946,' *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 17:3, 2006; Louis Allen, *The End of the War in Asia* (London: Hart-Davis MacGibbon, 1976); Peter Dunn, *The First Indo-China War* (London: C. Hurst & Co, 1985); F.S.V. Donnison, *British Military Administration in the Far East, 1943-6* (London: HMSO, 1956); Woodburn Kirby, *The War Against Japan*, Vol. 5 (London: HMSO, 1969); Earl Mountbatten of Burma, *Report to the Combined Chiefs of Staff by the Supreme Commander, South East Asia, 1943-1946* (London: HMSO, 1951); *Post Surrender Tasks; Section E of the Report to the Combined Chiefs of Staff by the Supreme Allied Commander South-East Asia, 1943-1946* (London: HMSO, 1969); and *Transfer of Power (TOP)*, Vols. 5, 6, and 7; as well as the papers of General Sir Douglas Gracey, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King's College London.

later state, in the position of 'piggy in the middle.'<sup>8</sup> The divisional and corps commanders had to navigate a minefield of political issues, involving emancipation of Allied prisoners of war<sup>9</sup> and civilians, disarming more than 300,000 Imperial Japanese soldiers, and eventually fighting combined and joint counterinsurgency campaigns against nationalist guerrillas, as well as Japanese troops who perceived them as instruments of the returning French and Dutch colonial administrations. For some battalions, the campaigns during this period involved fighting almost as bitter as anything they had encountered against the Japanese in Burma.<sup>10</sup>

The occupation was further hampered by a poorly-defined strategy; mission statements appeared to change over the course of the occupation, and indicate considerable gaps in understanding between SEAC, HMG, and India Command on what the Indian Army's remit and goals should be. Attempting to define, and articulate, why the Indian Army should be involved in combined operations in non-British colonies and as a result find itself fighting a counterinsurgency campaign against nationalists that had nothing to do with India or the British Empire, was a considerable challenge.

One need only refer to the various war diaries and divisional and regimental histories to see that, for the men, VCOs, and officers, this campaign was a strange continuation of the Second World War.<sup>11</sup> The Indian Army had extensive experience in combined and joint operations from three years of combat in Burma, but the ambiguous role of the IJA in the FIC campaign was a confusing adjunct to an already complicated theatre of operations.

### Strategic context

As noted above, Lord Louis Mountbatten, commander of SEAC, arrived in Potsdam, Germany, on 24 July 1945, to meet with the Combined Chiefs of Staff. There he was informed that SEAC would be taking over responsibility for more of South East Asia—chiefly Borneo, Java, and Indo-China, all of which had previously been under the control of South West Pacific Area, or General MacArthur's command. At first, Mountbatten did not feel that this would be too large a task for SEAC to take on. SEAC had already been planning Operation ZIPPER, the amphibious landings and operation for Malaya and Singapore.

It was during the meetings in Potsdam that Mountbatten was advised of the impending atomic bomb drop on Japan. He was sworn to secrecy, but told to prepare for the possibility of an early Japanese capitulation. Mountbatten duly informed SEAC HQ in Kandy, Ceylon, without revealing information about the atomic bomb, to prepare for potentially imminent

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with Major G.C. Coppen, 1/11/1999.

<sup>9</sup> See Kirby, Vol. V, Appendix 30, for a detailed discussion regarding the numbers of POWs in SEAC AO.

<sup>10</sup> A sad commentary regarding this point was the death of Lt Col Sarbjit Singh Kalha of the 2/1st Punjab Regiment at Soerabaja in Java, NEI. As noted in the second chapter, he had risen to command the battalion during the Burma Campaign and was highly respected. According to the 5th Indian Divisional history, he was "calm and unruffled in battle, fearless, and with delightful manners, he had won the DSO and Bar. His remarkable ability included that of commanding both British and Indian officers, and there was no one in his battalion or in the Division who did not hold him in the highest regard. He was one of those senior Indian Army officers whom India could least to afford to lose." Antony Brett-James, *Ball of Fire: The Fifth Indian Division in the Second World War* (Aldershot: Gale & Polden, 1951), p. 463.

<sup>11</sup> See Richard McMillan's work.

capitulation, and to begin joint planning to manage the enlarged area of responsibility that SEAC had inherited. SEAC HQ responded to this information with concern, fearing that Operation ZIPPER would not go forward if an early capitulation occurred. Military and political leaders in SEAC and London considered the invasion and re-occupation of Malaya and Singapore of particular psychological importance, necessary to wipe clean the humiliation of the 1942 Malayan and Singapore capitulations.<sup>12</sup>

Mountbatten immediately set out to prepare SEAC, chiefly formations from the 12th and 14th Armies RAF and RN, to make ready to seize strategic areas from the Japanese in Burma and then prioritise specific areas expected to be handed over to SEAC control. More than 120 ships and 50 squadrons from the RAF prepared to deploy<sup>13</sup>, and on 13 August SEAC established priority areas as follows: Malaya, Saigon, Bangkok, Batavia (NEI), Surabaya (NEI) and Hong Kong. With this plan in place, SEAC was able to move quickly, and land and naval forces were able to begin carrying out Operation ZIPPER in short order.<sup>14</sup>

The increased level of responsibility caused consternation for some senior British officers, including General Sir William Slim, commander of Allied Land Forces South East Asia (ALFSEA). As he wrote: ‘The area of South East Asia Land Forces had suddenly expanded to include Malaya, Singapore, Siam [Thailand], [NEI], Hong Kong, Borneo and the Andaman Islands.... [I]n two of them, [FIC and NEI], nationalist movements armed from Japanese forces had already seized power in the vacuum left by the sudden surrender.’<sup>15</sup>

Another major issue for Generals Slim and Auchinleck, back at India Command, was that Operation PYTHON<sup>16</sup>, the repatriation scheme for British personnel, was also in full force. Many conscripted British officers, NCOs, and soldiers, sailors, and airmen were being released from service due to pressure on the British government to end conscription with the war’s end. With the expanded area of operations for SEAC and the need to re-occupy many areas, SEAC needed formations that were going to provide the capacity required for occupation duties. The political reality of Operation PYTHON meant that this duty fell chiefly to the professional Indian Army<sup>17</sup>, a development that was unlikely to be welcomed by nationalist

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<sup>12</sup> See Denning to Foreign Office, 31 July 1945, *Documents on British Policy Overseas*, Series 1, Vol. 1 (1945) (London: HMSO, 1984) Calendar I to no. 599, also quoted in Dennis, pp. 11-12.

<sup>13</sup> Mountbatten, *Post Surrender Tasks*, p. 257.

<sup>14</sup> Saigon was placed high on the list due to the fact the Japanese HQ for their Southern Army was housed there. Dunn, p. 119.

<sup>15</sup> Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, pp. 529-30.

