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A BRITISH PIONEER IN GUERRILL WARFARE: ORDE WINGATE

General Orde Wingate was one of the pioneers of British use of guerrilla warfare. He was one of last century's greatest military leaders. He was killed while flying back to India from Burma when his aircraft crashed into a mountain killing all on board.

Wingate was an inspiration to his troops and a nuisance to many of his military superiors. He believed in leading from the front ("follow me" was his slogan). He was bold, innovative and unconventional. His troops respected him.

But he was also an eccentric who did not follow the model expected of the traditional British officer. He was untidy, poorly dressed, and ate raw onions for his health. His unruly beard, piercing stare, outsize pith helmet and constant carrying of the Bible gave him the appearance of a Baptist missionary. He was also widely read and like discussing religion and politics, when most officers preferred discussing sport, horses and hunting.

The problem for the conventional thinking of British officers is that they kept being outsmarted by guerrilla groups who were innovative. Part of Wingate's military genius was that he recognized that the traditional British way of doing things was not working in the new military era and so new ideas had to be developed.

Wingate received a gunnery officer's commission in 1923 and was sent to India. The Army's global task was to maintain order in the vast, turbulent British Empire, rather than be ready for another international war.

He learnt Arabic and got posted to the Sudan in 1928. He was to patrol the border with Abyssinia (today's Ethiopia) to stop slave traders and ivory poachers. He decided that a better strategy would be to set ambushes rather than just carry out patrols.

Wingate's five years in the Sudan gave him the opportunity to think about guerrilla warfare. Many of his ideas remain in effect today, not least for the Australian SAS. First, properly trained and motivated, small groups of soldiers could learn to survive in hostile environments. Second, they could operate in isolation far from home base. Third, there had to be constant training.

Wingate had plenty to do. Not only was he protecting the borders against criminal gangs but there were fears of a revival of Islamic fundamentalism to try again to drive out the British rulers. Meanwhile, some tribal chiefs were resisting British rule.

In 1936 Wingate was assigned to the British Mandate Territory in Palestine (taken over from Turkey after World War I). He set about learning Hebrew. Although he had no Jewish relatives, he suddenly fell in love with the Jewish cause and supported the creation of an independent country for Jews (which was contrary to British policy, which wanted to maintain British rule in Palestine).

Arab gangs were out-smarting the British rulers and Jewish settlers. Jews had a static defence in their settlements, while the Arab gangs were mobile, attacked at random and then disappeared.

The Arabs came in from Syria and Jordan, hid in the hills and caves, and used hit-and-run tactics. Meanwhile, the British Army stayed on the roads in motor vehicles to give chase (and lost contact with them when they moved into hilly, rough territory).

Wingate got permission to create Special Night Squads formed from British and Jewish personnel. They ambushed Arab raiders on their raids. He earned his first Distinguished Service Order (DSO) at this time – he was to get three in his career.

Eventually Wingate's pro-Jewish opinions got him into too much trouble in Palestine and he was sent back to England in May 1939. He was banned from ever being allowed back into the territory.

Wingate's pioneering work in Palestine made him the spiritual father of the Israeli Defence Force (IDF). Some of his young soldiers went on to distinguished careers in Israel (such as Moshe Dayan). He is far more honoured in Israel than in Britain, with many streets and buildings named after him.

Orde Charles Wingate was born on February 23 1903 in India into a British military family (his father Charles was a colonel). It was a strict Plymouth Brethren family and Wingate acquired a detailed knowledge of the Bible (his mother was a missionary). He was bored at school and military academy and did poorly. It was only when he suddenly realized how he could contribute to military science (through the evolution of guerrilla tactics) that he started to use his brains.

He was also well connected. His distant relative Sir Reginald Wingate was the governor of the Sudan and so assisted his posting there in 1928. (Sir Reginald had earlier on also helped another distant relative TE Lawrence – Lawrence of Arabia – at the end of World War I).

When war began in September 1939 Wingate was posted back to the Sudan, to begin operations against Italian occupation forces in Ethiopia. In February 1941, Colonel Wingate used guerrilla tactics to lead 12,000 troops against 200,000 Italians. It was a stunningly successful campaign and Emperor Haile Selassie was restored to the throne.

Winston Churchill (who shared Wingate's impatience with stale military thinking) was a great admirer of this eccentric military genius. Churchill saw him, in effect, as another Lawrence of Arabia (who had also been a friend of Churchill) and supported his style of guerrilla fighting.

Japan entered the war in December 1941 and in January 1942 began its attack on Burma and India. On February 27 1942 Colonel Wingate was sent to the Far East to organize a new type of guerrilla unit.

This was going to be a tough campaign. The Japanese were advancing at rapid speed and swept across Burma before the Allies could get organized. Additionally many Burmese liked (at least initially) the Japanese "liberators" and so Wingate realized that it would not be possible to raise a large patriotic resistance to the Japanese.

Wingate had to create more new ideas. The Burmese hill tribes in northern Burma remained pro-British and so could be relied upon. He recommended that there be long-range penetration raids of specially trained British and Indian forces, supplied by air drops, to operate behind enemy lines to harass them and so divert them from their attacking operations.

The first campaign took place in February 1943 ("Operation Loincloth"). The troops were named "Chindits" after the mythical stone tigers – Chinthe - guardians of Burmese temples. The remnants of the force arrived back three months later. It had been costly – for both the Allies and the Japanese, who had not expected this type of warfare from the Allies. The army thought the operation was a waste of effort but it generated an immense publicity boost because it showed that the Japanese could be beaten at jungle warfare.

Churchill was very impressed and took Wingate to the Allied summit conference at Quebec. Wingate also impressed the Americans who promised to supply more equipment for the next operation.

General Wingate launched the next campaign ("Operation Thursday") on March 6 1943 with over 9,000 troops. Due to his style of leading from the front, he was visiting forces when his American aircraft crashed. My colleague the late Major Andrew Boyd of the Indian Army led the search party and said that the only Wingate possession to survive the crash intact was his distinctive pith helmet.



His remains were buried at the US Arlington National Cemetery (one of the few foreigners accorded that honour). It is often adorned with Jewish tributes.

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