

OUR FORCES IN INDIA

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- WHAT THEY SAW
- WHAT THEY THINK
- WHAT THEY WRITE HOME

by ARTHUR
OLORENSHAW

3d.

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Our Forces in India

by *ARTHUR OLORENSIAW*

"FAMINE IN BENGAL" . . . "IMPHAL FRONT" . . . "RELEASE OF GANDHI." A few years ago such headlines would have meant little to Jack, Bill, Harry or John, who are now "Out East." They may be fighting and dying at this moment on the Burmese sector of the Allied battlefronts. But nearly all of them have been in great cities and tiny villages to which they have seen Death come in the guise of FAMINE. Many of them have been coming to realise that Indian demands for food and for freedom are not questions infinitely remote from themselves OR FROM YOU; that Nehru, Gandhi and other Indian leaders are not the discontented agitators they have so often been described, but are really the responsible leaders of India's people.

India, in far-off days maybe, suggested the Aga Khan to Bill, because he once "won a packet" by backing "Bahram in the Derby"; to Harry, untold wealth when he read aloud a paragraph from his newspaper: "The Maharajah of — lost £100,000 on the turn of a card at Monte Carlo."

It's not the same for them now—for Bill's wife or John's mother waiting in Britain. For all of them INDIA takes on a new meaning. Wives and sweethearts—families and friends! They long for the day when the words of the popular Forces' song will be translated into reality:

"There's a troopship just leaving Bombay,
Bound for old Blighty's shore . . ."

to bring their own men back to them.

Meanwhile the reality remains. Bill and John are there in India, and around them is disease and starvation; they are in danger from foes without and within. India means more than Maharajahs and racehorses now!

In many letters home they have described the things they've seen; impressions formed and ideas they've had to revise. Some of the letters have reached you—possibly mutilated by the Censorship; others went to the bottom of the sea. Most of the things they wanted to tell you had nothing to do with "Security," but only related to the lives and deaths of the people among whom they were living. Reading many of those which finally reached this country it is easy to divine their feelings, and this pamphlet is based on their evidence and that of men who

have already returned. They have witnessed scenes they would have deemed incredible; have begun to sense the feeling of frustration which can grip a whole nation. They've begun to appreciate the fact that if famine and frustration are to be allowed to continue, not only will the departure of that troopship be deferred, but that when it does sail they may not be present to answer the roll.

THE JOURNEY THERE

It would be no exaggeration to say that many of them reached India's shores in a rather critical frame of mind. The vast majority saw either Capetown or Durban, and save for fleeting memories of "Shore leave" in one place or the other, retained few pleasant recollections of the long voyage.

"Shore leave" brought them face to face with colour-bar restrictions which they frankly didn't understand, and Jack was a bit "shattered" when he saw two Indian women unceremoniously bundled off a Durban bus because the few seats reserved for "non-Europeans" were occupied. The rest of the bus was empty, save for himself and his mates, who certainly didn't object. In one case, a whole ship heard how two Indian cadets in a largish group were refused admission to an hotel to attend a celebration dinner. They weren't there long enough to absorb the racial ideas—often unconsciously Nazi in character—which are so tragically prevalent among the white population, and although opinions naturally were by no means unanimous, there would always be general agreement that a lot of this was all wrong. A certain sympathy for the *underdog* had been developing from their own experiences. Were they really fighting to perpetuate this sort of thing? Wasn't there something known as the "Atlantic Charter"?

They weren't without benefit of lectures on what they would find in India, and how they should behave towards the "natives." But as these lectures gave the picture as Whitehall saw it, they were not much use. The emphasis was usually on the manifold blessings which the British Raj had bestowed; and on the dangers they would run if they wandered abroad in Indian cities in groups of less than six. On the whole they were neither amused nor impressed.

ARRIVAL

India at last! Perhaps Bill's unit was entraining the next day while Harry's was re-embarking for another port. In either case they generally went ashore through the "Red Gate" or the "Yellow Gate" and looked at the Orient for probably the first time. Hordes of half-naked, hungry-looking people. The majority

seemed to be either begging or trying to sell something. A souvenir to send home was obviously indicated, so they made their way through the crowds to the silk market, and being unused to the immemorial bargaining traditions of the East, paid "through the nose" for whatever they bought. It was away from the European quarter and strictly speaking "out of bounds," but no one worried much about that. More and more beggars—more and more evidences of unbelievable poverty and malnutrition. Strange and fascinating sights; sounds and smells—especially smells! Not much of the "glamorous, colourful East" in all this; and if it happened to be towards nightfall, they saw countless numbers of Bombay's homeless preparing to sleep on the narrow pavements.