<sup>16</sup> HMG made an announcement in February 1945 that all British soldiers, NCOs, and officers who had served in the Far East for three years and eight months would be repatriated to the UK and released from service. In June 1945 this was amended to three years and four months. This policy decision created significant difficulties for SEAC and GHQ India in manning British battalions in the Indian Army, as well as British divisions, during the final phases of the Burma campaign. Decisions made about expanding SEAC’s area of responsibility extended its impact into the postwar period. See Kirby, V, pp. 83-91 for a full description of its effects.

<sup>17</sup> As Professor Ronald Spector noted: ‘Mountbatten suffered from the most critical shortage of troops as well as the worst timing.... [A] large proportion of Mountbatten’s non-British forces were divisions of the Indian Army.... [A] good number of the Indians were career soldiers and many of the rest were in no hurry to be discharged.’ Ronald Spector, ‘After Hiroshima: allied military occupations and the fate of Japan’s empire,’ 1945-1947, *Journal of Military History*, 69 (October 2005), pp. 1128-9.

politicians in India.<sup>18</sup>

Even as planning went ahead, as formations were earmarked and assigned, as shipping began to move, inter-allied relations deteriorated. The American General Douglas MacArthur announced that he wished for all commanders to stop movement and for no landings to take place in the Japanese Empire until the formal surrender in Tokyo Bay had taken place. At this point, this ceremony was planned for 28 August. MacArthur's reasoning was that Japan had not yet signed any surrender treaty, and that unilateral action by theater commanders could prejudice the surrender process, and ultimately lead to the Japanese commander of forces in South East Asia, Field Marshal Terauchi, refusing to obey surrender orders from SEAC.<sup>19</sup> It was well known that communications between Tokyo and field commanders were erratic at best during this time<sup>20</sup>, and while some of MacArthur's points may have been valid<sup>21</sup>, Mountbatten and SEAC were outraged. They complained bitterly to the Joint Chiefs, pointing out that some of their forces were already six days out from Rangoon and preparing to land in Malaya. The British Chiefs of Staff agreed with Mountbatten, but HMG in London disregarded these concerns and told Mountbatten and SEAC to halt the invasion of Malaya and follow MacArthur's instructions. This delay contributed significantly to the subsequent issues that arose in the occupation of FIC; British/Indian forces lost time and traction in dealing with both Japanese and nationalist groups, the latter having successfully filled the political vacuum that had been created by the Japanese surrender.<sup>22</sup>

Field Marshal Terauchi received the Emperor's decree on 19 August and immediately began to negotiate the take over and surrender of all his forces in South-East Asia. Terauchi's Chief of Staff, Lt Gen Takazo Numata, began negotiations on behalf of the Japanese Army in the southern regions. The question for the British and American commanders was whether all subordinates would follow orders and stand down, or take it upon themselves to continue fighting. (It is important to remember that at this juncture neither the IJA nor the IJN in South-East Asia had been defeated on the battlefield, except for Burma and parts of Borneo.<sup>23</sup>) In negotiating terms for surrender, General Numata did not mince words with the Allies: 'It did not matter so much to the Japanese whether they lost or won a war; far more important to them was the preservation of Bushido, or in other words the spirit of militarism.'<sup>24</sup> The British operations would have to deal with both the positive and negative aspects of this sentiment.

The British/Indian Army mission for the FIC continued to evolve over the next several months. Overall, the commanders had three specific aims in entering into each area: 1) rescue Allied Prisoners of War (POWs); 2) disarm the Japanese military; and 3) maintain law and

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<sup>18</sup> See below for more discussion.

<sup>19</sup> Dunn, *The First Indo-China War*, p. 123.

<sup>20</sup> Dennis, *Troubled*, p. 13.

<sup>21</sup> It was feared that many Japanese soldiers would still fight on until they heard that the Emperor had actually surrendered. It was estimated that there were close to 5 million Japanese soldiers in the Empire, and their impression was that they had not been defeated.

<sup>22</sup> Dennis, pp. 14-15. See also, Field Marshal Slim's critical comments regarding this issue in *Defeat into Victory*, pp. 530-1.

<sup>23</sup> Dunn, pp. 126-130.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Dunn, p. 130.

order to ensure internal security.<sup>25</sup> The ability of commanders to carry out these orders was compromised by the delay imposed by General MacArthur, and the ensuing internal political maelstrom. This chapter will focus on the FIC campaign named Operation MASTERDOM.<sup>26</sup>

### **French Indo-China**

The British were placed in charge of only part of FIC; specifically, they were assigned to control the area south of the 16th parallel<sup>27</sup>, while the Chinese Nationalists controlled the area to the north. The Japanese had more than 71,000 troops in FIC: two divisions (the 21st and 22nd), as well as other independent formations. It was also home to Southern Army Headquarters.<sup>28</sup> The British area of responsibility included not only southern Vietnam, but also Cambodia and parts of Laos. The Chinese troops, having disregarded General MacArthur's orders, arrived in the area first, in early September.<sup>29</sup> The British mission was organised into two groups, the Control Commission<sup>30</sup> and the Allied Land Forces French Indo-China (ALFFIC)<sup>31</sup>, and headed by the seasoned and well-respected 20th Indian Division commander, Major General Douglas Gracey.<sup>32</sup> The British Chiefs of Staff had specifically stated that the SEAC forces were not to occupy any more of FIC than was necessary to ensure control of the area. Meanwhile, the French Government had made it clear to MacArthur and the allied powers that their representatives in FIC 'reserved the right to take whatever measures they considered necessary' to assert their sovereignty.<sup>33</sup> This position was to cause much friction in the coming months.

As commander of Allied Land Forces South East Asia (ALFSEA), General Slim issued Operational Directive no. 8 to his senior commanders for the military occupation of Malaya, Burma, the NEI, and FIC. Commanders were instructed to disarm and concentrate all Japanese forces; protect, succor, and ultimately evacuate Allied POWs and civilian internees; establish and maintain law and order; introduce food and other civil affairs supplies; and set

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<sup>25</sup> See WO 203/5444, 28 August 1945, ALFSEA Operational Directive No 12, 'Masterdom,' NA and Springhall, p. 119.

<sup>26</sup> See WO 203/5444, Operational Directive, No. 12, 28 August 1945, NA and Springhall, p. 119.

<sup>27</sup> In the end, the 20th Indian Division expended most of its time and effort in and around Saigon.

<sup>28</sup> Kirby, Vol. V, pp. 297-8.

<sup>29</sup> See Springhall, 'Kicking out the Vietminh,' p. 119 and Dunn, p. 139.

<sup>30</sup> This organisation was made up of resources from SEAC and reported directly back to SEAC HQ in Kandy, Ceylon. General Gracey had an extensive list of tasks to fulfill for SEAC: assume control of HQ Japanese Southern Army; supervise the surrender; transmit SEAC orders to the Japanese; obtain information regarding Japanese dispositions and supplies; control Japanese communications; study the Recovery of Allied Prisoners of War and Internees (RAPWI) problem and render all possible aid; report on Indo-China's lines of communication, airfields, and the port of Saigon; open river and sea approaches to Saigon; using Japanese resources, reduce size of Japanese HQs as soon as possible; and maintain liaison with the French local government, keeping Mountbatten informed. Gracey Papers, file 4/2, Liddell Hart Centre, KCL, 30 August 1945.

