Sentinels of the North-East

The Assam Rifles

Major General D.K. PALIT, Vr.C., F.R.G.S.

PALIT & PALIT
New Delhi

The gradual encroachment of British rule into north-east India started in the Brahmaputra Valley in the 1820s and eventually encompassed the whole of the area of what later became Assam Province and the tribal territories that extend from it to the Tibetan and Burma borders. For the subjugation and eventual security of these territories the British raised a number of local levies that were eventually formed into battalions of Assam military police, the progenitors of today's Assam Rifles. This book traces the history of this Force from humble origins to its present position in the security hierarchy, wherein it is virtually indistinguishable from the regular Army.

In the Great War of 1914-18 the Assam Rifles provided Gorkha reinforcements to Gorkha regiments fighting in France and on other fronts. From those days starts the close association of the Assam Rifles with the Regiments of Gorkha Rifles. In World War II the Assam Rifles played a crucial strategic role in the war against Japan, sometimes operating under British Intelligence (Special Operations Executive) far behind the enemy's lines. Some aspects of this story are revealed here for the first time.

The second half of the book deals with the redeployment of the Assam Rifles after Independence. The first few years witness the use of the Force mainly in support of the civil government in extending the administration to tribal areas, a task that had been somewhat neglected during the British era. However, it was not long before the Assam Rifles were recalled to a predominantly military role. The insurgencies in Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur (the social and political causes of each of which have been briefly but adequately covered in the text) absorbed an increasing number of battalions newly raised for the purpose; and the part the Force played under the Army's command during the Chinese

Rs 150.00

invasion of 1962 strengthened the bonds between the regular Army and the Assam Rifles.

The Assam Rifles has expanded greatly since Independence : by the mid-1980s it is destined to constitute a Force of over 30 battalions. Whereas this is a great achievement for a para-military body, the eventual ethos of the Force—whether it is to be an administrative or a military instrument—is the question that has yet to be settled.

The Author

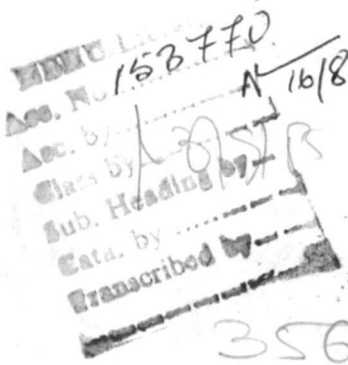
Major General D K Palit joined the Army in 1939 and saw active service in the N.W. Frontier, the Second World War, Kashmir (1946-48) and the Punjab (1965) in various capacities, from platoon to Divisional Commander. From 1961-64 he was Director of Military Operations at Army HQ.

His first book *The Essentials of Military Knowledge*, published in 1946 in the U.K., became both a best seller (seven reprints) and a text book in a number of Commonwealth military training institutions. Since retirement in 1969 he has, among other pursuits, devoted himself to the study of, and writing widely on, general military science, military history and nuclear strategy.

Published Works

The Essentials of Military Knowledge	(1946)
The Campaign in Italy 1943-45	(1950)
The Campaign in Europe 1944-45	(1952)
The Malayan Campaign 1941-42	(1956)
War in the Deterrent Age	(1966)
The History of Indian Artillery	(1971)
The Lightning Campaign (*Indo-Pak War* 1971)	(1972)
Jammu and Kashmir Army	(1972)
Return to Sinai (*Arab-Israeli War* 1973)	(1974)
Our Army (*for Children*)	(1978)
Pakistan's Islamic Bomb	(1979)

First published in 1984



Note: Maps in the text are approximate and have been included only to illustrate the narrative.

Published by Major General D.K. Palit for
Palit & Palit 1/9, Shanti Niketan, and printed by Shakti Malik
at Hans Raj Gupta & Sons, Anand Parbat, New Delhi

FOREWORD

North-eastern India has always suffered from the disadvantage of being geographically remote from the centre of political power. The result has been a marked lack of knowledge in the rest of India of the peoples and the problems of that large, potentially rich, naturally beautiful area and of its most attractive people. Large parts of its territory are peopled by tribes who have never been part of the Indian mainstream and who were, under British rule, deliberately kept apart from the rest of the country for reasons both legitimate and illegitimate. That part of the area which formed the North-East Frontier Agency was not even administered during British rule. The consequence has been a totally insufficient integration of the tribes with the rest of the Indian community, giving rise to dissatisfactions of various kinds which have, in some parts, culminated in insurgencies and insurrections.

One of the instruments used for handling this situation and for spreading the administration into hitherto unadministered areas has been that fine body of men known as the Assam Rifles. I had the honour of being associated with this Force for 5½ years, as the Governor of Assam is still technically its Head, although none of its battalions are now used within the present borders of that State. I was greatly impressed by the *esprit de corps* of the officers and men of this Regiment, their excellent discipline, their high sense of devotion to duty, and in particular the manner in which they identified themselves with the area and people whom it was their duty to control and sometimes to chastise. The primary function of the Assam Rifles has always been internal but they have, in all post-Independence wars, been used alongside the Army in defence of our external borders and have distinguished t hemselves in that role.

Perhaps the most accurate and elegant tribute to this Force is to be found in the words of Verrier Elwin: "The custodians of law and order, the pioneers of every advance into the interior, the guardians of our borders and, above all, the friends of the hill people. Modestly, and without fuss, they have faced every possible hardship and difficulty, and thousands of villagers in the wildest areas think of them with affection and gratitude."

