



'Mad Mike' Calvert:

Unorthodox flair made him the ideal Chindit leader

## BRIGADIER MICHAEL CALVERT

**Brigadier Michael Calvert, DSO and Bar, wartime Chindit commander, died on November 26 aged 85. He was born on March 6, 1913.**

Michael Calvert was one of the most colourful and unorthodox characters thrown into prominence by the Second World War. He had an exceptional flair for analysing the unfamiliar and for devising counter-measures. His name will always be linked with the long-range penetration Chindit expeditions into Japanese-occupied Burma led by General Orde Wingate in 1943 and 1944.

James Michael Calvert was born at Rohtak near Delhi. His father had served as the acting Governor of the Punjab. He was educated at Bradfield from where he followed his brothers to the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich, in 1931, and was commissioned into the Royal Engineers in 1933, going the same year to St John's College, Cambridge, to read Mechanical Sciences. He won a Blue for swimming and boxed middleweight for the Army, subsequently becoming Army middleweight champion.

When Japan entered the war in December 1941, Calvert was the chief instructor at a jungle warfare school at Maymyo in Burma. Wingate met him there, having read a paper, *Operations of Small Forces Supplied and Supported by Air*, which Calvert had written. The two became firm friends. Calvert was probably the only man to whom Wingate gave serious attention. Others received only impatient audience.

The first Wingate expedition was carried out by the 77th (Indian) Brigade, divided into seven columns of 400 men. The ostensible objectives were Japanese communications, but Wavell, the C-in-C India, also wanted to test the validity of long-range penetration operations in the jungle and to take the initiative against the seemingly invincible Japanese.

Calvert's Number 3 Column was ordered to destroy two railway bridges at Nankan used to supply the Japanese 33rd Army facing the American General Stilwell's Chinese forces in the north. Calvert blew both bridges without a single casualty to his column. He then led it a hundred miles east and across the Irrawaddy, ambushing the enemy and leaving many dead.

Other columns were markedly less successful and the 77th Brigade returned to India in April 1943 having lost one third of its strength and much equipment. The strategic impact was barely perceptible, but the propaganda value was out of all proportion to the number of men involved. British troops had operated against the Japanese in the jungle and inflicted damage and casualties.

The second Chindit expedition comprising six brigades was launched on March 5, 1944. Calvert commanded the 77th (LRP) Brigade which led the fly-in to a landing site codename "Broadway" some 50 miles Northeast on Indaw. Many of the troop-carrying gliders crashed on landing or had to be diverted, as landing zones were blocked by trees felled by the enemy. But the 77th Brigade was established at "Broadway" by March 10 and an airstrip constructed to receive the follow-up brigades.

Although taken by surprise, the Japanese pulled together a force of divisional strength to counter the Chindit invasion and destroyed on the ground the handful of Spitfires based on Broadway. The enemy's attempts to over-run the Chindit-held areas failed. Calvert's brigade established a stronghold at "White City" astride the railway south of Mawlu and held it for two months against much stronger Japanese forces. But the offensive plan's overall cohesion had been lost following Wingate's death in an air crash near Imphal on March 24.

In April the Chindits were ordered north to bring pressure on the Japanese 33rd Army opposing Stilwell's Chinese at Mogaung. The monsoon had broken and conditions were vile. The columns were ravaged by malaria and typhus. Battle casualties amounted to 950 in the final six weeks of the campaign. When the 77th Brigade finally took Mogaung it was with a fighting strength of only 300 men of an original 3,500. The switch from guerrilla to conventional operations, for which the Chindits were inadequately armed or equipped, was primarily the cause.

Calvert commanded the 77th Brigade magnificently throughout the second Chindit expedition but the march on Mogaung was his finest hour. For his bravery and outstanding leadership in Burma in 1944 he received a bar to the DSO he had been awarded for courage as a column commander in the first expedition.

The Chindits were withdrawn to India for retraining in September 1944. Then, absurdly in view of his battle experiences, Calvert found himself evacuated to England with an Achilles tendon, injured in a football match. The Chindits were abruptly disbanded while he was in hospital but, as soon as he was fit, he was appointed to command the Special Air Service Brigade comprising British, Belgian and French units. The two British units (1 and 2 SAS) were detached for operations in northwest Europe but Calvert led the others on Operation Amherst in Holland and was awarded several Belgian and French decorations.

From the war's end in 1945 Calvert's life went steeply down hill. After a period as a lieutenant colonel with the Allied Military Government in Trieste, he was appointed to command the newly raised Malayan Scouts (SAS Regiment) in 1950. The communist insurgency in Malaya was already two years old and there was as yet no sign of the terrorists being eliminated.

The Scouts were formed to hunt them down in the jungle, but volunteers for the unit had been quickly assembled without any of the exacting selection techniques used by the modern SAS. The result was an ill-disciplined shambles, which brought neither operational success nor credit on Calvert. He was invalided home on medical grounds in June 1951.

He tried working in Australia, but drink dogged him. Then he began to write and lecture on guerrilla warfare and military history in 1969. He had published an acclaimed memoir of his war in Burma, *Prisoners of Hope*, in 1952, and appointment to a Research Fellowship at Manchester University in 1971 to write *The Pattern of Guerrilla Warfare* appeared to be the long-sought breakthrough, but the book was never finished. He published *Slim as a General* in 1972, and many articles on military and political topics. For a time he worked as a gardener.