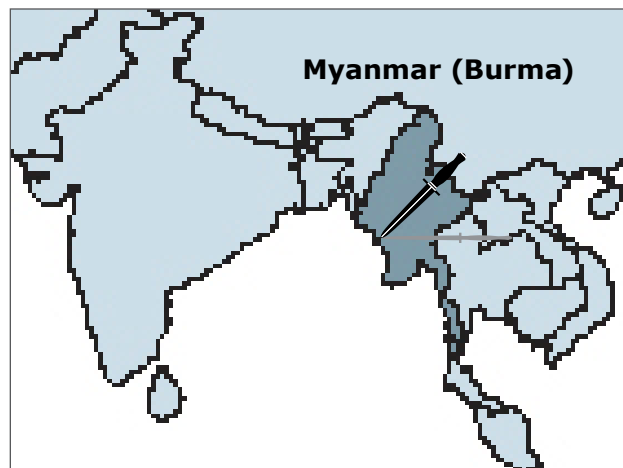


The OSS Maritime Unit on the Arakan Coast of Burma

by Kenn Finlayson



“THERE were few less desirable places in which to fight a campaign,” wrote Lieutenant General Sir Geoffrey Evans of the Arakan coast of Burma.¹ The Arakan ran south from the Indian frontier along the Burmese coast for 120 miles to the town of Akyab, which marked the furthest advance up the coast by the Japanese Imperial Army. Riven by rivers and chaungs resembling the bayous of Louisiana, the Arakan coast was penetrable only during the summer dry season. The area became a mosquito- and leech-ridden swamp from October to May, when the monsoon dumped over two hundred inches of rain on the land. During that time, access to most of the coast was restricted to watercraft.

The British, established in the region since the days of the *Raj*, possessed extensive facilities in India and Ceylon from which to launch operations against the Japanese in the Arakan. Joining this effort was the Maritime Unit (MU) of the United States’ Office of Strategic Services (OSS).

Lieutenant (LT) Fisher Howe, U.S. Naval Reserve (USNR) arrived in the South East Asian Command (SEAC) Theater in February of 1944 with the mission to recruit and train a maritime group capable of infiltrating agents into hostile territory, conduct reconnaissance, and execute small-scale sabotage operations.² General William O. Donovan, Director of the OSS, promised Lord Louis Mountbatten, the theater commander, that the OSS would provide troops from the maritime unit to

augment the British intelligence gathering effort. Neither the British nor the United States had sizeable combat power in the theater and the addition of the OSS and their counterparts in the British Special Operations Executive was important.

Fisher Howe estimated that to accomplish the missions promised by Donovan, he would need four fast surface craft with crews; at least thirty of the trained MU swimmers; a like number of small boat (kayaks

and rubber rafts) operational men; and a headquarters staff for administration, supply, and operations. On 15 May 1944, a cable went back to Washington for an MU swimming group. Up to this time, Howe was the sole representative of the MU in SEAC, and he industriously built up connections and borrowed individuals from other OSS branches to further the preparation for the arrival of the personnel.

The primary base for MU operations was established on the island of Ceylon (Sri Lanka), initially at the harbor town of Trincomalee. The British maintained an extensive dock and maintenance facility there, and a substantial portion of their fleet in the theater. Howe succeeded in establishing close working relationships with the other U.S. and Allied agencies in the theater, and he contributed his expertise to a number of missions of a maritime nature. Ill health forced Fisher Howe to return to Washington in July 1944, and LT Kenneth Pier, USNR, replaced him. Pier had already been in the SEAC Theater for a considerable time, assigned to the Navy’s Field Photographic Office. His assumption of command of the Maritime Unit coincided with the arrival of Swimmer Group 1 under the command of LT William Horrigan, USNR, with thirty swimmers and assorted support personnel. Group 1 was followed in August with the arrival of Swimmer Group 2 under Lieutenant Junior Grade John Archbold, USNR.

Prior to the arrival of the forces and his own departure, Howe began to look for a more suitable site for the training and operations of the unit. Training of native agents



initially took place twelve miles outside Trincomalee at a small outpost called "Camp Y." In June 1944, the MU moved across the island to the southwest corner and established a base at Galle, about seventy miles south of Colombo. This became the central training facility for the MU, where native agents were introduced to basic demolitions training, the use of the folboat (a collapsible kayak-type craft), infiltration, and intelligence gathering. The natives were recruited from throughout the theater, and the MU personnel trained Chinese, Burman, Thai, Malay, and Sumatran agents, few of whom spoke English. Galle remained the primary training center for the MU for the remainder of the war.