Had they reached India any time in the past year or so they would have seen the long queues waiting outside grainshops which would be opening perhaps some *eighteen hours* later! It would have been an introduction to a sinister sight with which they were to become tragically familiar. Maybe Bill had known what it was to be cold, hungry and miserable in South Wales or Jarrow, but somehow hope had never been utterly extinguished even when things had been at their worst. These people seemed beyond all hoping.

Was this really the INDIA of the Aga Khan or the Maharajahs? Nothing "glamorous" about these women, carrying rickety children, haggard faces and spindly legs. Nothing "colourful" in their well-worn, washed-out Saris.

They won't quickly forget this first glimpse of the real Bombay, or of the men and women who produce much of its wealth from the great textile mills, and who exist in pain and poverty, crowded in their "Chawls"—great tenement buildings, housing three or four families in each tiny room. It was a far cry from the other end of the city where they gazed on the ornate arch known as the "Gateway to India," through which incoming and departing Viceroys used to pass with suitable pomp and circumstance in the days before they became air-minded. Harry had his photograph taken in its shadow, and probably you still treasure the copy he sent.

MOVEMENT ORDERS

They went their several ways. Some to the North-West Frontier; some across the Deccan plateau to Madras or Bangalore; many more through the jungles of Central India to far-off Bengal. We can't follow them everywhere. We'll concentrate upon some who eventually arrived in Bengal. The

name of this province is synonymous with suffering. It is the vital base from which our men must fight the battles of the future.

THROUGH A HUNGRY LAND

Perhaps it was not the hottest season of the year but anyway, the journey, lasting several days, was no joke. Troop trains in India have never been equipped with many amenities, and Jack recalled how his father had spoken of an "incident"—Karachi in 1916—when a lot died from heat-stroke and suffocation in a train.

Nagpur, Jubbulpore, the outskirts of Benares with a first sight of the Ganges. Each station seemed a replica of the last. Crowds, apparently encamped and living on the platforms as if they had been there for days—many of them had! Carriage doors and windows besieged by men, women and children begging for bread or the smallest coin. These people did really seem to be starving, so they gave them what they could, until the Sergeant-major—a real "old sweat" he happened to be—came along and announced that the next man he caught doing that sort of thing—distributing unconsumed rations—would be "put on a charge."

They reached their destination and, if the date happened to have been round August, 1942, were confined to barracks. Some of them had been following the political situation and had heard that all the Congress leaders had been arrested. Rumour had it that troops were being employed to quell disturbances which had followed the Government's action, and though they would, most of them, have admitted that they didn't know all the "ins and outs" of the problem, they hoped that they wouldn't have orders to carry out any such duties.

The disturbances practically ceased so they were released from confinement. Somehow they didn't sense any of the hostility they had been led to expect. Between them and the Indians, with whom they came into immediate contact, the language barrier was a difficulty, but it soon disappeared. In many cases they received special kindnesses from some of the Anglo-Indian families they met. Because these people have a "touch of the tar-brush" they can't, of course, belong to the Gymkhana or Club round which the lives of the "Burra Sahibs" mainly centre. The Chaplain of one big hospital unit was so concerned at the gulf which the men felt existed between themselves and the other Europeans that he persuaded the Colonel's wife to visit the canteen and dispense tea twice a week, which she did in a

"lady of the manor going slumming" sort of way. Support for criticisms of coldness shown by British residents to British troops was given by Miss Elsie Waters on her return to London after a four months' tour of India with her sister for ENSA. "Not nearly enough British people open their homes to the boys," she told the Press. "In Poona there were only 13, and that is a stronghold of Britons. The boys are doing a splendid job, and they ought to be looked after."

FAMINE!