<sup>31</sup> This was a larger organisation than the commission; it included French military forces and directly reported back to General Sir William Slim and ALFSEA.

<sup>32</sup> Springhall, p. 119.

<sup>33</sup> Mountbatten, *Post Surrender Tasks*, p. 265.



up appropriate civil administration.<sup>34</sup> Gracey received further detailed orders; in addition to the points raised in Operational Directive no. 8, he was instructed to pay special attention to law and order and, more importantly, 'liberate Allied territory in so far as your resources permit,' which to some on his staff implied possible future operations against the Vietnamese nationalists, the Vietminh.<sup>35</sup> This last directive has been interpreted by later historians as Gracey potentially going beyond his remit.<sup>36</sup> Records indicate that Slim sent a message to Gracey that the French were to be in charge of civil administration; however, in designated key areas, he would be responsible for full authority over both the military and civilian but working through the French administration.

By the time the British were able to send troops into Indo-China, planning was beset with difficulties. The British had minimal intelligence about the Japanese Army in the area, as well as the state of the administration and relations with the Vietminh.<sup>37</sup> The French had administered the area under five different colonies: Cochinchina, Tonkin, Annam, Cambodia, and Laos. Until March 1945, the Vichy French had worked alongside the IJA, at which point they had been ousted by Japanese occupation forces. Before the British arrived, Ho Chi Minh had declared independence from the French authorities for the new nation of Vietnam, with the tacit support of the Japanese. The resistance movement was named the League for the Independence of Vietnam, or Vietminh. The Vietminh provisional executive committee in the south set out to fill the political vacuum there, acting at the behest of Ho Chi Minh.<sup>38</sup> The Vietminh slowly started to take over governmental control in Saigon and the surrounding areas. On the same day as the Japanese surrender occurred, there were mass demonstrations in Saigon in support of the Vietminh and declaration of independence. Violence erupted between French civilians, Vietminh, and other political factions wishing to take advantage of the power vacuum. There were rumors of many people being killed, and escalating violence.<sup>39</sup>

The British needed to get troops to Saigon quickly, but were hampered by acute transport shortages by air<sup>40</sup> and sea. This was the start of an ongoing problem for British and, later, French forces. Six squadrons of Dakotas were earmarked to move teams into Saigon and Bangkok.<sup>41</sup> The first elements of the 20th Indian Division, 80th Indian Brigade<sup>42</sup>, arrived at Saigon's Tan Son Nhut airport on 8 September<sup>43</sup>, closely followed by more on 11 September.

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<sup>34</sup> General Gracey Papers, file 4/2, Liddell Hart Centre. ALFSEA Op Directive no 8, 23 August 1945.

<sup>35</sup> Gracey papers, 'Operational Directive no 12, Liddell Hart Centre, 28 August 1945.

<sup>36</sup> See debate in Dunn, pp. 140-7.

<sup>37</sup> Dunn, p. 134 and Gracey papers, give full reference. More information started to trickle out to the British, but it was not of a high quality.

<sup>38</sup> Kirby, Vol. V, p. 290.

<sup>39</sup> Springhall, pp. 117-8.

<sup>40</sup> With the surrender being signed, the United States prohibited the use of lend-lease equipment, unless it was bought with cash. Spare parts were to be paid for with cash as well. There were more than 1,600 US aircraft in SEAC that would soon become unserviceable without spares. Dunn, p. 132.

<sup>41</sup> Kirby, Vol. V, p. 235.

<sup>42</sup> It would not be in fully in-country until the 26th, due to the many transport issues.

<sup>43</sup> There is some discrepancy on the date: some authors such as Springhall state the first troops arrived on the 8th. The first detachment was a company minus from the 1/19th Hyderabad Regiment. Kirby concurs that the first troops arrived on the 8th.

Gracey, arriving from Rangoon with his staff on 13 September<sup>44</sup>, immediately recognised the need for more troops, with the city and surrounding areas apparently in chaos. Incongruously, Japanese troops were being used to provide security at the airfield, a practice which was to recur frequently under British command during the occupation, not just in FIC but also in the NEI<sup>45</sup>, and to lead to controversy, especially with the American and British press. One of the chief missions for Gracey and the Indian troops was disarming the Japanese<sup>46</sup>, but it rapidly became apparent that they would need to keep a significant number in place as defensive and static forces. Indian troops were slowly starting to arrive, but in the meantime the rising violence between the French and the Vietnamese communities was causing problems.<sup>47</sup> As the days progressed, tensions between the British/Indians and the Vietminh increased apace. The Vietminh were inciting Japanese soldiers not to surrender, but to desert with their weapons and join the Vietminh.<sup>48</sup> They also set out to spread anti-British propaganda amongst the Indian soldiers in the division but it fell on deaf ears.<sup>49</sup>

Gracey and his staff viewed the Viet Minh as a direct threat to law and order. On 19 September, SEAC issued contradictory directives, simultaneously ordering Gracey and the 20th Division to seize Saigon Radio and censor other broadcasts of the Viet Minh, and issuing a general statement about not interfering in local affairs.<sup>50</sup> Gracey and his staff decided on more far-reaching moves to contend with rising violence. Brigadier Maunsell, Chief of Staff on the Control Commission, met with the Viet Minh provisional government on the 19th, and issued a proclamation closing all newspapers, banning provisional government seizure of buildings or other property, banning all public meetings, demonstrations, and processions, and carrying weapons, and enforcing a night curfew. He also asked for a list of all Vietnamese police and armed units. This amounted to declaring martial law, which Gracey then had to

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<sup>44</sup> Upon arriving, Gracey and his staff walked past the small Vietminh delegation and met with the Japanese contingent. To many historians, this action specifically stated that the Allies did not recognise the Viet Minh as a legitimate government.

<sup>45</sup> Interestingly, many Indian Army veterans recalled, from their command of Japanese POWs, the professionalism and discipline that the Japanese displayed. Some even indicated their preference for commanding Japanese over their own Indian jawans. Interviews with Indian Army officers, 1999-2007. The CO from the 3/8th Gurkha Rifles, Lt Col E.H. Russell, noted in a letter to his wife, upon arrival in Saigon, that 'the most incredible thing—really incredible thing—is to see the Japs. As we came down the gangplank, a Jap fatigue party took the men's kit from them, and loaded it onto lorries. They did it at the double. My right arm will fall off soon, as every Jap, even if he is 500 yards away, salutes, and one has to return the salutes.' Cited in 8th Gurkha Rifles Association, *Red Flash*, No. 15, February 1992, p. 6.

<sup>46</sup> The process of disarming and rounding up soldiers and weapons was complicated. The British and Indian soldiers would do it first and then hand over the weapon stores to the French authorities and military, as the Japanese refused to deal with them.

<sup>47</sup> Kirby, V, pp. 298-9.