The facilities at Galle were inadequate for the fleet of surface ships that the MU acquired. To provide access to the British repair facility at Trincomalee, the MU prepared a small facility adjacent to the main harbor, known as Dead Man's Cove. From here the ships of the MU fleet set sail on their various missions to the Arakan Coast, thirteen hundred miles across the Bay of Bengal.

The earliest missions out of Ceylon involved the infiltration of native agents trained at Camp Y. For these missions, the OSS depended on the use of British Royal Navy submarines or Catalina PBY flying boats to carry the agents to the coast of Burma or Indonesia for insertion. Between 1 January 1944 and 23 May 1945, thirty-six missions were run against the coasts of Burma, Thailand, Sumatra, and the North Andaman Islands, half of which used submarines for insertion. The British Navy proved to be willing partners in the various OSS projects, although its shop-worn fleet of submarines often experienced mechanical difficulties in reaching the Burmese coast.

While in support of Operation DURIAN I, the long haul from Trincomalee across the Bay of Bengal proved too much for the aged HMS *Severn*. Eighteen hours out of port, the port engine on the submarine died, shortly followed by the refrigeration and air conditioning systems. As a result, the temperature inside the submarine soared, spoiling the ship's food and roasting the occupants. Stormy conditions on the surface kept the vessel submerged and when it finally arrived in position, three of the four motor launches failed to operate and the fourth capsized. At this point, the captain of the *Severn* scrubbed the mission and the vessel limped back to Trincomalee.

When missions did not have to be aborted, the common practice of submarines was to surface near the coast. The operational teams positioned the rubber rafts manned by the native agents and their OSS handlers on the forward dive planes. The submarine then dove and held its position offshore until a previously determined rendezvous time when the OSS operatives would return.

During one such mission, Ripley II, as the submarine cruised on the surface a large native prau was sighted. To prevent compromising of the mission, the submarine gave chase and overtook the vessel, which proved to be a fishing boat. The crew was taken into custody and proved to be "five Sumatrans and one large monkey. . . . The five Sumatrans were not intelligent and no information was obtained except that the monkey was trained to pick coconuts and was capable of gathering six hundred in a day."

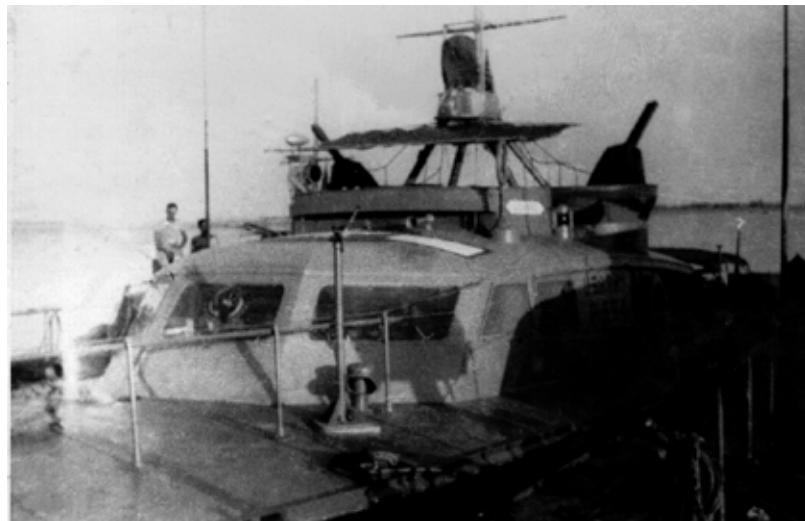
The use of the Catalina PBY Flying Boats extended the range and speed of infiltration at the expense of the size of the teams and amount of cargo. By the fall of 1944, the Maritime Unit recognized the need to move its base of operations closer to the Burmese coast and, with this in mind, Pier orga-



The Catalina PBY-5A "Flying Boat" was used extensively to infiltrate agents and OSS personnel along the Burma coast. The aircraft could cover greater distances more quickly than submarines or surface vessels, though at the expense of a greatly reduced payload.

