

Fighting Heroes of the Intelligence Corps No. 4

Lt Col George Lowther Steer

By Harry Fecitt MBE TD

George Steer

In north-eastern India on 25 December 1944, an overloaded jeep on its way to a Christmas party overturned, killing the driver, 35-year-old Lt Colonel George Steer, Intelligence Corps, attached to Special Operations Executive (SOE). Three of his soldier passengers later died of their injuries and four others were injured but survived after hospitalisation. George was buried nearby in the James Finlay's Rungamuttee Tea Estate Cemetery; he is commemorated on Face 19 of the immense and impressive Rangoon Memorial located in the Taukkyan War Cemetery, Myanmar.

George was a wartime soldier, having previously been a famous war correspondent. For the *Times*, he reported on the Second Italian-Abyssinian War where he exposed Italian war crimes in using chemical weapons against civilians, and the Spanish Civil War where he likewise exposed German war crimes, especially the thermite bombing atrocities at Guernica. When the *Times* took exception to George's anti-fascist stance, the *Daily Telegraph* sent him to report on the 1939 Winter War that occurred when Russia invaded Finland. George was also a prodigious writer, producing several books on the fascist threat that he saw developing in Europe, Italian-occupied Africa and the former German colonies.

In mid-1940, George Steer, then in London, was personally recruited by the team of men planning to return the exiled Haile Selassie to his emperor's throne in Addis Ababa, Abyssinia (Ethiopia), and George became a second lieutenant in the Intelligence Corps. The fortunes of war, plus George's own interest and skills in using media tools, were to see him developing and practising psychological warfare skills in Abyssinia, North Africa, Madagascar and Burma.

Abyssinia, North Africa and Madagascar

George knew both Haile Selassie and Orde Wingate, a guerrilla leader in the 1940-1941 campaign to clear the Italians out of East Africa, and he was tasked with operating a forward propaganda unit (FPU) in Abyssinia with the mission of causing demoralisation and a desire to lay down arms amongst the enemy Italian and Eritrean ranks. The unit

quickly ensured that the Italians in East Africa knew the full extent of their compatriots' reverses and surrenders in the Western Desert of North Africa.

During the major battle at Keren, leaflets in Italian and the regional dialects were dropped over enemy positions whilst broadcasters positioned near the enemy lines played light classical music reminiscent of Italy, plus stirring Ethiopian Imperial marching music, to remind the local troops of their former allegiance. In the first fortnight of February 1941, 1,500 enemy troops came over to the British lines holding George's leaflets. Once Addis Ababa had been seized by the Allies in early April 1941, George started a national radio service that broadcast news and imperial propaganda in all the Abyssinian dialects until fighting ceased in late November.

George was then deployed in the Western Desert and it is probable that he took part in the first attempts at sonic deception in the Helfaya Pass on Christmas Eve, 1941, where soundtrack recordings of massed tank movements and engines revving were broadcast across the German wire through the amplifiers of a propaganda unit. Another, less technical, method used German-speaking individuals with megaphones who shouted slogans across the enemy wire. Whilst in North Africa, George wrote *The Abyssinian Campaigns*, the official government story of the conquest of Italian East Africa.

When Japan entered the war in early December 1941, the Vichy-French-occupied island of Madagascar presented serious problems for the Allies. The Vichy-French authorities preferred the company of the Axis powers to that of the Allies, and the Japanese were very interested in establishing a submarine base on the island; this would have threatened critical Allied shipping routes. British troops captured Diego Suarez in northern Madagascar in early May 1942 and a Japanese midget submarine in the harbour seriously damaged two Allied ships before it was dealt with. The campaign lasted for a further six months (that was the minimum time period qualifying the Vichy-French troops for a campaign medal) and George, now a major and GSO 2 (Intelligence) appears to have originated two radio deception plans to deceive the enemy as to the locations of subsequent Allied landings at Majunga and Nosy Be island.