<sup>48</sup> It was estimated that more than 2,000 Japanese soldiers did desert before and after the arrival of the British and Indian troops. Springhall, p. 119.

<sup>49</sup> Gracey Papers, 'Report on Ops 80 Ind Inf BDE,' Box 5/4, see page 6, 'propaganda to suborn Indian soldiers were freely posted up by Annamites. These had no effect at all.'

<sup>50</sup> It was stressed by Mountbatten in a communiqué that HMG's goals in sending British troops into FIC were fourfold—to control Field Marshal Terauchi's headquarters, which commanded the Japanese Armies in the Southern Regions; to disarm the Japanese; to release and repatriate Allied POWs and internees; and to maintain law and order until the arrival of French forces. He stressed that HMG had no intention of using British forces in FIC to crush resistance movements. Dunn, p. 167.



enforce, relying on the equivalent of two battalions of troops.<sup>51</sup> Gracey advised SEAC of his proclamation, asserting that: 'I would stress that though it may appear that I have interfered in the politics of the country, I have done so only in the interest of the maintenance of law and order and after close collaboration with some senior French representatives.'<sup>52</sup> Mountbatten backed Gracey at the time, although later in life he questioned Gracey's decisions at this point in the campaign.<sup>53</sup>

Gracey's proclamation was read out and in theory took effect on 21 September. In reality, however, without sufficient troops the British were limited in their ability to enforce its tenets, particularly the curfew. Japanese troops were among those who disregarded the curfew, sparking serious debates at 20th Division HQ regarding their employment. As noted, Gracey was 'trying desperately not to fall into the trap of using [Japanese troops], for severe criticism would follow'—despite significant pressure, including from members of his own staff. Gracey, however, remained adamant in his dislike of the Japanese, and felt that employing them was a sign of weakness. Ultimately, however, the rising violence forced Gracey to capitulate and employ Japanese troops in offensive roles, alongside his own troops, until more French arrived to take over the situation.<sup>54</sup>

On the 22nd, former French POWs were released and rearmed to support the effort.<sup>55</sup> While at first this seemed like a good solution to the manpower problems in Saigon, it was to have unforeseen repercussions within 24 hours. British and Indian troops had been moving through the city, trying to round up and disarm the Viet Minh police and armed groups. Units of the 80th Indian Brigade also moved against the Viet Minh-controlled administrative buildings, handing over the structures to the small amount of available French forces after they had taken possession. The French were able to seize control of the administrative elements of Saigon without too much bloodshed, pushing out the Viet Minh provisional government and raising the tricolor above Hotel de Ville.<sup>56</sup> A coup d'etat had occurred, however, and more blood was to be spilled.<sup>57</sup>

The released French POWs had been guarded by the Viet Minh, and had suffered at

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<sup>51</sup> WO 172/1784 NA, Gracey to Mountbatten.

<sup>52</sup> WO 203/5562 NA Gracey to Mountbatten, 21 September 1945; Dennis, p. 39, and Springhall, p. 120.

<sup>53</sup> See Mountbatten, *Post Surrender Tasks*, Section E, as well as Dunn, p. 173 and Dennis, p. 41.

<sup>54</sup> Dunn, pp. 172-3.

<sup>55</sup> The French 9th DIC (Colonial Infantry Division) was still not in Vietnam, but was to be released soon, to relieve the 20th Indian Division.

<sup>56</sup> See Gracey papers, 'Saigon Control Commission, Political Report, 13 September to 9 October 1945, Liddell Hart Centre, for a more detailed account, as well as Dunn, pp. 183-9.

<sup>57</sup> Throughout this period, a series of debates was ongoing in both SEAC and in London, where the British mission began and ended. Mission creep had been occurring since mid-August and there was at times a lack of clear strategy and end goal. General Gracey felt that he had to carry out the coup to allow for law and order to be restored, and that the French forces and administration were best placed to carry this out, since the Viet Minh was not a recognised organisation. See Dennis, Springhall, and especially Dunn for a much more detailed account of the higher-level issues regarding strategy and joint British and French planning and thinking on Indo-China. An interesting document is the 'Report on Ops 80 Ind Inf BDE' found in General Gracey's papers. It clearly outlines the need and planning for the seizure of key administrative buildings and centres in Saigon, stating: 'the stage was now set for the coup d'etat by the French to take over the civil administration in Saigon'; p. 4. Gracey Papers, 'Report on Ops 80 Ind Inf BDE,' Liddell Hart Centre, 23 September 1945.

their hands. Unfortunately for Gracey and the British/Indian forces, within 24 hours of the coup, French discipline began to break down, and French troops began to kill Viet Minh and so-called Viet Minh in retaliation. The French civilian population also became involved with the ensuing mob violence. This had repercussions for the British and Indian troops, and Gracey attempted to make the French commanders aware of the issues and to get their men back in control. These men still fell under the command of Gracey, and he and his men would be accountable for the situation's deterioration.<sup>58</sup>

As a result of these developments, the Viet Minh began to consider the British as part of the attempt to re-impose French colonial government in Indo-China.<sup>59</sup> Some authors cite this episode as the beginning of the first Indo-China war. The Viet Minh launched a general strike on 24 September, paralysing sections of the city by cutting off water or electricity. Violence also began to increase; on 25 September, more than 300 French and Eurasian families were butchered in a northern section of Saigon by Viet Minh and other paramilitary gangs. Violence escalated as the Viet Minh set up road blocks and British and Indian troops engaged them during their expanded patrols.<sup>60</sup> The sounds of gunfire, mortars, and other weapons were heard each night, as British/Indian, French, and Viet Minh forces skirmished through the city. Many Burma veterans noted the difficulty of fighting guerrillas in an urban environment.<sup>61</sup>

Mountbatten praised Gracey for his actions in communicating with the Chiefs of Staff<sup>62</sup>, but on the 24th he cabled Gracey and asserted that British and Indian troops should be used only in designated 'key areas'; the French and Japanese needed to handle sections outside of Saigon.<sup>63</sup> Mountbatten appeared to be growing concerned that Gracey had exceeded his orders, and began to question his ability to command. General Slim, by contrast, supported Gracey, and pushed Mountbatten to release all of the 20th Indian Division to provide support.<sup>64</sup> The course of action being contemplated was for British/Indian forces to take complete control of Saigon; this would require a whole division, to restore law and order and to repatriate POWs as well. General Gracey was also expected to start working to find a political solution to the problems between the Viet Minh and the French, so as to allow the withdrawal of British and Indian forces.<sup>65</sup> It was also at this juncture that a politically fraught decision was made: to expand the use of Japanese troops. Not only would they be protecting airfields; they were

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<sup>58</sup> See Dunn, pp. 195-7, and Dennis, pp. 43-8.

<sup>59</sup> As noted 'On September 23, armed and protected by the British forces, the French colonialists launched their attack and occupied Saigon. Our people replied by force of arms, and from that moment, our heroic resistance began.' Truong Chinh, *Primer for Revolt* (New York: Praeger, 1963), p. 17, and Dunn, pp. 202-3.