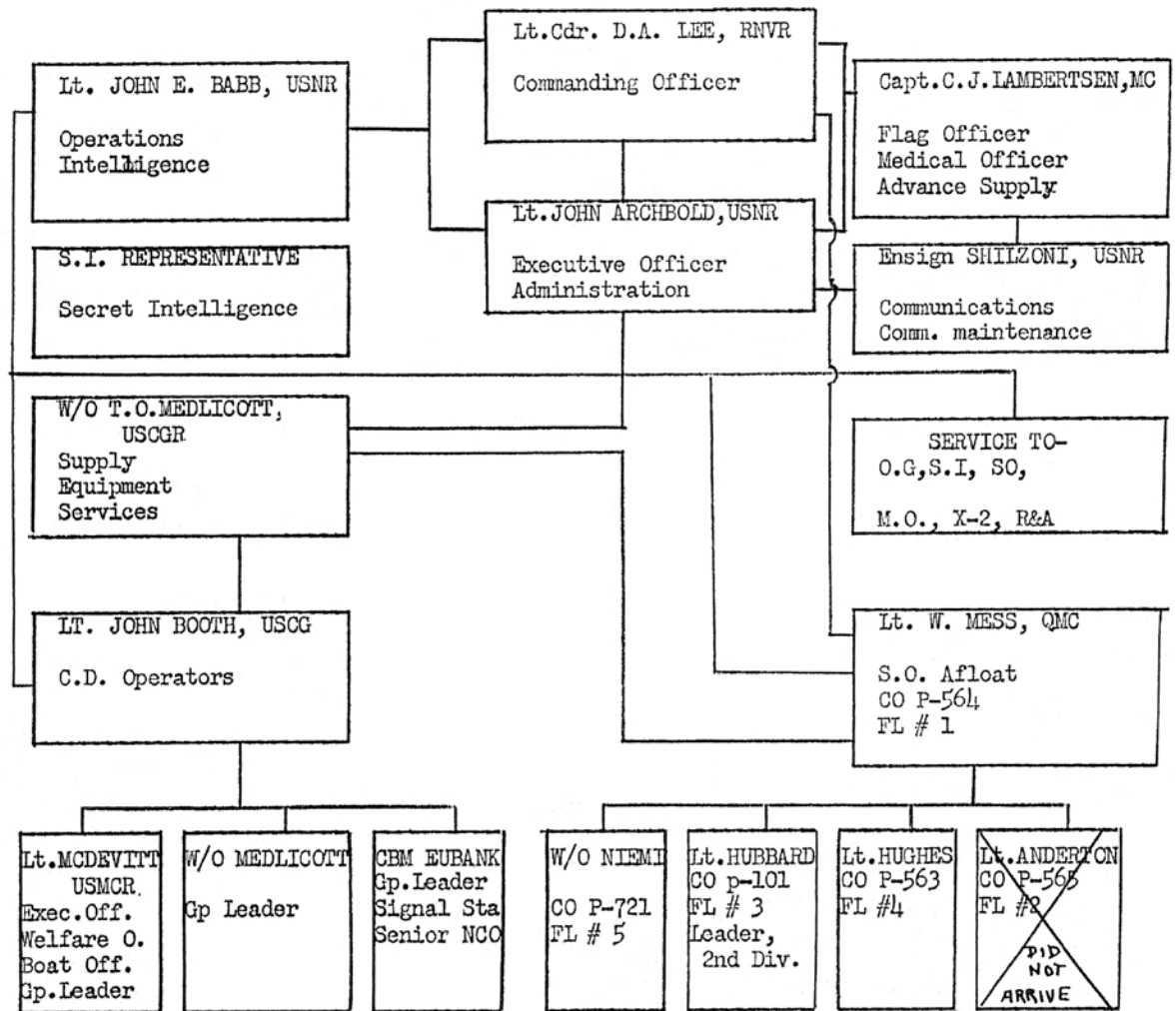


The three eighty-five-foot Air Rescue Boats formed the heart of the Maritime Unit fleet. Despite inadequate range and noisy operation, the boats were the principle craft for infiltrating agents and OSS personnel on the Arakan coast.



One of the three 85-foot Air Rescue Boats in the Maritime Unit P-564 operated out of Akyab after moving across the Bay of Bengal from Dead Man's Cove. When the OSS Maritime Unit ceased operations in the Spring of 1945, P-564 with P-563 returned to Calcutta and passed into the service of the British.