Burma – the Indian Forward Broadcasting Units

In January 1943, George arrived in India with the task of conducting psychological warfare operations (Psyops) against the Japanese forces occupying Burma. This was a tough task as the Japanese troops had a

collective desire to die, if need be, for their emperor as surrender brought shame on the soldier and his family. There was more scope for success when operating against Indian National Army soldiers who had thrown in their lot with the Japanese after the British surrender of Singapore. Another important target was the Burmese village communities behind enemy lines that had become disillusioned with their Japanese occupiers, as they could provide sound information on enemy deployments and movements. After struggles to obtain men, especially linguists, and technical equipment plus mules and handlers to carry it through the jungle, George commenced trial operations with an FPU. He personally went forward with the unit to the frontline in the Arakan and supervised the trials himself.

The SOE took over George's operations and Indian forward broadcasting units (IFBUs) were formed to perform a number of Psyops and Humint activities. Alan Ogden's book on SOE heroes in the Far East describes the scene:

It is worth mentioning at this stage the role of the Indian Field Broadcasting Units formed by SOE in response to a request by the Director of Military Intelligence India for combat propaganda in the field. Under command of Major George Steer, five IFBUs were deployed, four on the Assam-Burma front and one between Mandalay and Kalewa. The idea was to lower the morale of frontline Japanese troops through conveying to them the certainty of defeat, either by broadcasting through an array of loudspeakers or in writing by leaflets delivered by mortars or aircraft.

Another aspect of the work of IFBUs was termed 'consolidation propaganda', or 'Hearts and Minds' campaigns, and was carried out behind enemy lines by patrol groups led by a British captain with up to seventy Assam Riflemen, usually Gurkhas, under command. Their role varied from the collection of battlefield intelligence to establishing local markets where essential foodstuffs and clothing could be dropped by Dakota and sold at pre-war prices in exchange for pre-war currencies. Medical treatment of villagers also played a major part in bringing local people over to the Allied side.

Captain Peter Goss remembers how, after completing his training at the Psychological Warfare Camp near Darjeeling on the Sikkim border, his party, No.2 IFBU, was infiltrated at Myingyan, near the junction of the Chindwin and Irrawaddy Rivers, some fifty miles ahead of 20th Indian Division. His experience of trying to get the Japanese to defect through propaganda messages showed it was "not a very good idea as the Japanese could be relied upon not to surrender". On more than one occasion he had to extricate a Psyops team from a firefight, both sides incurring casualties.

Capt Peter John Goss, 8th Gurkha Rifles attached to No. 2 FPU, was recommended for a Military Cross by the commander of 20th Indian Division, and although higher authority reduced the award to a Mention in Despatches, his citation shows the technique used and the dangers involved:

On the morning of the 13 March 1945 Captain P.J. Goss in command, Captain R.C. Bacon, a Korean Officer, a Jemadar (Indian officer) and a patrol of No.2 Forward Propaganda Unit, left their position at MILAUNGGYUIN and advanced over open country to within 200 yards of a strong Japanese position with the object of making a direct surrender call to the enemy.

The Korean Officer first spoke at 200 yards range, after which the whole patrol closed to within 70 yards of the enemy, where the Korean Officer again spoke. The enemy immediately opened fire with a light machine gun and rifles. One Sepoy was hit and Captain Goss seeing this ran under heavy fire to his assistance. He succeeded in carrying him back to comparative safety, where, seeing that Captain Bacon was also badly wounded, he handed the wounded man over to a Sepoy, and again went forward under fire to help Captain Bacon, whom he picked up and carried back to safety.

Throughout this action Captain Goss continued to command, control and direct the fire of his men, showing leadership of the highest order, and complete disregard for his own safety. That the rest of the section managed to withdraw without further loss is due to Captain Goss.

The British *Official History of The War Against Japan* mentions in a footnote that ten days after the incident described above, the fourth Marquis of Dufferin and Ava, working with an FBU, was killed in an ambush between Ava and Fort Dufferin, Mandalay, when a group of Japanese chose to fight to the death.

An important function of IFBU patrols was the immediate interrogation of prisoners and surrendered enemy personnel and this required linguists, such as the Korean mentioned in Peter Goss's citation, to be embedded in the patrols, and fast communications links to be maintained with the formation being supported. Despite the paucity of Japanese willingly surrendering, wounded enemy were sometimes taken prisoner and they would often co-operate with their interrogators. Indian National Army deserters were generally very willing to co-operate.

