

Burma 44: Holland James By James Holland

An excellent example of popular military which breathtakingly narrates the story of the Battle of the Admin Box using the memoirs and oral histories of the men that fought this vital battle a turning point in the war in Burma to tell their stories in a way that not only brings to light the horrors of the jungle war but also explains the importance of the victory by British and Indian forces and how it was achieved and places it within the context of the war in South East Asia against the Japanese. This is amongst the very best of Holland's Second World War books and is highly recommended to anyone who wants an easily accessible retelling of an often overlooked victory by the Forgotten Army. Pocketbook I can't quite put my finger on it but there is something captivating about World War Two's Asian theatre - perhaps it is the exoticism perhaps it is the daunting backdrop perhaps it is the hot blooded savagery of a depraved Japanese enemy. Lieutenant General Slim's 14th are often termed 'The Forgotten Army' taking an undeserved second class seat subordinate to celebrated military endeavours of Normandy ilk yet the indisputable point remains that Allied Asian continent efforts went some way to eroding preconceived ideas around Japanese military invincibility. English author James Holland journeys the reader to the Allied Arakan Campaign in 'Burma '44' homing in specifically on the Battle of 'Admin Box' a milestone encounter set within a gruelling conflict up to that point dominated by military forces of Imperial Japan. 'Through the eyes of the soldier' 'boots on the ground' as authorial blueprints furnish a human feel in that the reader is given greater insight into individual thoughts feelings emotions and experiences faced by human beings in acute tribulation. A sense for atmosphere exudes from Burma 44's pages as Allied soldiers relate minutiae such as jungle sounds dreaded nightfall and practised Japanese field craft causing relentless feelings of edginess and discomfiture. Burma '44 then is an immersive experience conducive to engaging us as readers in attempting to grasp both the scale of suffering a conflict as far reaching as World War Two wrought and support to sole as well as collective outcome for those involved. Holland's balance of resource utilisation in Burma '44 is about right: largely a tactical account of a series of engagements or as another way of putting it one salient cog as part of the larger strategical Burma Campaign wheel. From reading other work by Holland the strategic angle is not in truth a strong suit of the Salisbury historian perchance attributable to that eagerness to include primary resource sometimes to excess where names places and happenings can seem to merge into one. Holland nevertheless outlines a 'Cast List' appendix in an atypical but worthwhile approach with Burma '44 following experiences of troopers engineers and senior command thus outlined; the last unusually close to the action by the very nature of encirclement centric jungle warfare. In this Burma '44 is a mistle as the aerial view so to speak masterfully relayed by Frank McLynn in 'The Burma Campaign' cedes precedence in Holland's book to relatively small scale albeit ferocious keenly contested frays with the Battle for The Admin Box comprising a narrative centrepiece. Holland makes logistics as a crucial facet in warfare interesting another trademark from alternative works on Normandy the Italian campaign and general histories of World War Two in the West. Of especial apropos in Burma's unforgiving environment of mountains paddy fields swamps and rainforest those involved with commissariat and logistics are the real unsung heroes of World War Two and gratifying it is to read Holland paying glowing tribute. If the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again expecting a different result the Japanese evidently played truant through that particular lesson - Holland rationally identifying a tendency to attack through the same means channels or chaungs notwithstanding prior costly disasters. Be it Leyte Gulf or Midway The Marianas or Saipan Imphal or here at the Arakan in Holland's book Japanese personnel (drilled and lashed to obedience in World War Two epochs this proved both a strength and major weakness in Japanese military approach: a strength in following orders to the letter while scoffing notions of backing down; a weakness in that little resourcefulness initiative or guile could flourish) regardless of service arm consistently lacked a sound Plan B faced by setback - when the Allies got their collective head around this recurrent manifestation they began to win the Asian Pacific War. The idea behind this attack was to distract British attention from the Japanese main offensive planned a