We as a people are correctly charged with not valuing our history and not maintaining and developing our institutions. The only history of the Assam Rifles hitherto written is one by an Englishman, Colonel Shakespear, over fifty years ago. We owe a debt of gratitude to Major General Palit that he should now have produced a most comprehensive and detailed history of this Regiment, bringing the story up-to-date. With great sympathy, clarity and elegance of language and obviously as a result of very hard labour, he has traced the development in detail of the Assam Rifles from their humble inception in 1835 as a body of 750 "ill-equipped, ill-paid, ill-trained and ill-armed" known as the Cachar Levy to its present strength of no less than 21 battalions of a highly disciplined and highly motivated force under the command of a Lieutenant General of the Indian Army. In the words of Verrier Elwin again: "May they long continue to provide the foundations of security and order in our border areas."

B.K. Nehru

Raj Bhavan
Jammu
15 December, 1983

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

When General Sushil Kumar first asked me to undertake the writing of this History I was reluctant to accept the task, principally because I had never served with the Force. I once had 5th Assam Rifles as part of my Brigade in Kameng Frontier Division; but that was twenty-five years ago. As Director of Military Operations in the early 1960s I had had much to do with the process of drawing the Assam Rifles into the Army's operational fold during the confrontations with the Chinese; but that experience had offered no first-hand contact with them. Furthermore, Assam Rifles headquarters in far away Shillong, from where most of the basic material would have to come, was geographically too remote from Delhi to permit a smoothly running schedule for research.

Fortunately, Sushil was not the man to take no for an answer easily. I am glad that his constant arm-twisting eventually resulted in breaking down my resistance—because working at this task for the past three years has been a rewarding experience, affording me considerable insight into a particularly interesting aspect of India's military history concerning a region and a people who, even if they have been remote from the mainstream of past history, today play a prominent and ever-increasing part on the Indian scene.

The difficulties I had anticipated in tackling the assignment would indeed have been formidable but for the generous and friendly support I received at all times from Colonel "Joe" Commissariat, than whom there lives no greater enthusiast, and perhaps authority, on Assam Rifles customs and lore. Associated with the Force for long periods during and after his Army career, himself personally involved with the tribal people and possessing a research-oriented intellect, he has been an invaluable help to me in my task. No matter was ever too burdensome, no detail too trivial for him to

devote his energies towards the acquisition of sources and data. I owe him a debt that I can acknowledge only in part.

The first four chapters covering the period 1825-1920 are a condensation of the Force's history written by Colonel L.W. Shakespear and published nearly sixty years ago. I hope I have not presented this section in such detail that future officers will abandon their study of the Colonel's history and make do with the paraphrased version included in mine. That certainly was not the intention.

I must acknowledge the use I have made of a draft history of the Force prepared by Major K. Brahma Singh some years ago but never formally approved. It was "Joe" Commissariat who drew my attention to this work. He advised me of its shortcomings but quite rightly recommended it as a sequential framework on which to develop the narrative. I have done so and am indebted to the Major.

Some aspects of the part played by the Assam Rifles in "V" Force during the Second World War are nowhere on record in India—perhaps because elements of the Force operated under Force 136, which was directed by the War Office in London. For instance, previous attempts to chronicle the Assam Rifles story, such as Major Brahma Singh's, make no mention of the Assam Rifles' operations across the Chindwin—or on the marches of the Salween, when they were parachuted into Karen territory. For details of these exploits I am indebted mainly to two stalwarts of those days—both wartime soldiers—Lieut-Colonel N. Stanley, D.S.O., O.B.E., and Major J. Bowen, O.B.E., M.C. (erstwhile J. Gebhart), both of whom I was able to contact in England through "Joe" Commissariat's good offices.

Fortunately the project suffered no setback when Sushil was posted back to an army assignment, for the next incumbent, Lieut-General J.K. Puri, turned out to be an old colleague who had been a B.M. in my Division in the mid-'sixties. His support never flagged, even when it transpired that the cost of the project would exceed the budget initially agreed upon. As the then D.G. he has contributed a Director's Preface to this volume.

Lastly, to Governor B.K. Nehru for his all too kind Foreword, I tender my grateful thanks.

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DIRECTOR GENERAL'S PREFACE

The first and only history of the Assam Rifles was written by Colonel L.W. Shakespear, C.B., C.I.E., in 1929 and it covered the period from 1835 to 1924. Shakespear's book chronicled the growth, activities and achievements of this Force, which had been born as "Cachar Levy" in 1835 and, by the turn of the century, had come to be recognised as the "right arm of the civil and left arm of the military", in the rugged and turbulent north-eastern tribal regions of erstwhile Assam. The title of "Assam Rifles" that was conferred on the Force in 1917, in recognition of the contribution made by it during the First World War, was a hallmark of its reputation.

In the last sixty years or so since 1924, the Assam Rifles have had an even more chequered history and apart from many significant achievements, the Force has undergone many changes in its role, composition and employment. The story of all these events, of the rapid growth of Assam Rifles from five battalions in 1947 to twentyone battalions in 1968, and of its contribution to the development of North East India had remained untold. A need was, therefore, felt to bring the history of the Force up-to-date and it was decided that a new history of Assam Rifles be written from its very origin, to make it all available to the reader under one cover. This idea had germinated in the mind of my predecessor, Lt Gen Sushil Kumar, P.V.S.M., and credit goes to him for putting it into effect.