<sup>60</sup> The first American casualty in the history of US intervention in Vietnam occurred during this period. Lt Colonel Thomas Dewey of the OSS was killed in a Viet Minh ambush. The role and position of the US OSS during this period is controversial; see Dunn and Dennis for a more detailed discussion of their stance in relation to the British and French activities.

<sup>61</sup> See War Diaries from the 20th Indian Division for more information; see also Dunn, pp. 200-1.

<sup>62</sup> Dennis, p. 50.

<sup>63</sup> See Dunn, pp. 200-10, and Dennis, pp. 50-4.

<sup>64</sup> Springhall, p. 124, as well as Hughes, p. 271 and Dunn, pp. 229-30. At a meeting in Singapore on 28 September, Slim backed Gracey against Mountbatten that the whole division was needed to restore law and order in and around Saigon. See Hughes, p. 270.

<sup>65</sup> Dennis, pp. 59-61.

also allocated to more offensive roles alongside and sometimes under the command of British officers<sup>66</sup> to support Gracey's efforts to impose law and order in and around Saigon, until the rest of the 20th Indian Division and the follow-on French military forces arrived.<sup>67</sup>

The Japanese refused to work for the French, and requested that all orders and actions were directed through the British command structure.<sup>68</sup> While the Japanese claimed to be supporting the efforts of the British, there was also evidence to the contrary. Harry Brain, political advisor to General Gracey, sent a report to SEAC in late September, in which he identified 'some kind of Japanese organization whose object it is to make things as difficult as possible for the restoration of law and order and for the peaceful turnover of the country to Allied control.'<sup>69</sup> Gracey was open that he was compiling a list of Japanese commanders who he claimed were openly working against the Allies and would use the evidence in future trials.<sup>70</sup> In the end, however, the main French build-up of forces took longer than expected, leaving the British to rely upon the IJA as an uncertain ally.<sup>71</sup>

General Slim advised the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Alanbrooke, that 'directions we have been receiving from various sources seem to me to have been somewhat involved and at times contradictory.' In the same letter, he also recounted a conversation with the British Secretary of State for War, Lawson. He noted that, while Lawson intended that the British not become involved in nationalist struggles, French forces still operated under Slim's command, and that 'as long as we retain this command... we cannot divorce ourselves from the responsibility for their actions.'<sup>72</sup>

Meanwhile, back in Saigon, the fighting continued. On 1 October, the British Chiefs of Staff reversed an earlier decision, and expanded Gracey and the British and Indian troops' remit to work outside the Saigon area in support of the French.<sup>73</sup> As the violence escalated,

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<sup>66</sup> Interviews with Indian Army veterans, 1999-2007 and 1/1 Gurkha Rifles, War Diary, WO 172/7769, October 1945, NA, as well as Dunn, p. 204.

<sup>67</sup> The Japanese forces followed a multifaceted approach to the campaign. Some units clearly did not want to support the British and French, and actively aided the Viet Minh with weapons and lack of support to the British and Indian troops. Other units actively worked with British and Indian troops, and fought and died alongside them in battle with the Viet Minh. See Dunn for a more in-depth discussion.

<sup>68</sup> General Gracey reiterated this in a letter to General Slim on 5 November: 'It is most necessary that I should continue to run the whole Japanese side of things as long as we are here. The Japanese will take anything from us, but will do nothing for the French.' Later in the letter, he noted a request from the Japanese command: 'We respectfully submit a request that all orders to our forces should be passed by a British officer and not a French officer, as we find it increasingly difficult to carry out the orders resulting from their shameless plans.' Gracey Papers, Gracey to Slim, Box 5/4, Liddell Hart Centre, 5 November 1945.

<sup>69</sup> Quoted in Dunn, p. 227. Brain would go into more detail and evidence of Japanese soldiers, selling weapons, failing to prevent attacks on French or Eurasian communities, and serving alongside the Viet Minh and carrying out attacks upon the British/Indian forces.

<sup>70</sup> Dunn, p. 230.

<sup>71</sup> The 9th DIC was not formally in place until the end of November 1945, although other forces started to arrive in October and early November. General Philippe Leclerc, commander of the French Forces, arrived on 5 October. See WO 203/5608, NA, 19 November 1945, SACSEA Joint Planning Staff, 'Turnover of Command,' and Dennis, pp. 59-61.

<sup>72</sup> Slim to Brooke, 6 October 1945, annex to COS 9450 607 (0), CAB, 80/97, and cited in Dennis, p. 165.

<sup>73</sup> Mountbatten stated that he told General Gracey, 'British/Indian troops were still to be used only in a preventive role and not in an offensive one.' Mountbatten, *Post Surrender Tasks*, p. 268.

Gracey asked for restrictions to be lifted on using RAF Spitfires to attack hostile targets. Up to this point the various Spitfire squadrons were being used for reconnaissance. Mountbatten agreed that from 3 October, Gracey was 'empowered to use Spitfire aircraft to attack hostile targets.'<sup>74</sup> Also on 1 October, talks were held between the British and the Viet Minh. Gracey's stated position was to curb violence and restore order in Indo-China. The Viet Minh expected the British to act as arbitrators, but Gracey was under strict orders not to do so, since such a role was political and outside his remit. A ceasefire was agreed, to take effect on the evening of the 2nd, and meetings between the French and Viet Minh were scheduled for the 3rd. Despite these efforts, sporadic fighting continued.<sup>75</sup> The truce ended definitively on 10 October, when the Viet Minh attacked a British/Indian engineer reconnaissance party. Gracey had warned the Viet Minh that they would reap the consequences of violence against his troops; he ordered his 20th Indian Division, veterans of the Burma campaign, and the newly arrived 32nd Indian Brigade, to clear the areas to the north of the city.<sup>76</sup> Brigadier D. E. Taunton of the 80th Indian Brigade recalled that 'the moment rebel Annamites attacked British troops I issued orders that we would cease to use minimum force and persuasion, but would use maximum brutal force in order to effect counter-measures in the quickest way and avoid unnecessary casualties to own troops.'<sup>77</sup> Mountbatten had agreed to this, asserting that 'I ordered strong action should be taken by the British/Indian forces to secure further key-points and so to widen and consolidate the perimeter of these areas. At the same time I insisted that further attempts to negotiate must continue.'<sup>78</sup>

Throughout October and November, the remaining units and formations of the 20th Indian Division arrived; they set out to establish control in and around Saigon and to provide support for the French.<sup>79</sup> The French also began to arrive in early October; their commander, General P. Leclerc, arrived on the 5th, along with the 5th Colonial Infantry.<sup>80</sup> Fighting continued during this period between the British/Indians and the Viet Minh, and between the Viet Minh

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<sup>74</sup> Quoted in Dunn, p. 237.

<sup>75</sup> Gracey to Mountbatten, WO 172/1786, 1 October, NA, and Dennis, pp. 66-7. See also Dunn's chapter 'Truce' for a very detailed discussion of the truce talks and the higher level political issues that occurred.