month or so later from Northern Burma into the Eastern extremities of India (which culminated in the famous sieges of Imphal and Kohima). Arakan is a coastal region on the border between India and Burma where fighting came to a halt throughout the entire monsoon and where mules were the only practicable heavy transport medium. The high point of this battle was the desperately brave defence of the 'Admin Box' the surrounded divisional headquarters & supplies area with a remarkable role for M3 tanks that were after all proven quite effective in the jungle. The battle of the Admin Box was a turning point in the sense that for the first time the British Indian army still reeling from its massive defeats in Malaya and its retreat from Burma was not routed but rather stood and fought debunking the myth of Japanese unbeatability in the jungle once and for all. The successful defense was made possible by supplying the surrounded 'box' from the air (presaging events later in Kohima) which in turn required suspending the air supplies to China over the Himalaya for a while. Although Holland tries his utmost to convey the frightening nature of being in a trench at night in the jungle waiting for a Japanese attack the account of the actual battle remains difficult to follow. I think this is an inherent problem of all military history that drills down into the details of specific actions maybe a book just is not the right medium for grasping the reality on the ground. Holland's book does great justice to what must have been a miserable battle over an extended period he conjures up the fear and the stench of the theatre of operations very well indeed and as a result one really begins to understand the extraordinary courage that those involved must of had. He approached this crucial subject with brevity and clarity with regard to the bigger picture and was then able to weave into the narrative how that effected the situation on the ground be that around logistics management of disease tactics morale etc. It is also refreshing to read about successful tactical innovation be that in the use of combined arms at the same if not a effective level than seen in the Western and Eastern Fronts the value of training of men as infantry first and foremost to take into account the fluid nature of battle in Burma and the application of resources at hand such as the invention of parajutes. Taken all together when reading a history such as this it is clear that the changes that Mountbatten Slim and others wrought from late 1943 onwards were spectacular was there any other command on any side in any other theatre who achieved so much with so little while preserving the lives of their men to such an exceptional degree in what can be only described as truly challenging circumstances? However I do have three slightly circumspect observations first yet again the maps provided disappointed; Second it would have been splendid to have heard from Indian Gurkha and Japanese participants (although the lack of available first hand accounts is hardly Mr. Holland had book ended better by elaborating on the Grand Strategy of both sides then taken us through Arabian (as he did so well) and then finished with Imphal and Kohima as many of the participants Mr. Pocketbok In February 1944 a rag tag collection of clerks drivers doctors muleteers and other base troops stiffened by a few dogged Yorkshiremen managed to hold out against some of the finest infantry in the Japanese Army and then defeat them, A hallmark of Holland's work is extensive use of primary resource in recounting history Burma '44 peppered with memoirs diaries and verbal recollection from participant Allied personnel. GOC of the 7th Indian Infantry Division Frank Messervy was exactly one such after having his HQ overrun going 'off radar' for some time in the fallout, With that said Holland certainly has a gift for descriptive writing in a coruscating avid graphic prose, But those firing or dropping the projectiles tend to grab the headlines Holland's description of battle absorbing and taut in equal measure. James Holland's Burma '44 has all the page turning grip of a novel giving voice to a sadly Cinderella force truly deserving of all our contemporary gratitude. Pocketbok Account of a dramatic action in early 1944 in which the Japanese infiltrated and encircled British positions in the rain soaked jungle of Arakan: I liked the first part of the book which features a general introduction to the war in Burma of which I knew almost nothing. This brave stance was even remarkable as the British found themselves surrendered by an enemy that was in the habit of butchering prisoners in rather nasty ways (e, Be that as it may I am certainly motivated to move on to Imphal Kohima Meiktila and of course the road past Mandalay: This author has managed to research an obscure but vital battle in the Japanese conflict and describe it in intensive and gripping detail, We all knew about Kohima and Imphal but

the Admin Box was new (to me anyway). He gives due credit to the British leaders especially Mountbatten who tends to get an indifferent press: If the Japanese had won these battles they would have broken through to India, It would probably not have made any final difference to the War's outcome but it would have required the Americans to smash the Japanese, Pocketbok I really enjoyed this book well written lucid and comprehensive with regard to the battle he describes at least from the point of view of the English soldiers involved, Certainly its one of the best books I have read on the challenges tribulations and struggles of jungle warfare and that includes a raft written on Vietnam, Holland did an excellent job in highlighting the evolution of the 14th Army under Slim: This made the battle very immediate and helped my understanding as to why we must now consider it as one of the crucial encounters of the war: It is this last point which frustrated me most it would have been terrific if Mr: Holland introduced us in Arakan also fought in the later battle there would have been a satisfying sense of continuity. In short a great book and it really would have been a pleasure to read of Mr, Holland's excellent prose on what is a fascinating critical yet generally poorly researched and recorded campaign.g. by using them for bayonet practice). Pocketbok Masterful as ever with James Holland. Also Slim probably the best British general of WW2. Britain's standing would have been destroyed. So. an important book.Mr.I also think that Mr. All good stuff. Holland's fault) and third the book just felt incomplete. It became know as The Defence of the Admin Box. This book deals with this battle. Burma 44: Holland James