Maj Gen D.K. Palit, Vr.C., F.R.G.S., a distinguished writer on military affairs, was requested to undertake this mission of writing the history of Assam Rifles from the beginning to the 1980s. We are grateful to him for having accepted this challenging assignment and for the marvellous job he has done. The task of collecting and collating the available material was assigned to Colonel M.D. Commissariat (Retd),

popularly known as "Joe", who has had a long and intimate association with the Force. Joe had the difficult job of carrying out extensive research not only in the archives of North Eastern States and Union Territories, but also in the National Archives in New Delhi and the National Library in Calcutta, apart from gathering and compiling a horde of information and reports of historical value from the Ranges and units. Maj Gen Palit had the unenviable task of gleaning from all these documents what he needed for writing the history. He also carried out research of his own, particularly in the United Kingdom, where he met some old British officers who had served with the Force, and gathered from their fading memories of old age bits and pieces of information that could embellish and authenticate accounts of Assam Rifles' activities in the Second World War.

Our men are cut off from civilization and spend particularly the whole of their service in inhospitable and inaccessible areas, deep in the jungles or high on the snow-capped mountains, far and often forgotten. This history attempts to recount the saga of their sacrifices and service to the nation as 'Sentinels of the North East'. I hope all officers of the Force will read this book and will be inspired by the deeds of valour, self-sacrifice and chivalry recorded herein. It is worth remembering that for every one deed so recorded, there are perhaps ten more which have gone unnoticed and hence have not been mentioned in this book.

I can end this preface in no better way than by quoting Col Shakespear, whose words, written over fifty years ago, are as true today as they were then. May they ever remain so:

> The Assam Rifles will be ever ready when wanted, and will ever maintain their traditions of faithful service, progress and efficiency.

J.K. Puri
Lieutenant General
Director General Assam Rifles

Shillong
1 November 1983

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THE ORIGINS OF THE ASSAM RIFLES
(1824-1860)

ALTHOUGH the valley of the Brahmaputra later known as Assam formed an integral part of the political and cultural tradition of ancient Bharat, it seems to have drifted into a hazy limbo in middle-history; and came back into prominence only during the past two centuries. There was little cultural or other contact between the rest of India and the north-eastern corner of the sub-continent during the Moghul era. It was not until the early nineteenth century that Assam was drawn into the mainstream of India through the British colonial process; but even thereafter the specialised administration that was imposed on Assam and its hill tracts served to keep it socially and culturally isolated till very recent times.

Today the old area of "Assam" has been regrouped in seven different States and Union Territories, which together comprise one of the most economically important regions of the country. The sheer diversity of its political and social structure makes it a fascinating study for archaeologist, anthropologist and historian alike: and the political adjustments that are still in the process of being negotiated are a matter of the utmost importance to the security and integrity of India. It would be appropriate therefore to start this chronicle of the Assam Rifles with a brief history of the former province of Assam in whose service this Force was raised.

From references made to the north-eastern region in the Hindu epics, it is apparent that the area we now call Assam was not as culturally remote from the rest of the country as it later became. It figures prominently in Hindu mythology and early history. For instance, it was here that Kamdev, the god of love, is believed to have regained his original form after being burnt to ashes by Shiva's fiery glance for his presump-

tuousness; and hence the name Kamarupa for western Assam. In the Mahabharata Assam is referred to as Pragjyotisha; and modern Gauhati as Pragjyotishpur, a city against which Arjuna, charioted by Lord Krishna, led several forays—because its king, Bhagadatta, had thrown in his lot with the Kauravas.

Records of early history in the period following the great epics are almost non-existent. Tradition refers to a King Mahiranga (or Mairang) whose capital was located just south of modern Gauhati (Mairang Parbat); but no records of his rule exist. When the Chinese pilgrim Hsuan Tsang visited this region in about A.D. 640 he found a ruler with a Hindu name on the throne of Kamarupa. Shadowy kinglets succeeded one another thereafter, but the few contemporary records that exist are of doubtful accuracy. Other sources of history are: casual references in Burmese chronicles; coins from the later periods; and Moghul accounts of the wars of the 16th and 17th centuries. From these it is possible to discern or reconstruct the major landmarks of the history of the Brahmaputra valley.

The material prosperity of the fertile valley of the Brahmaputra attracted a number of invasions by hardier races from outside, mostly from the east or the north-east, who established their successive rules over the original inhabitants of Dravidian stock. The present tribal peoples of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, for instance, display social and cultural characteristics—and linguistic affinities—that link them to the Mong Khmers of Cambodia; they are almost certainly the remnants of an early invasion by these Indo-Chinese peoples. The Nagas, Kukis and Lushais, on the other hand, belong to a Tibeto-Burman race, as do the Abors and Miris, remnants of an invasion from the north-east, possibly originating in south-west China—though there is another school of thought that gives the Nagas and Kukis a south-east Asian origin, classing them as kinsmen of the Borneo Dyak and Malay peoples because of their common head-hunting propensities.

The last of the invaders of Assam were the Burmese Shans, known as Ahoms, who were to give their name to the country and rule it for centuries. They crossed the lower ranges at the head of the Brahmaputra valley, the Patkoi hills, and consolidated their power in Upper Assam. The tradi-

tional date of the first Ahom invasion according to their own chronicles is 1228, but students of Burmese history consider a date in the late 15th or early 16th century more probable. Certain it is that they at once came into conflict with the Cacharis, whom they absorbed, and the Nagas, whom they defeated into submission.