Even before 1943 they saw the grain-shop queues growing longer and longer, read of rationing schemes and their Indian friends, warned them of worse to come. The papers spoke of mounting prices for vital food commodities and one, called *People's War*, was advocating the formation of "People's Food Committees" to assist Government measures for the equitable distribution of supplies, control of prices and stocks. They certainly weren't all Communists, but they felt the eloquence and urgency behind the appeals of someone called P. C. Joshi, who they learned was an Indian Communist leader.

Mr. Amery was complacently assuring the House of Commons that there "was no cause for alarm," but both John and Bill were there on the spot, seeing for themselves, and they knew that this was mere trifling with tragedy.

As far as the British public was concerned, the smoke-screen remained until much later in the year, when courageous newspaper men like Stuart Emeny of the *News Chronicle* (afterwards to die in a plane crash) did their best to bring enlightenment. But some of your men had already been writing of the scenes that were meeting their eyes. Young "John," Signals Formation of the R.A.F., but formerly of London and Exeter, wrote:

"The sights meeting one's eyes in the countryside are appalling. Bodies of men, women and children lie where they have dropped from exhaustion, and everywhere children with the "bloated belly" of starvation, beg for bread from the passers-by. Many of them have been deserted by their parents. . . ." He went on: "They all flock to the cities, but what hope is there for them? They are met again with a food shortage and join queues of hundreds, even thousands, or perhaps, having no money, choose a spot near a queue and beg from its members. So many corpses are found in the streets that most of the large towns, such as ours, have their own "Corpse Disposal Squads." He told how a nearby University after taking a survey had estimated that 25 per cent of all the families in that Province had



disintegrated through the famine; that more than 25 per cent of Calcutta's female destitutes had turned to prostitution, and concluded: "This then is the picture of a famine-stricken land. . . . I'm afraid that I can't give my own views, shared by many of the men, of the Government policy or even tell you all the facts I've accumulated, but I will say this, that praise is due to those who organised free food kitchens and gave help to the destitutes through the People's Food Committees long before 'Officialdom' realised how serious the crisis was."

In Britain we think we know something of "queues." They are not the "Queues of Death" which the men in India have been seeing. Queues, not for relative luxuries, but for a mere handful of grain or some weak gruel which might fan the dying flames of life for a few hours. Queues, not for a cinema, but of bodies awaiting cremation and lined up inside the Hindu Burning Ghats. Maybe the available wood is exhausted; the bodies cannot remain—so they go into the river with dire consequences for all.

An Ack-Ack gunner writes of this. "Only the other day a pal of mine saw a woman, presumably the mother, carrying a baby in each arm; one dead, the other obviously dying. She simply dropped them both in the river and went her way. Anyhow they escaped the life of misery which would otherwise have awaited them. Death would have taken them all within a week."

There is a saying, "India lives in her villages," and it is the villages which have suffered, and are suffering, most. Rationing schemes, such as they are, have never touched any but the large cities and now, if her children are not dying in them they are begging in the cities. That is why we quote from a letter written by a Naval rating, who says:—

"Personal charity will not solve India's economic problem—with all economies throughout history which have failed to satisfy needs, beggary may increase until it becomes a fine art—but the vast majority of the cringing, half-starved people we see were never professional beggars, just peasants driven from their land by famine or flood; by pressure of sheer starvation after they have been compelled to sell all their tiny crops to landlord or moneylender."

These words are typical of many; some from men who have since given their lives that all shall be free. The letters, naturally, weren't always of India, but of the "little things that remain", the little things you loved. And how Bill had been "thrilled by the wonderful news of Stalingrad and the advances of the Eighth Army." Another letter said that the eternal question, "When is the Second Front going to open?" had been replaced by, "Hasn't the Second Front opened yet?" Now you will soon



be getting letters telling you how they greeted the news that their questions had been answered and the enthusiasm with which it was received. Nevertheless, in all their letters the theme which constantly recurred, and will continue to be heard, was that of the conditions of the people among whom they are living. **NOT WORDS FLOWING EASILY FROM THE PRACTISED PEN OF THE PROFESSIONAL WRITER, BUT THOSE OF YOUR OWN MEN, THEIR OWN, PERHAPS RATHER CRUDE, CHOOSING.**

One final extract from a letter from John, dated April 12th, 1944:—

"People here, including the majority of us, are disappointed that more wasn't done about the famine or about the employment of women in the colmines." They might well feel disappointed about the one, and even more angry about the

other, had they read, as many did, how Indian coal experts had been arriving in Lisbon! Yet Amery, in a rather uneasy manner, had assured a critical House of Commons that "the employment of women in the mines was temporary and only dictated by war necessities." They cannot understand how coal for Portugal can be a "war necessity."