This diagram depicts the organization of the Maritime Unit in December 1944. Operations were centered in Ceylon and spread across the Bay of Bengal to Akyab on the Arakan Coast of Burma. P-565, under Lieutenant Anderson, ultimately joined the unit.



nized a reconnaissance mission to the Mergui Archipelago, a collection of islands south of Akyab, in September 1944.

Two PBVs from British Special Duty Squadron 628 supplied the aircraft to land an OSS team on Chance Island. Pier accompanied the team comprised of First Lieutenant Gregory Coptoulis, Second Lieutenant James Fine, and "Chee Chee" the Chinese radio operator. The PBV touched down in a quiet cove at Chance Island and the team cautiously began to prepare the rubber boats for departure. Crewmen armed with submachine guns took up positions on the wings and scanned the shore. The crew prepared to disembark. "At this time, Lieutenant Fine moved one of the submachine guns in the rubber boat, catching the trigger, with the result that five or six shots were fired before the gun could be freed. Fortunately, the bullets passed under the tail section of the airplane and no harm was done." After waiting a nervous two hours, the boats were launched and the Catalina flew safely back to Trincomalee.

The displacement across the Bay of Bengal shortened the approaches to the Burma coast and coincided with the advance of the British 15th Corps into Burma. The second Arakan campaign saw the British move south along the coast and eventually overcome the Japanese defenses that blocked the advance. From this point on, the MU depended largely on its own fleet of fast surface boats to insert agents and deliver operational groups to the various islands and coves along the Arakan coast.

The first two vessels arrived in December 1944. The Army Air Rescue Boats, P-563 and P-564, were 85 feet long powered by twin gasoline engines. Later, another 85-foot

"P" boat, P-565; two 63-foot craft, P-721 and P-1011; and P-1012, a 42-foot vessel were added to the fleet. The Air Rescue craft, notably the 85-foot vessels, proved to be less than ideally suited for the mission of clandestine insertion.

Originally designed with efficient Chrysler Royal Crown engines that provided a range of twenty-five hundred miles, the boats arrived with Packard engines that only gave a maximum operating range of five hundred miles. The Packard engines ran on one hundred-octane aviation grade fuel, which tethered operations to ports in the vicinity of airfields or procured from tankers. The boats were noisy and ill designed for use in shallow water. As noted in the unit after action report, "a boat carrying thirty-eight hundred gallons of one hundred-octane fuel is at all times a highly inflammable and dangerous craft to operate as close to enemy shoreline as was the custom in the Arakan. A single incendiary bullet would convert one of these craft into a seventy-ton funeral pyre for all hands on board." Fortunately, this never occurred and all the vessels survived the campaign.

The move across the Bay of Bengal took place in December 1944. "The Arakan Field Unit" consisted of an OSS Operational Group of eight officers and thirty-three enlisted men led by Major Lloyd E. Peddicord, and two members of the MU, Lieutenant Commander Derek Lee, and Lieutenant Junior Grade John D. Archbold. Their objective was to establish a maritime base and gather intelligence for assisting 15th Corps in the advance south. The unit set up a base at Teknaaf near the India-Burma border. The new home was called "Camp Ritchie" in honor of an operational group member, Captain Ritchie,



The OSS Maritime Unit from the base at Galle, Ceylon, used the "Sleeping Beauty," a manned submersible of British design. Despite no formal training, CPT Lambertsen was able to repair and maintain the vessels and trained the swimmers on deploying the system.

who lost his life on a training mission in Ceylon. On the 20th of December, Lieutenant Junior Grade John Booth arrived as the commander of Swimming Group 2, whose eight enlisted members closed on Camp Ritchie with Lieutenant Hugh A. McDevitt on 26 December. They provided the necessary operational expertise to conduct the reconnaissance needed of the coves and harbors of the coastline. Captain Christian J. Lambertsen (see sidebar) of the Army Medical Corps, and the inventor of the underwater rebreathing apparatus used by the swimmers, arrived at Camp Ritchie on 7 January 1945. He remained briefly to train the members of Swimmer Group 2 before moving back to the base at Galle in Ceylon. Camp Ritchie proved to be a short-lived home for the MU.

Between 5 and 9 January 1945, the MU and the operational group moved from Teknaaf to the port of Akyab where they established Camp Ritchie II. The remaining members of Swimmer Group 2 arrived on 13 January and over the next month, the boats of the MU fleet arrived and operations were begun in earnest.