For many years the Ahoms maintained close contact with their Burmese kinsmen, but gradually Hindu influence began to replace cultural affinities with Burma. The Ahom King Suhungmung, whose traditional dates are 1497-1539, took an additional Hindu name, as did his successors. Suklengmung (1539-52) was the first Ahom king to mint coins; and these provide a useful gloss to the records of his and subsequent reigns. Late in the 17th century King Rudra Singh became an orthodox Hindu and in the reign of his successor Sib Singh (1714-44) Hinduism became the predominant religion.

In 1527 a Moghul force from Gaur invaded Assam for the first time but was defeated by the eastern Assamese peoples, probably the Kochs of present day Cooch Behar. Soon thereafter the Ahoms began expanding westwards from Upper Assam, pushing the Cacharis before them, first to Maibang and then even further westwards till most of the Brahmaputra valley came under their tutelage.

Between 1615 and 1669 the Moghuls despatched several expeditions to invade Assam but none was able to make much headway against the Ahom King Chakradhvaj's forces. The last of the expeditions, reportedly comprising 30,000 infantry, 18,000 cavalry and 15,000 archers was sent by Emperor Aurangzeb in 1669, under the command of his most able General, Raja Ram Singh. This force met with some success at first but the guerilla tactics adopted by the defenders and the difficult, unfamiliar terrain combined to frustrate any worthwhile ambitions of the Moghul commander. Eventually it was Chakradhvaj's successor, Udayaditya, who forced General Ram Singh to retire. The Moghuls made no further attempt to conquer Assam.

Extension of British Rule

Ahom rule had always been distracted by frequent rebel-

lions. By 1792, during a particularly troublesome period, King Gaurinath appealed to the British in Calcutta for support. A small force of 360 sepoys was sent up from Fort William under the command of a Captain Welsh, who had no difficulty in restoring a semblance of order. However, the force was recalled in 1792 in conformity with Governor General Sir John Shore's non-intervention policy; and chaos returned to Assam. In 1816 a claimant to the throne sought support from the Burmese, who were only too glad to send a force whose main preoccupation however was to plunder the country and take the loot back to Burma.

In 1819 further court intrigues led to King Chandrakant being deposed and the throne occupied by Purinder Singh. Again an appeal was made to the Burmese, this time by Chandrakant. Again the Burmese intervened; they reinstalled Chandrakant as king but thereafter refused to vacate Assam. Instead, they imposed a rule of terror in the country. Chandrakant then turned to the British who, despite their reluctance to intervene, decided to take a hand in Assam's affairs.

The British assembled a force at Goalpara and entered the Assam plains. At the same time a direct invasion of Burma was undertaken by a larger force formed from the Bengal and Madras armies which, under the command of Brigadier-General Sir Archibald Campbell, invaded Burma at two points—at Rangoon and on the Arakan Coast. The war lasted two years, at the end of which the Burmese sued for peace and Assam was handed over to the British. (Manipur, however, was not annexed at this stage. It was not until 1851 that the British extended their administration to this state.)

After a few years of direct rule the British handed back a part of the country—the north-eastern end of the Brahmaputra valley—to Purinder Singh, retaining the areas now known as Nowgong, Darrang, Kamrup and Goalpara districts. However, in 1839 the British decided to expand their domain and set in motion a series of annexations. Purinder was finally deposed for alleged misrule and Assam became a part of Bengal, an arrangement that continued till 1919 (except for the period of the partition of Bengal, 1905-13, during which Assam and East Bengal were united under a separate Lieutenant-

Governor). Under the Government of India Act of 1919, Assam became a separate province in 1919.

British rule brought sound administration to the region and with it economic growth and prosperity. The tea industry, started by a Mr Bruce, with the first tea garden planted at the mouth of the Kundil river near Sadiya in 1832, soon spread all over Assam and in time became one of the principal sources of wealth not only for the province but for the country as a whole because of its large-scale export to Britain. In fact it was mainly for the protection of the tea gardens bordering tribal territory that units of armed police, forbears of the Assam Rifles, were initially raised.

The Brahmaputra and Surma valleys, the alluvial flat lands of Assam, are bordered by forest-clad mountain ranges—the Great Himalayas to the north, the Naga, Patkoi and Manipur hills to the east, the Lushai hills to the south and Khasi, Jaintia and Garo hills in the middle. Most of the tribes inhabiting these hill tracts were wild and unruly and often led forays into the plains for loot, spreading arson and pillage in their wake. These raids were a serious threat to the tea industry.

Following the end of the war with Burma the number of troops in Assam was gradually reduced till only four regular battalions remained (forbears of the 6th and 8th Gorkhas). In order to meet the threat from the hill tribes it was decided to raise a "Levy" (or militia body) as a separate force under the civil government and distinct from both the regular army and the armed police. The proposed Levy was to be placed on a better military footing than the police in order to enable them to replace regular troops in certain parts of the tribal border. It was to be officered by police officials and would thus serve as a cheap semi-military body. The men were to be drawn from the armed Bengal Civil Police, at first comprising all classes, chiefly from Bengal.