Propaganda leaflets were often fired from 2-inch mortars by IFBU operators. Illuminating bombs were used with the flares removed and rolled-up leaflets inserted in their place which fell out when the bombs' parachutes opened and the bomb compartments hung downwards; the leaflets then scattered onto enemy positions. If the unit came into contact with the enemy, the mortar operator fired high-explosive rounds at his ground targets. The leaflets used never influenced the Japanese as it could immediately be seen from their design and semantics that they had been produced by non-Japanese personnel. Thirty Canadian-Japanese men were recruited to join the IFBUs but the war ended before they were deployed into the field.

In Charles Cruikshank's history of SOE in the Far East it states:

The Commander, Major G.L. Steer was refreshingly frank about the unit's performance. There was no evidence of success or failure, but at least it was possible to speak to a large captive Japanese audience. There was nothing to suggest that the leaflets, produced on the spot on duplicating machines, made any impact.

The Hearts and Minds markets that were organised behind enemy lines were excellent places for recruiting local agents. An ideal candidate would be a contractor supplying food to Japanese garrisons as he would always have a rough idea of ration strengths in the various locations, and he would be able to report on new enemy units arriving in the district and on other units moving away.

The IFBU broadcasting ability was also used behind British lines to inform British and Indian troops of news about the war, as there were no other channels regularly disseminating that information. It appears also that suitable soothing music broadcast during enemy bombardments helped to calm and control British and Indian nerves.

The IFBUs continued to function until the war ended and a fair assessment of the results they achieved is to say that senior officers from the army commander downwards liked them, presumably because of the intelligence gained from the Hearts and Minds and immediate interrogation activities (especially the debriefing of Indian National Army deserters), but at brigade level and below, many armoured and infantry officers thought that the IFBUs got in the way as it was easier, quicker and more convenient to kill Japanese in their bunkers rather than induce surrender.

Recognition

George's death came at a time when the experience, vision, dedication and energy that he brought to his military employment had borne fruit, and his IFBU operations had been recognised as valuable contributions to the intelligence effort in the Burma campaign. The Deputy Director of Psychological Warfare for South-East Asia Command, Lt Col A.D.C. Peterson OBE, commented that he wanted: 'To put on record the great service he has done for SOE . . . without Steer I do not think that there would have been any British Forward Propaganda units in this area. . . . His great personal qualities of courage and sympathy made him an ideal leader not only of British officers, but also of the many Orientals, Korean, Indian and Assamese who served under him'.

The Head of SOE's Indian Mission (Force 136), Col Colin Mackenzie CMG, remembered: '(George's) inexhaustible energy and ever fresh springing enthusiasm . . . It seems doubly hard that the machine he designed and improved over such a long period was just becoming ready for action this year on an enlarged scale when the accident happened. He is literally irreplaceable'.

During his military service, Lt Col George Lowther Steer, Intelligence Corps, was awarded a Mention in Despatches on three occasions.

Books written by George Steer

Caesar in Abyssinia: An Account of the Italo-Abyssinian War, 1935-6 (1936). *The Tree of Gernika: A Field Study of Modern War* (1938). *Germany in Africa*. A series of articles dealing with the question of the former German colonies (1938). *A Date in the Desert* (1939). *Judgement on German Africa* (1939). *Abyssinia Today* with W. Arnold-Forster (1939). *Sealed and Delivered: A book on the Abyssinian Campaign* (1942). *The Abyssinian Campaigns*, a Ministry of Information publication (1942).

Endnote

In the National Archives there is an SOE file on George Steer under the reference HS 9/1410/9 but the information it contains could not be accessed by this writer due to geographical limitations.

Sources:

Charles Cruikshank. *SOE in the Far East*. (Oxford University Press softback 1986).

Major General S. Woodburn Kirby. British Official History. *The War Against Japan. Volume IV. The Reconquest of Burma.* (Naval & Military Press softback reprint).

Alan Ogden. *Tigers Burning Bright. SOE Heroes in the Far East.* (Bene Factum Publishing softback 2013).

Nicholas Rankin. *Telegram from Guernica. The Extraordinary Life of George Steer: Reporter, Adventurer and Soldier.* (Faber & Faber softback 2013).

Indian Field Broadcasting Units: Their Purpose and Activities.
<https://www.psywar.org/ifbu.php>