HOW THE FORCES ARE HELPING

When official silence could no longer be maintained the High Command at New Delhi announced that aid in famine relief would be given unstintingly by the Forces. Since last November a great deal of assistance has undoubtedly been afforded. Military motor vehicles have carried large quantities of food grains, and helped the civil power to move stocks to areas where the need has been greatest. Medical relief has been developed on a big scale through existing military hospitals and mobile treatment centres. Although the troops themselves know too well how inadequate many of the measures taken have been, they have welcomed them enthusiastically, and there's a lot of evidence to show that many have made their own individual contributions in such ways as they could find and far beyond the mere orders they may have received.

Many men volunteered personal assistance to Food Committees, but even though these comprise men from all religious classes and caste, they are not, of course, "Official" bodies, and for active help to be given them by British soldiers might naturally be wrong -from the authorities' viewpoint! The same "authorities"—not merely content to prevent the troops from co-operating in the work the People's Food Committees have been doing -have done their best to discourage their activities and even suppress the Committees through the police.

Nevertheless, your men have not been frustrated in their desires to help and many have sent contributions in cash to the different Relief Funds. This letter which accompanied 82 rupees (about £6) collected in an Army Unit indicates something of what they feel:—

"We know that this is only a drop in the ocean to what is required, but those who have contributed are deeply distressed by the responsibility which Britain bears for the present economic and political crisis; and they pledge themselves to do everything possible to bring the British soldier and the Indian people closer together in their mutual fight against Japanese Fascism."

How some of them have been carrying out this pledge has been told vividly by a correspondent in a January, 1944, issue of *People's War*. He describes how the people in a largish city of Central Bengal had feared the coming of the R.A.F.: how the best houses were requisitioned for the officers and how they built airfields in the "golden fields." He told how quickly the people

found out their fears were unjustified, and how friendly the boys of the R.A.F. were. One told him: "We want India to be immediately free. It is only a few of our countrymen who want India to be a colony. We people, we don't get anything from India except perhaps our tea, and that for a very high price." Another, who admitted that he had been a Conservative until he joined the army, said: "I have learned to love India. I am not sure what will be my political affiliations, but I am definite about this, I will never again join the Conservative Party." He went on to describe how the R.A.F. boys were utterly shaken by the sights they saw when the famine came, and how when they learned that the people had united for relief they desired to join in and assist in all the steps that were being taken. Not only the men but "the higher circles" of the R.A.F. reacted in the same way: they too wanted to fight famine and save Bengal. The Squadron-Leader, two officers and two aircraftsmen joined the Relief Committee; paid a first instalment of their help; organised a Boxing Tournament, and they are continuing to raise money.

This Indian writer concluded, almost happily, "Out of evil comes good. The fascist offensive brought them (the men of the R.A.F.) near us. The famine brought them even nearer. And I believe that the people's counter-offensive against fascism will unite them with us for, and in, a Free India."

Over a year ago, the B.B.C. broadcast a dramatic story of a Highland battalion which fought its way through the jungles to take succour to a big area south-west of Calcutta which had been devastated by a cyclone. More than 10,000 people had been drowned and over a million rendered homeless. They did gallant work, but many realised when they arrived that the help had been too long delayed. What, maybe, they didn't know, and what the B.B.C. never told the world, was that for many days relief had been refused by the Provincial and local authorities on the grounds that the people of Midnapore "were on inimical terms with the Government and were not co-operating with it." This was the categorical statement which appeared in the *Bombay Press (Bombay Sentinel)*, 25th November, 1942, and there is no evidence that it was ever contradicted. On the battlefield, even a wounded Nazi receives help!

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO YOU?

We've told you something of what John, Bill and the others have been seeing, feeling and doing, and we come back nearly to the point from which we started.