The Cachar Levy

The first unit of the new organisation, the Cachar Levy, was raised during 1834-35 by Mr Grange, the civilian officer-in-charge at Nowgong. It consisted of 750 all ranks—Inspectors,

Head Constables and Constables. This was the earliest embodied unit of what eventually developed into the fine force now called the Assam Rifles. In 1838 a similar body known as the Jorhat Militia was raised at Jorhat for the security of the Sibsagar border.

The main duty of the Cachar Levy was to guard the eastern frontier of Assam from the Brahmaputra river at Nowgong southwards to Silchar. An administrative headquarters was established at Asaloo (25 kilometres east of Haflong). The troops were located as follows: strong detachments at the two extremities—Nowgong and Silchar; smaller posts located along this 400 kilometre line at places where jungle routes from the Naga hills led down into the plains. Post commanders were responsible for patrolling these routes and the surrounding jungles to prevent tribal raiding parties from reaching the tea gardens and other settlements in the plains. The Cachar Levy was not deployed for the security of the border with Burma, that task being allotted to regular Army battalions assisted by the civil armed police of Bengal.

A typical post consisted of a moat-cum-earthwork perimeter, with a loop-holed palisading along the top of the parapet. Since the Commandant of the Cachar Levy, Mr Grange, was also the principal civil affairs official at Nowgong, it was not possible for him or other British officials to make frequent visits to the posts. The junior commanders had therefore to operate mostly at their own initiative, a responsibility which they met adequately and thus created a tradition of junior leadership which continued into the Assam Rifle battalions of later years.

Soon after the raising of the Levy the British undertook the first of a series of excursions into Naga territory. It was not only that the Nagas needed to be restrained from their raiding propensities; a more important reason was that the British had learned that the Raja of Manipur was planning to incorporate the Naga hills into his kingdom and the Naga tribes under his rule; and of this the British did not approve. The Government in Calcutta decided to bring the Naga tribes under British influence instead.

To this end Mr Grange was directed to conduct the first expedition into the strongest and most turbulent area of the

Angami Nagas in 1839. He set out with 50 men from his Levy, bolstered by a small detachment of regular troops from 1st Assam Light Infantry, and entered the Naga hills in the region west of Kohima. He encountered hostility *en route*, but there was not much actual fighting. The force was too small to achieve anything more than a determined flag march.

In 1840 Mr Grange took out another expedition, this time with a stronger force. He marched to a point south of Kohima to keep a rendezvous with a detachment of Manipuris with whom he was to enter into talks about the delineation of the boundary: but the two forces missed each other. On his way back to Dimapur Grange's force was much harassed by armed Nagas. Both sides suffered heavily and Grange was forced to withdraw to Dimapur for the care of his wounded. He later returned to the hills and carried out effective punitive measures, burning two rebellious Naga villages.

The Nagas had been suitably punished; but the British realised that though armed with only primitive weapons they were a formidable foe and subjugating them would be a costly process. The concept of routine annual expeditions deep into the hills was therefore dropped, though trans-border visits were maintained in order to establish rapport with, and acquire influence over, the clans—and thus to frustrate Manipuri interference.

The southern end of the protective line began to liven up in the early 1840s, the Kuki and Lushai tribes starting to raid into South Cachar from across the Tripura border. Punitive measures undertaken during 1841-49 brought a semblance of order into the area; and in 1850 a small body of local Kukis 250 strong was formed into the Kuki Levy. The Kukis are a sturdy, self-reliant tribe originally from the Lushai Hills, who were gradually pushed north into the South Cachar area. They are a united people, unlike the Nagas who, being essentially egalitarian by nature, do not easily take to a tribal structure. Also, Kukis are good fighters, expert with bows and arrows, and were somewhat feared by the Nagas.

A period of road-building in North Cachar and the Surma Valley resulted in increased trade with the tribal peoples, though occasional trans-border raids continued. Further to facilitate trade a small Levy post was opened at Samguting,

an old village on the track from Dimapur to Kohima.

The fortunes of the Cachar Levy during these years were linked to those of Captain Butler, who had taken over as Principal Assistant at Nowgong in 1845. This officer was ultimately to have the distinction of not only himself serving with the Cachar Levy for a continuous period of twenty years but also of being succeeded by his son in the same appointment after a gap of just three years following his retirement.

Captain Butler introduced a number of schemes for the betterment of the Levy. He obtained for the men a uniform different from the armed police—black serge trousers and jackets with white metal buttons for winter wear. The weapons and accoutrement were of the Waterloo pattern, that is, the old muzzle-loading Brown Bess musket with a long bayonet, two broad black leather cross-belts supporting the bayonet on one side and a large expense pouch on the other, both kept from swinging loose by a black leather waist belt. A short sword attached to the belt was also carried (until about 1865 when the more useful *khukri* was substituted). The headdress was the black Kilmarnock cap; and for footwear, if worn at all, local style shoes. Spare kit and rations were carried on the back in a bundle wrapped in a sheet, hillman fashion. Butler also made a change in the recruitment policy of the Levy by enlisting Nepalis, Cacharis and Kukis as they were better suited for hill and jungle operations.

Naga intransigence in the winter of 1849-50 led to the biggest expedition to date—about 200 men from both the regular Army and the Levy being sent into Naga territory under Captain Vincent. It carried out punitive measures as far south as Kohima. Later Major Fouquet took command of the column, which was reinforced by 500 regulars and 200 Militia and Levy and supported by two mountain guns and two mortars. Heavy casualties were inflicted on the Nagas in a pitched battle in front of Khonoma village, after which the village was put to the torch.