<sup>76</sup> Gracey was quick to point out that it was not going to be wanton killing; there would be no provocative use of force, and troops would cause minimal disturbance to law-abiding citizens. However, this did not mean he would not use all of his weapons against the violent elements of the Viet Minh. Dunn, pp. 259-60.

<sup>77</sup> Gracey Papers, 'Report on Ops 80 Ind Inf BDE,' Box 5/4, Liddell Hart Centre, Kings College London.

<sup>78</sup> Mountbatten, *Post Surrender Tasks*, Section E, p. 282, and Dunn, p. 257.

<sup>79</sup> Lt Col Russell, 3/8th Gurkhas, noted some of his frustration with the mission in a letter to his wife. On 23 October, after his battalion had lost more men killed and wounded, he wrote: 'what a bloody show this is. We had another man killed and two wounded, one rather badly.... I wouldn't mind so much if this was a pukka war, but our men are getting hit because a lot of bloody Annamites want to chuck the French out. I hope these French get a move on and take over the running of their own affairs.' *Red Flash*, No. 15, February 1992, p. 6.

<sup>80</sup> Kirby, Vol V, pp. 302-3.

and the French.<sup>81</sup> Japanese troops were also utilized, and the British brought in more Royal Air Force support, in the form of Spitfire fighter squadrons. These were to be used sparingly and under strict controls, but to be called upon if necessary.<sup>82</sup>

By 17 October, the last units and formations of the 20th Indian Division had arrived and were ready to move against the Viet Minh. It was decided to send the 100th Indian Infantry Brigade, commanded by Brigadier C.H.B. Rodham, and supporting arms to the north and north-east of Saigon into the Thu Duc/Thu Dau Mot/Bien Hoa areas. Intelligence reports stated that the Viet Minh strength lay in these areas, and there was a clear need to break the Viet Minh ring of control surrounding Saigon. Brigadier Rodham informed the Japanese command in the region that the 100th Brigade was coming to occupy the area and assume responsibility for the maintenance of law and order over the course of 23-25 October.<sup>83</sup> The Japanese were asked to continue disarming the Viet Minh, searching for weapons, and clearing areas around the main towns. The Japanese troops now fell under the command of Brigadier Rodham and his brigade. The various units of the 100th Indian Brigade—the 1/1st Gurkha Rifles, 4/10th Gurkha Rifles, 14/13th Frontier Force Rifles<sup>84</sup> and the 16th Light Cavalry<sup>85</sup>—carried out a well-planned and executed operation to clear the areas to the north of Saigon. The Japanese carried out the static duties of defence, while the Brigade operated mobile columns to destroy any opposition and deal with any road blocks.<sup>86</sup>

The units of the 100th Brigade defaulted to their wartime experience, and created combined arms mobile units. An example of this, an operation known as GATEFORCE, was established by the 14/13th FFRifles, who were based to the northeast of Saigon at Bien Hoa. Major L.D. Gates took his company, plus a squadron of armoured cars from the 16th Cavalry, a section of mortars from the 14/13th FFRifles, a detachment of Royal Engineers and an attachment of Japanese troops, and pushed east towards Xuan Loc. They were ordered to create a patrol base in Xuan Loc on 29 October and patrol for three days, to try to destroy and capture 2,000 Viet Minh and members of the HQ staff that had been reported to have fled to the area. Gates was ordered to use maximum force to clear the area and track down and destroy the Viet Minh.<sup>87</sup> One of the most controversial aspects of this operation was the instruction to

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<sup>81</sup> For some battalions, serious fighting ensued. See the Newsletters and Histories of 9/14 Punjab and the 2/8 Punjab regiments in the General Gracey Papers, files 5/5 and 5/12, for more details of the actions, as well as Dunn, pp. 257-9. As one battalion stated: 'As far as the BN was concerned the shooting season for the Annamites [word used for the Viet Minh by British and Indian troops] had opened.' Also see battalion history of the 9/14th Punjab, which stated: 'it was an unsatisfactory sort of fighting. The enemy wore no uniform and usually did not carry arms visibly.' Anon, *Ninth Battalion Fourteenth Punjab Regiment* (Cardiff: Western Mail and Echo Limited, 1948), p. 97.

<sup>82</sup> See Dunn, pp. 236-7, and Dennis, p. 64.

<sup>83</sup> 100th Indian Infantry Brigade, War Diary, WO 172/7135, November 1945, NA.

<sup>84</sup> This battalion was considered one of the best in the Burma campaign; at this point in the Indo-China campaign, it still had many of the veterans from Burma. See Marston, *Phoenix from the Ashes*, for much more detail on the battlefield performance of this battalion.

<sup>85</sup> This was a pre-war Indianised regiment and performed well during the war. It was commanded at this point by an Indian officer, Lt. Col. Chaudhuri.

<sup>86</sup> Dunn, pp. 270-7, and 100th Indian Infantry Brigade, War Diary, WO 172/7135, November 1945, NA.

<sup>87</sup> 14/13th FFRifles War Diary, November 1945, WO 172/7743, NA.

destroy any village that resisted their efforts.<sup>88</sup> Over the course of several days, GATEFORCE and Japanese forces engaged elements of the Viet Minh and succeeded in destroying various roadblocks and fortified positions. After two days of fighting, it was estimated that close to 200 Viet Minh had been killed in the Xuan Loc region; thus, in theory, breaking the back of the overt Viet Minh military presence.<sup>89</sup> It was reported that GATEFORCE was also able to rescue some 20 French civilian hostages.<sup>90</sup> While the Japanese in some areas were commended for bravery and support of British operations, tensions remained around their employment.<sup>91</sup>

The month of November brought about a partial shift in the campaign. Vice-Admiral d'Argenlieu arrived as the French High Commissioner and commander of the French forces in FIC. The campaign was formally shifting to French control. As the 20th Indian Division was able to consolidate its gains, it decided to re-focus on its primary operational task, disarming the Japanese Army.<sup>92</sup> More and more French troops were arriving in FIC and were able to start taking over key security tasks from British/Indian troops, as well as from the Japanese outside of Saigon. The various units and formations of the 20th Indian Division continued to send out mobile combined arms patrols to show the flag and disrupt any Viet Minh attempts to seize key areas within the 'Saigon' area of operations, at the same time as disarming the Japanese soldiers.<sup>93</sup> At around this time, General Gracey made some key observations of the French army's performance in Saigon. In a report to General Slim on 5 November, he wrote: 'The French troops are leaving a pretty good trail of destruction behind them, which will result in such resentment that it will become progressively more difficult for them to implement their new policy, and, I am convinced, will result in guerrilla warfare, increased sabotage and arson as soon as we leave the country.'<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Dunn, p. 280. This was not the first time that buildings were burned in retaliation by British and Indian troops. Members of the Bombay Sappers and Miners Company had destroyed huts after the killing of one of their men. See Dunn, p. 277. The issue with this is that although the Indian Army was an army that understood 'minimum force,' many within the 20th Indian Division were mistakenly viewing this campaign through the prism of conventional operations, due to the level of violence and the military organisation and activities of the Viet Minh. It must also be remembered that the burning of villages followed the doctrinal practice of 'punitive expeditions' in the North-West Frontier Province over the previous 80 years. The British attempted to drop leaflets to inform the population, as they had done in the NWFP. See letter from Gracey to Mountbatten, 9 November 1945, WO 203/4271, NA, and Dennis, pp. 174-5, for some of General Gracey's explanations for the destruction of houses and, potentially, villages.

