

February 1945

By the end of January, the German Army was on retreat into Germany itself. On 13th February, the bombing raids on the German city of Dresden started, and many thousands of civilian lives were lost in the ensuing firestorm. On 16th February the Western Gazette told the story of Private Harry Machan, a native of Jersey who had escaped with his sister just before the Germans entered. She settled at Milborne Port, where she made many friends. His fiancé, however, was taken to Germany. Harry returned to Milborne Port after nearly five years in a prisoner of war camp in Poland; he had been captured on May 23rd, 1940. He spent years in the camp hospital on the clerical staff, having contracted an illness in 1941 which resulted in muscle wastage. He wrote, 'The camp I was in has now been overrun by the Russians. What has happened to my 620 pals I cannot say, but I can assure their mothers, wives and sweethearts that they are all in the best of spirits and good health.' He wanted the people of Britain to know how much the Red Cross and Y.M.C.A. had done, firmly believing that but for the Red Cross food parcels not 10% of the men in the camp would have lasted the five years.

The German threat to the UK was much more immediate and so the Far East became a secondary theatre lacking equipment and resources. The conflict did not affect or have the same level of resonance with the nation, but men from Milborne Port were serving there. Communications were difficult; letters, if they arrived and weren't lost at sea to Japanese attacks, took a long time to get through. Many British and Commonwealth servicemen had been in the Far East for a long time; by 1945 many had been in the region for the duration of the war.

The war in the Far East was initially a source of embarrassment as the Japanese defeated all the British and Commonwealth forces sent against them. Hong Kong fell in December 1941, then Malaya in January, Singapore in February and Burma in May, of 1942. The defenders, fell back up the Irrawaddy river, accompanied by tens of thousands of refugees, harassed and murdered by the Burmese population as they struggled to gain Indian soil. Among them were Bill and Nellie (Hilda) Mitchell who lived in 170 South Street in the 1960s and 70s. Bill had been Chief Engineer at Rangoon Power Station and they escaped capture by walking out of Burma.

In 1943, Lord Louis Mountbatten took over, and his influence obtained much needed air support for what now became the 14th Army, and re-supply by air became the norm for the forward troops. The Japanese, aware that the defenders had gained strength, launched an assault into Assam, aimed at capturing the key towns of Imphal, capital of the hill state of Manipur, and Kohima. For the first time the defenders stood firm, confident in their air support. Early in 1945, 14th Army continued to advance, no longer in the jungle but in the open plains of upper Burma.

In February 1945 a letter arrived from Lieutenant R. G. Dawson, to his parents at Milborne Port. His regiment was in action at the taking of Myitkyina, and after being landed by air at Myitkyina, had fought its way down through the jungles of Central Burma. He wrote, 'I hope you enjoyed your Christmas. We had quite good one, didn't do much work, and had duck for lunch. Since then we have been working very hard. Censorship regulations have been relaxed so that can give you quite lot of information. We had our preliminary bout at Myitkyina, but the Division started off at Hill 60, which is S.W. of Mogaung. Hill 60 was pretty tough, and the infantry had a rotten time in the monsoon, right up to Hopin. We had to keep the roads open, and it was heart-breaking job, I can tell you. A couple of days of sunshine and we would have a stretch of road really good, and then two hours of rain would make the whole thing a morass.' The letter continues in this vein until the recapture by the allies of Indaw and Katha, at which point he writes, 'There I must leave it for moves since then are still secret. Tell you about our work next time.'