While the bulk of Major Fouquet's force returned to the plains, a detachment was left behind under Captains Vincent, Blake and Reid to make a more protracted tour in Angami territory in order to punish certain other villages which had sent men to fight against the British. A major battle was fought at

Kekrima, in the course of which a massed body of Naga spearmen charged the British force. About 250-300 of them were killed, Vincent's force losing only 3 killed and 20 wounded.

For a year or two this visitation had its effect, but soon the raiding started again. Thereafter, under Butler's advice it was decided to leave the tribes alone, as the great expense of the military expeditions could not be justified. The post at Samguting was abandoned and Dimapur evacuated. This passive policy lasted for twelve years during which the tribesmen were able to raid the plains at will. It was not until 1865 that the line of control was pushed forward once more to Dimapur and Samguting. The new salient was placed under command of a British Officer who was given power of decision for immediate punitive action. In 1868, it was young Captain Butler, son of the former Commandant, who took command of this salient.

In about 1852 it was decided that operational command and control of the 400-kilometre line then held by the Cachar Levy was not feasible from a single headquarters at Nowgong. The old Cachar Levy was split in two: the portion in the North Cachar hills was increased in strength and placed under operational command of a British Civil Officer based at Asaloo. Its name was changed to "The Frontier Police of North Cachar Hills". The Northern part of the force was amalgamated with the Jorhat Militia and placed under Nowgong, and became the forbear of 3rd Assam Rifles.

In 1863 the Kuki Levy was merged with the North Cachar Frontier Police. The combined unit was named "The Cachar Frontier Police" and made responsible for the maintenance of law and order in all the border areas of Cachar. It was later again renamed, this time as "The Surma Valley Frontier Police". The Surma Valley F.P., combining with the Chittagong Hill Tracts Police Force (later known as "The Lushai Hills Military Police Battalion"), became the forbears of 1st Assam Rifles.

The Central and Northern Tracts

It is time now to turn to the central range of hills that stretch from the Mymensing district in the west to North

Cachar—the Garo, Khasi and Jaintia Hills. We have already made mention of the tribes that inhabit the latter areas, known as the Syntengs, who are of Mong Khmer stock. The Garo tribe, on the other hand, belong to the Tibeto-Burman ethnic group, with a language distinct from that of the others. Their country is entirely mountainous, rising to 1,300 metres, and more densely wooded than the Khasi-Jaintia region.

The Garos are not a warlike people: between 1837 and 1861 only a few minor raids were carried out by them and these were easily dealt with. In 1866 the Garo tract was taken over as a separate district under a British officer at Tura. In 1879 a force of Frontier Police 300 strong (Nepalis and Cacharis) was raised and located at Tura. In 1882, when the Frontier Police was reorganised into Military Police Battalions, the Tura unit became "The Garo Hills Military Police Battalion". In 1908 its strength was reduced, 200 men being sent to the Dacca M.P. Battalion. In 1913, the detachment remaining in Tura was absorbed into the Darrang M.P. Battalion, the forbear of 4th Assam Rifles.

The Synteng tribes of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills had remained peaceful since their subjugation in 1829, but in 1860 they suddenly rose in open rebellion, in protest against the new taxation system and in defence of tribal funeral rites which they felt were being interfered with by the police. A large force under Colonel Rutherford, consisting of three regular battalions, a military police battalion and 200 men of the Nowgong and North-Cachar F.P., supported by a battery of artillery, was sent to relieve Jowai, which had been besieged by the rebels. It took three weeks of hard fighting, with many casualties on both sides, before Jowai was relieved. It was not until 1863, by when every valley and jungle had been searched for rebel leaders, that the trouble in these hills was finally stamped out. The Khasis, essentially a peaceable people, gave no further trouble for years to come.

The civil administration headquarters for this area, originally organised from Dacca, had for years been located at Cherrapunji, which (as all students of geography know) is the place with the heaviest rainfall in the world. Clearly this was unsuitable for a government centre and in 1864 the administrative seat was moved to Shillong, which though only 50

kilometres distant, received much less rainfall and was a far more pleasant place to live in. In fact, after another two years the seat of the Assam Government itself was shifted from Gauhati to Shillong.

We turn next to that part of the Assam frontier which in our times has been of such great interest and seen so much military activity, that is, the northern frontier—stretching from Bengal in the west to Burma in the east. (This region later came to be known as the North-East Frontier Agency and today forms a separate State of the Union, Arunachal.)

After the annexation of Assam the British had extended their administration up to the foothills, but left the mountains, right up to the Himalayan watershed, to the tribal people. Some of the latter had taken advantage of the confusion that reigned during the process of annexation to encroach into the plains (south of what came later to be known as the Inner Line). The gradual ejection of those tribal settlements and the general security of the plains was the responsibility of the regular army aided by the civil police of Bengal, there being no special body of Militia during those early years.

The peoples that inhabited the northern tracts were: the Bhutanese in the far west; the Akas, north of Darrang district; the Daphlas and Miris, north of Tezpur; the Abors, in the hills between the Subansiri and Dibang rivers; and the Mishmis, in the hills bordering North Burma. (This list leaves out the Monpas of the Towang area, who had no access to the plains except as occasional traders, through Eastern Bhutan.) Although none of these tribes, except the Abors, was so persistently hostile and truculent as the Angami Nagas or the Lushais, the history of this part of the frontier records troubles of varying degrees of intensity right up to the 1920s.