<sup>89</sup> 14/13th FFRifles, War Diary, WO 172/7743, NA, November 1945, and 100 Indian Infantry Brigade, War Diary, WO 172/7135, November 1945, NA.

<sup>90</sup> Dunn, p. 282. By the end of November, 18 British and Indian soldiers had been killed and 51 wounded, along with 19 Japanese killed and 13 missing. It was estimated that close to 400 Viet Minh had been killed and more than 400 had been captured by the 20th Indian Division; estimates from the French and Japanese were lacking. Dunn, p. 285.

<sup>91</sup> There had been tensions regarding the apparent loss of large caches of weapons and ammunition, ostensibly under the control of the Japanese Air Force, to the Viet Minh. See Dunn, p. 283.

<sup>92</sup> Lt Col Russell of 3/8th Gurkhas wrote, in a letter to his wife, 'disarming the Japs is to start in a few days.... Unfortunately the Japs I have had under my command are to be disarmed by the RAF. I wish we were doing it, as I can't help liking the Jap Major who commands them, and I am sure he would prefer to be disarmed by us.' *Red Flash*, no. 15, February 1992, p. 7.

<sup>93</sup> See 100th Indian Infantry Brigade War Diary for the month of November 1945, as it lists 'Jap Surrender Instr No 1' as well as other key tasks and operations for the brigade. WO 172/7135, November 1945, NA.

<sup>94</sup> Gracey Papers, Gracey to Slim, Box 5/4, Liddell Hart Centre, 5 November 1945.



By the end of November, units of the 100th Indian Brigade had been used in mobile columns to engage pockets of the Viet Minh and had disarmed thousands of Japanese. The 14/13th FFRifles had disarmed over a thousand Japanese on one day in November.<sup>95</sup> At the same time, some Japanese frontline units were still being employed in battle, doing a professional job and being commended for it. As Peter Dunn noted, 'these Japanese frontline infantry units, as opposed to the support troops, were giving a good account of themselves right up to the moment when they had to disarm. It was an extraordinary episode in the history of warfare.'<sup>96</sup>

The complexity of the war and the 'strangeness' was staggering to many Burma campaign veterans.<sup>97</sup> The 9/12th Frontier Force Regiment<sup>98</sup> was earmarked to set up a large Japanese internment area in Cap St. Jacques (Vung Tau) to repatriate Japanese POWs.<sup>99</sup> It is also noted in W.E.H. Condon's *Frontier Force Regiment's* regimental history: 'As the concentration of surrendered Japanese troops increased, the men of the battalion [9/12th FFR] had naturally to come into closer contact with their late enemies, and had the opportunity to observe them closely. It is recorded that their discipline was first class, and they co-operated and carried out orders 100 percent. Never was there a cause for complaint, and the men grew to respect them and showed a tendency to fraternize.'<sup>100</sup> There differing sentiments in other battalions, as noted in the 9/14th Punjab Regiment's battalion history, while respecting the Japanese soldiers' discipline, still could not see them other than an enemy. As the battalion stated: 'Many of them [surrendering Japanese soldiers], handing over their swords which were family heirlooms, were in tears but after what we had seen of them [in Burma] our hearts were closed to any pity for the Jap.'<sup>101</sup>

On 28 November, the 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade handed over their area of responsibility north of Saigon. The drawdown was scheduled to begin in late November, in anticipation of Mountbatten's arrival to formally accept the surrender of the Japanese General Terauchi and his forces. While in Saigon, Mountbatten met with General Gracey and the French Army commander, Leclerc, to discuss the withdrawal of the 20th Indian Division, in response to both the needs of SEAC in other areas of operation (AOs) and the political pressure being applied by the Indian National Congress against the Government of India. The 32nd Brigade was earmarked to leave by the end of the year, and the 80th Brigade to leave with the divisional

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<sup>95</sup> See both the battalion and brigade war diaries, WO 172/7135 and WO 172/7743 for more detail.

<sup>96</sup> Dunn, p. 311.

<sup>97</sup> Interview with Indian Army officers, 1999-2007.

<sup>98</sup> The battalion arrived in FIC in early October 1945. It was initially commanded by an Indian Commissioned Officer (ICO), Lt Col Hayaud Din, who had commanded the battalion during the heavy fighting in Burma in 1945. The battalion had served throughout the Burma campaigns of 1943-1945 with the 80th Indian Infantry Brigade. Upon the ending of the Burma campaign, the unit became the recce battalion for the division. During the first weeks of deployment to FIC, it served in the Cholon area of Saigon and participated in many clearing patrols of the area. In mid-October it was ordered to proceed to Cap St Jacques to set up a series of internment camps for the Japanese POWs. See WO 172/7738, January to December 1945, as well as General Gracey Papers, file 4/26.

<sup>99</sup> WO 172/7738, NA, 9/12 Frontier Force Regiment, War Diary, December 1945.

<sup>100</sup> Condon, pp. 512-3.

<sup>101</sup> Anon, p. 99.

HQ and General Gracey by the end of January 1946, as French forces geared up to take over.<sup>102</sup>

While the planning for withdrawal was in full swing, operations continued and took on a different tone during December. The 32nd Brigade carried out an operation to clear Han Phu Island of the Viet Minh, which it did with minimal casualties with support from Royal Navy landing craft. By the 19th, it had relinquished command of the area to the French.<sup>103</sup> As 80th Indian Brigade was earmarked next, it slowly started to hand over various areas of responsibility to the French, at the same time as disarming the Japanese.<sup>104</sup> It became so quiet in their sector that the battalion was able to revert to peacetime training.<sup>105</sup> This was not true for the 100th Indian Brigade and its units, which continued to be engaged in various skirmishes with the Viet Minh at the same time they were disarming the Japanese and seizing arms stocks, during December 1945 and January 1946.<sup>106</sup>

As noted previously, the 32nd and 80th brigades began to hand over control to the French and organise withdrawal, in preparation for service in British Borneo and other AOs of SEAC in December. Meanwhile, the fighting continued, in the north and north-east of Saigon, in the 100th Brigade's AO, throughout December and early January. The Brigade was stretched, due to the lack of supporting forces to the south and west. The 14/13th FFRifles carried out countless patrols in and around Bien Hoa, reverting to the term, 'Sher Forces,' which had originally referred to their patrolling activities in the Burma campaign. This exemplifies how many within the battalion saw this as a continuation of the Burma war, even against a different enemy.<sup>107</sup> While the battalion sent out 'Sher Forces' to engage the Viet Minh, they slowly started to see a Viet Minh build-up of forces and became aware that the Viet Minh controlled the night once again. Many patrols were able to surprise the Viet Minh, partially due to their experience they had earned in Burma.