One and all, they are out there to do a job, a big job. You have the right to demand that it shall be tackled when the time comes, when Nazism in Europe has been utterly crushed and it

will be the turn of the Japanese aggressors, under conditions most likely to lead to speedy victory. Can it be truthfully said that the most favourable conditions for the launching of a successful offensive are now in existence?

Instead of a population 100 per cent co-operative and mobilised behind the war effort, you have a famine-ridden land, and a people embittered and angry, whose revered leaders—anti-fascists with the best of us—are still, with the exception of Gandhi, behind prison walls. Two other facts have to be considered. "Mobilisation" means not only recruitment into the armed forces, but development of a country's productive resources. Can it be said that Indians are really being trained adequately to produce in mass the weapons of war upon which your men's lives will depend? It is common knowledge that they aren't. So, maybe, for the lack of utilisation of India's capacities your men will wait for armaments to reach them from these shores or from America. The other factor is that of their health. They will have been living under the conditions which have been described in previous pages, and despite all precautions which are known to medical science, these conditions in which endemic diseases such as cholera, dysentery and malaria are running riot, constitute a constant menace to their welfare.

Are these things to happen? Is that troopship in which you are especially interested to be delayed, because Whitehall refuses to enlist the whole strength of the Indian people by ending the political deadlock?

Much high-powered propaganda has been employed to convince the world that the British case on both issues—deadlock and famine—is unimpeachable.

"My dear old chap, what can we do? The beggars simply won't agree among themselves and until the Indians are entirely united, matters must rest as they are." A typical remark of an Amery "fan"! The fact is that every political party of any importance in India is opposed to the policy of Whitehall. (**The Government is aware of this.**) It looks as if the India Office and New Delhi Government are the only people marching in step!

Isn't it true that during recent months there has been a marked coming together of political trends, and that popular pressure, largely led by the Indian Communist Party, is bringing into being a really united front for the opening of negotiations? Only unity on immediate practical demands will force the bureaucracy to end the deadlock and bring about unity of all Indian patriots for defence and offence against Japan; will enable them to combat sabotage and declining morale.

Not all the whitewash in the world would suffice to cover the Government's responsibility for the famine. You can pay your money, and take your choice of any one of the reasons to which

they ascribe it. Loss of imports from Burma; failure of one particular rice crop; destruction of another (in one area only) by floods; hoarding by Indian peasants and dealers (as if the starving peasants ever were able to hoard food) and—of course—the time-honoured "Act of God." We are not going to dispute the fact that some of these things were contributory factors, but neither they nor any others which could be brought "out of the hat" provide adequate excuses for the failure of the Central Government to face up to its duties and responsibilities; for its failure to realise that control of "prices" can mean little without control of stocks; for its failure to check the activities of the hoarders and to support the People's Food Committees which were doing their utmost to uncover them, for its weak-kneed attempts to arrest the inflation of currency which strangely enough followed the Finance Minister's welcome to high prices as a "sign of prosperity"; and, finally, for the absence of consultation and consideration as to the introducing of rationing schemes in the vast areas outside the big cities.

The "Government" means not only a select coterie of "Die-hards" at Whitehall and New Delhi—the Amerys, the Andersons, the Linlithgows and so on—but YOU, the people of this country, and in so far as you condone its negligence, you are contributing not only a further quota of death and destitution to 400 million human beings, but you are jeopardising the lives of your own kith and kin.

We said earlier that "Bengal had become synonymous with suffering. This is what P. C. Joshi, the Indian Communist leader says to YOU:—

"Continuance of the famine is a standing invitation to the Japs to invade Bengal. Most of your soldier sons are inside or on Bengal's borders. They have to share with the people dangers of diarrhoea, dysentery, dropsy, cholera and malaria, which are spreading in epidemic form. They are not safe. They feel morally sick watching sights of horror and shame. The only way to help your sons is to help Bengal and let India's patriots come into their own to grapple with the situation.

"Send more foodships, more medicine cases for immediate relief.

"Urgently demand the release of the Congress leaders, as a real big blow not only against famine now, but against its probable recurrence.

"Demand immediate negotiations for the establishment of a National Government as a final solution to India's urgent present problems.

"This is the only way to speed up the counter-offensive into Burma, smash Japanese fascism and get your sons back home quicker than any other way. Help us and help yourself."

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