There was some resistance from the Bhutanese during the early years of the British administration. Steps were taken to push tribal settlers in the plains back into Bhutanese territory and a series of minor annoyances kept the border sensitive. In 1837 and again in 1863 missions under British military officers had to be despatched to Punaka, the Bhutanese capital. The high-handed behaviour of the Bhutanese government towards the second mission resulted in the Government sending a strong

force of British and Indian troops (eight battalions in all), supported by cavalry, artillery and Sappers and Miners, into Bhutan. Severe fighting occurred at Daling, east of Darjeeling, and later at Dewangiri in Eastern Bhutan north of Rangiya. It was not until 1866 that the Bhutanese finally agreed to comply with the British terms regarding the delineation of the border.

In the Darrang area the Akas were generally peaceful though on one occasion, in 1830, they attacked a detachment of the 1st Assam Light Infantry. A blockade of the hills was deemed sufficient punishment and this kept them quiet for a number of years. Similarly, the Daphlas and Miris gave only minor trouble. Only on one occasion, in 1817, was a strong force of regular Assam Light Infantry men, supported by a detachment from the Nowgong F.P., sent up into the hills to punish the tribes concerned. Like the Akas, the Daphlas and Miris were also a peaceable people and made very little trouble. (Terms such as "punish the tribes" are taken from the records of the British period and are expressions of colonial attitudes. More often than not the expeditions that carried out these tasks were the vanguards of a policy of expansion of territory. This was clearly the case in the Lushai Hills, as will become obvious as our story unfolds.)

It is the Abors who have been the most troublesome of all the northern tribes. The first major foray into the plains was made by them in 1848 when, to assert their claim to a share in the gold and fish taken from rivers flowing through their land, they carried off several plain dwellers. A punitive expedition led by Capt Vetch resulted only in retaliatory raids and other outrages by the Abors. Even a blockade of the hills failed to curb Abor hostile actions. In the end a major expedition was mounted in 1868-69 which, though it failed in its first effort, succeeded in its second. A force under Colonel Hannay and five other British officers consisting of 300 men of 2nd A.L.I., a detachment from the Naval Brigade (Indian Marines) and Nowgong F.P. carried out a determined assault against a series of well-prepared Abor stockades. The Abors fought back stoutly, taking heavy punishment in the process but inflicting significant losses on the British. It was only when the stockades were captured after heavy fighting that they made submission. In subsequent years a scheme of road

construction was put into effect and this led to friendly agreements with the hill people which were honoured for a number of years.

It had become obvious that the Abors were a more warlike people than the other tribes along the northern border and that a stronger force would have to be based at Dibrugarh than just a detachment of Nowgong F.P. In 1864 a special F.P. force was raised for service along the borders of Sadiya and Lakhimpur districts. This force was given the title of "The Lakhimpur Armed Police Battalion"—composed of Cacharis, Shans and Nepalis—and was the forbear of the 2nd Assam Rifles.

The Mishmis to the east of the Abors are a tribe that originate from the same stock as the others in the northern region but now have their own language and customs. On the whole their relations with the plainsmen have been well regulated. The only occasion when a punitive expedition had to be sent against them was in 1854 when one of their chiefs murdered two French missionaries. A small force from the A.L.I. and Shan volunteers made a forced march into the hills and, after a brisk engagement, captured the chief and brought him down to Dibrugarh to be hanged. Thereafter peace reigned in the Mishmi hills for nearly forty years.

Before we leave our geographical round of the Assam tribes, mention must be made of some of the Nagas that inhabit the area south of the Mishmis—in the mountains of the Singpho country south of Sibsagar and Jorhat. Although they are of the same ethnic stock as the Angamis, they are much less warlike and aggressive. Only in 1844 was it necessary to lead two minor expeditions (Jorhat Militia) into the hills to enforce quietude. In neither case do the records show any fighting having taken place and for many years it was found that a blockade of their hills was sufficient to bring the different tribes to reason when trouble seemed to be brewing.

There were some major changes in the organisation and administration of the Police and Militia forces during the 'sixties. A new body of Frontier Police was raised for the protection of the southern borders of Sylhet and Cachar by amalgamating the North Cachar F.P. and the Kuki Levy. The total strength was further increased by recruitment and the Cachar

Frontier Police was formed, later renamed the Surma Valley F.P.