A marked similarity between the campaigns in Burma and in FIC was evident in the Viet Minh attack on the patrol base at Bien Hoa. Overnight on 2/3 January 1946, a Viet Minh battalion attacked the main patrol base for the 14/13th FFRifles at Bien Hoa, with attached troops from the Jats. The Viet Minh launched five well-coordinated, simultaneous attacks supported by heavy fire. The Indian troops were able to beat off the attacks, with heavy fire from machine guns and supporting mortars. The attack lasted for four hours and resulted in an estimated 100 Viet Minh killed, with no losses for the troops at Bien Hoa, including the Japanese, who were still defending.<sup>108</sup> While the Viet Minh lost the battle, many noted their bravery afterwards.<sup>109</sup>

Units of the 100th Indian Brigade continued to send out patrols to keep up the pressure,

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<sup>102</sup> See Dunn, pp. 314-6 for more details.

<sup>103</sup> WO 172/7098, NA, 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade, NA, December 1945.

<sup>104</sup> WO 172/7128, NA, 80th Indian Infantry Brigade, NA, December 1945.

<sup>105</sup> WO 172/7738, NA, 9/12th FFR, December 1945, and also see Condon, *Frontier Force Regiment*, pp. 509-13.

<sup>106</sup> WO 172/7135, NA, 100th Indian infantry Brigade, December 1945.

<sup>107</sup> Interviews with officers from the 14/13th FFRifles. See Marston's *Phoenix from the Ashes* for more details on the 14/13th FFRifles and the 'Sher Forces.' Also WO 172/7743, December 1945, NA.

<sup>108</sup> WO 172/10272 14/13th FFRifles War Dairy, February 1946, NA.

<sup>109</sup> Dunn, p. 334.

before the brigade handed over responsibility to French forces.<sup>110</sup> The Viet Minh in return kept pressure on the brigade and the various patrol bases, including Bien Hoa. The 'mobile' ability provided by the 16th Light Cavalry's armoured cars ended with the 16th's departure on 12 January.<sup>111</sup> The 80th Indian Brigade had stood down the day before, and the 20th Division HQ and General Gracey were scheduled to leave FIC at the end of the month for Malaya. The date set for the transfer of all forces, including some Indian battalions in FIC to French command, was 28 January, the day that Gracey was scheduled to leave.<sup>112</sup> More than 54,000 Japanese soldiers had been disarmed and concentrated at Cap St Jacques; 40 soldiers from the 20th Indian Division had died and more than 100 had been wounded between October and late January. It is estimated that more than 2000 Viet Minh were killed during the same period.<sup>113</sup> Initially the 100th Indian Brigade was assigned to support the French, but this was stopped in response to political pressures in India and objections from Auchinleck and the Viceroy. The brigade left on two days, 8 and 9 February;<sup>114</sup> over the course of January and February close to 12,000 troops from the 20th Indian Division withdrew from FIC.

The 9/12 FFR<sup>115</sup> and 2/8 Punjab remained in FIC, the latter to guard the mission in Saigon and the former to guard Cap St Jacques and continue the repatriation of Japanese POWs. Both battalions served until the end of March under the authority of Allied Commander's Inter-Service Liaison Mission to French Indo-China, under the command of a British Brigadier, F.K.S. Maunsell. Only small miscellaneous sub-units remained, including one company from 2/8th Punjab, until May 1946.<sup>116</sup>

Field Marshal Slim summed up the efforts of Gracey and the 20th Indian Division as follows: 'Gracey was faced with the most difficult politico-military situation in Allied territory, which he handled in a firm, cool, and altogether admirable manner.'<sup>117</sup> This assessment could serve for the whole of the Indian Army's performance in this campaign.

## Conclusion

The 20th Indian Division's experiences in FIC highlighted the complexity that underlies even the apparently simplest military engagement. The division and supporting services performed well at the joint level, as combined arms teams pushing back the Viet Minh, and in combined or coalition operations alongside the French and the IJA. Despite these successes, however, questions remain about the aims of and strategy for the mission. HMG's government was never quite clear about what role the British and the Indian armies should play in supporting

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<sup>110</sup> WO 172/7135, December 1945, NA.

<sup>111</sup> See WO 172/7353 and WO 172/10060, NA for more details of the 16th Light Cavalry.

<sup>112</sup> 20th Indian Division HQ War Diary, WO 203/5995, February 1946, NA.

<sup>113</sup> Dunn, p. 341. Hughes puts the figures at 3,000 dead.

<sup>114</sup> WO 172/7135, December 1945, NA.

<sup>115</sup> Condon notes an interesting aspect of the withdrawal of the 9/12th FFR in his book: 'on 29th of March the battalion embarked at Cap St Jacques. . . . Many Japanese senior officers and men lined the route to say goodbye to the Battalion, and it was a curious, if not pathetic, scene to find the very men who had fought against us so bitterly, now so manifestly sorry to bid the Battalion farewell,' p. 513.

<sup>116</sup> Dunn, pp. 355-6.

<sup>117</sup> Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, p. 532.

their European allies in the restoration of their former colonies. This was a joint and combined operation that functioned very well amongst the various British services, the British/Indian Army, RAF and RN and at times with the IJA and French Colonial units and formations. The role and functions of the surrendered IJA caused more difficulties for commanders on the ground. It was not always clear to British, Indian, and French commanders if the IJA would carry out orders to support the restoration of law and order, or if they would actively assist the Viet Minh in their insurgent activities.

The uneven and continually evolving strategy within SEAC also highlights some of the issues that had arisen between India Command and SEAC. While both the 14th and 12th armies fell under the command of SEAC, their formations were predominantly Indian. It was one thing to have forces working in former British colonies, such as Burma and Malaya—which Indian Army units did. The lack of clear strategy, and contradictory advice from both SEAC and London, left Indian Army and SEAC commanders to develop planning and strategy on their own, from the perspective of the formation on the ground. While this resulted in some mistakes, particularly in the early days, British/Indian Army, RAF and RN commanders and troops were able to recover, regain the initiative to secure key areas, and repatriate thousands of Allied POWs and civilians. The divisional staff set out to carry out their mission, at first with minimal support; along strict military lines, they did a professional job. The officers, VCOs, NCOs and soldiers of the 20th Indian divisions carried out this difficult mission with the same level of professionalism and ability as they had shown in Burma from 1943 to the end of the war. Many veterans had remained with the divisions, and applied their experiences and knowledge to the campaigns in FIC. Many of the officers, VCOs, NCOs, and jawans considered themselves professional soldiers and recent victorious veterans of Burma, and their job to carry out the orders of their commanders professionally—even when lack of strategy and political awareness at the highest levels left them in the middle of a series of difficult political and combat situations. Even with these complications, this campaign was a very good example of a professional joint and combined operation, in the midst of a political vacuum, with an unforeseen enemy.