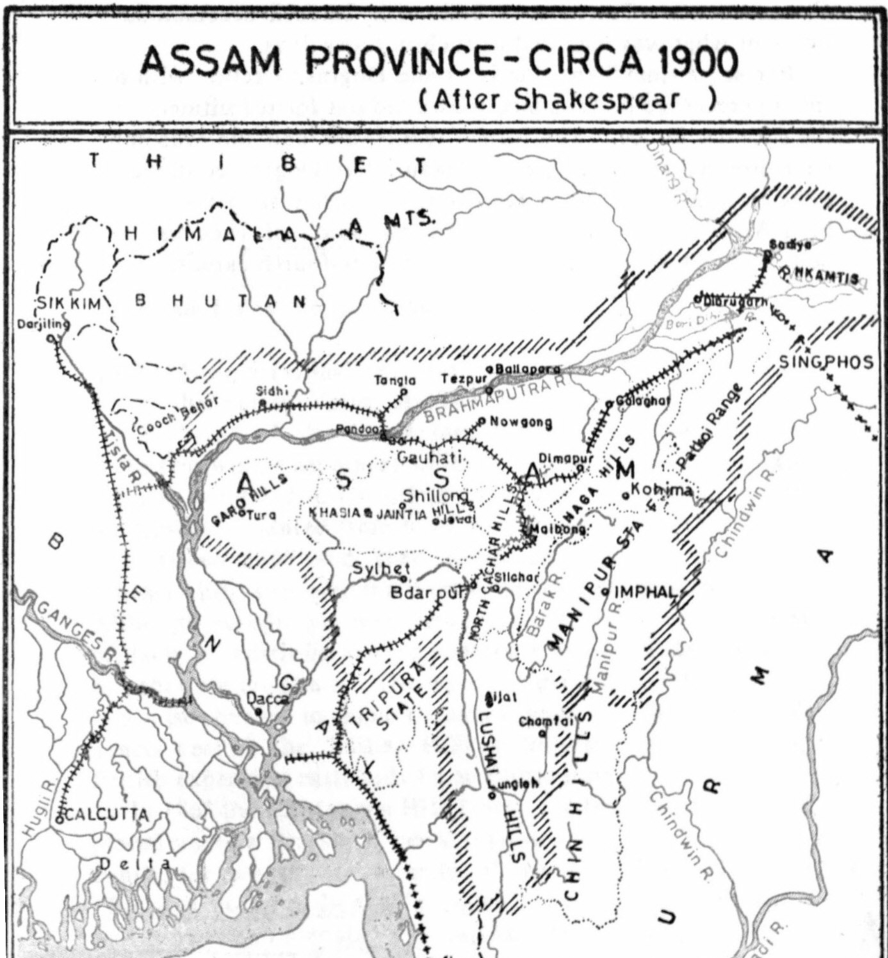
In 1865 a recruiting and training depot for all the Frontier Police was opened at Sylhet for the enlistment and training of Nepalis, Cacharis and Jaruas. In 1868 the F.P. uniform appears to have been changed to one of dark blue cloth with white piping. Some units adopted black puttees—others, brown canvas gaiters. Buttons were of white metal; a silver bugle adorned the Kilmarnock cap or the pugree. Black greatcoats were issued free to the men after 1879.

In the 1870s further changes were instituted, the most far-reaching being the reorganisation of the Frontier Police into separate para-military battalions, arranged territorially. Furthermore, in order to bring some sort of cohesion into the haphazard system of manning frontier posts, it was felt that all border posts should be taken over by the Frontier Police. Military units could thereby be further reduced in number. It was agreed that in order to carry out their duties effectively the Frontier Police would have to be strengthened, better trained and armed, and commanded by regular Army officers.

Existing units were thereupon reorganised into three battalions of "Assam Military Police"—one for the Naga Hills, one for the Sadiya tracts and one for the Surma Valley (Cachar)—each 750 strong. In addition a small battalion of 300 was raised for the Garo Hills. The first two were to be officered by regulars from the Army and the latter two by Police officers. It was decided, at the same time, that titles of ranks would thenceforth be as for the Army—Subedars, Jemadars, Havildars and Sepoys—with pay of rupees 150, 60, 16, and 8 per month respectively.

These changes were finally put into effect in 1882. Battalions wore their old uniforms till khaki was introduced in 1885. Thereafter each unit adopted its own distinctive silver buttons and cap badges, displaying the battalion's name. Indian Officers (Subedars and Jemadars) wore the *khukri* and the crossed-*khukris* badges of rank in place of stars. A winter uniform of khaki serge was introduced for some years but later given up for reasons of economy.

The whole force was placed under the Inspector General of Police—though great latitude was left in the hands of the


ASSAM PROVINCE - CIRCA 1900
(After Shakespear)
THIBET
HIMALAYA MTS.
SIKKIM
BHUTAN
Darjiling
Sidhi
Cooch Behar
Tista R.
Tangla
Tezpur
Ballapara
BRAHMAPUTRA R.
Sadiya
KHAMTIS
Dibrugarh
SINGPHOS
Golaghat
Nowgong
Pandoo
Gauhati
Dimapur
Patkoi Range
ASSAM
GARO HILLS
Tura
KHASIA & JAINTIA HILLS
Shillong
Jowai
NAGA HILLS
Kohima
Maibong
NORTH CACHAR HILLS
Sylhet
Badarpur
Silchar
Barak R.
MANIPUR STATE
IMPHAL
Manipur R.
Chindwin R.
BENGAL
GANGES R.
Dacca
TRIPURA STATE
Aijal
LUSHAI HILLS
Champai
Lungleh
CHIN HILLS
BURMA
Hugli R.
CALCUTTA
Delta
BAY OF BENGAL
Butidang
Akyab
Irrawadi R.
N

Commandants. Posts were rebuilt with barrack accommodation—or what was regarded as such in those days.

For some time Sikhs, Punjabis and Dogras, together with a small percentage of Muslims, were tried out for recruitment in the Frontier Police. The former two classes and the Muslims were dropped as unsuitable for Assam, but Dogras continued to be enlisted in the Naga Hills Battalion till just before the First World War. Eventually the composition of each battalion became three-fourths Gorkhas and one-fourth Jaruas.