In February, a third camp, Ritchie III, was established at the harbor of Kyaukpyu. This move located the MU closer to the action on the southern coast of Burma. Operations against Ramjee Island and along the Burma coast went on continuously throughout February and March. Camp Ritchie II at Akyab was then turned over to the OSS Field Headquarters, which had moved from Cox's Bazaar with the 15th Corps. On 15 February 1945, Colonel Ray Peers and Major Robert Farr visited Camp Ritchie III. Peers was the commander of Detachment 101, the primary OSS operational element in Burma. At that time, the operational group and MU were placed under Detachment 101 and designated the 101 Arakan Field Unit. The mission remained essentially unchanged, with the operational groups running missions ashore against the Japanese and the MU conducting beach reconnaissance and harbor evaluations. This continued until mid-March.

On 17 March, the two swimming groups and all the operational group men left Kyaukpyu for Calcutta, leaving behind Lieutenant Commander Lee and three boats: P-101, P-563 and P-721. From this point forward, operations consisted primarily of the insertion of agents at points southward along the coast as the Allied advance moved closer to Rangoon. Lieutenant Commander Lee returned to Calcutta in early April to discuss the future of the MU with the members of



A Maritime Unit swimmer equipped with the Lambertsen Rebreathing Unit (LARU) was capable of penetrating coastal defenses undetected. The design of the LARU prevented the discharge of gases that would mark the trail of the diver.

the OSS Field Headquarters. In the meantime, the MU vessels were moved on to Rangoon when the city was taken by the Allies, and began operations from that port. As the OSS emphasis shifted from Burma to China and Indochina, the men and equipment of the MU were gradually dispersed to other parts of the Theater. On 15 June 1945, orders disbanding the MU were received in Rangoon, and the remaining boats and personnel withdrew to Ceylon and Calcutta.

The exploits of the Maritime Unit on the Arakan Coast constituted the largest, longest, and most versatile maritime operations run by the OSS. The fall of Rangoon and the shift in the strategic and tactical picture in the theater brought radical changes to the OSS operations in the China-Burma-India Theater and precluded the type of shore operations that were the specialty of the Maritime Unit. ▲

Kenn Finlayson has been the USAJFKSWCS Command Historian since 2000. He earned his PhD from the University of Maine, and is a retired Army officer. Current research interests include Army special operations during the Korean War, special operations aviation, and World War II special operations units.

Endnotes

- 1 Geoffrey Charles Evans, *Slim as Military Commander* (Batsford, UK: Angus and Robertson, 1969), 86.
- 2 The remainder of this article is taken from Files 8, 9, 11, and 13 of The OSS-Lambertsen Collection, Box 7, Stack 5, Section 3, Shelf 2, ARSOF Archives, Fort Bragg, NC.

Dr. Christian J. Lambertsen

THE Father of Army Underwater Operations, Dr. Christian J. Lambertsen served in the Office of Strategic Services in World War II. During his service with the OSS he perfected and fielded the Lambertsen Rebreathing Unit (LARU), a closed-circuit underwater breathing apparatus, that became the standard for Army underwater operations. Stationed in Ceylon at the OSS Maritime Unit Base in Galle, Dr. Lambertsen trained the Maritime Unit swimmers with his rebreathing apparatus and in the use of the British submersible, the *Sleeping Beauty*. At the end of the war, he remained in the Army Medical Corps until his discharge in 1946.

After the war, Dr. Lambertsen returned to his *alma mater*, the University of Pennsylvania, and joined the faculty of the Medical School. He was a Professor of Pharmacology from 1953–1990. At the university, he founded the Institute for Environmental Medicine, one of the world's premier centers for the study of human physiology. He remains active today as the Director of the Environmental Stress Data Center of the Institute.

In his sixty-year career, Dr. Lambertsen has worked with the Department of Defense, the National Air and Space Administration, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. He has served on numerous advisory councils dealing with manned space flight and undersea operations. His work with the Department of Defense has been recognized with the Distinguished Public Service Medal, the Department of Defense Citation, the U.S. Special Operations Command Medal, and the U.S. Special Forces Green Beret Award. United States Special Operations Command recommended Dr. Lambertsen for the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2005.



Dr. Christian J. Lambertsen received the U.S. Special Forces Green Beret Award in May 1996.

The Lambertsen Rebreathing Unit (LARU) was invented by Dr. Christian J. Lambertsen and was the standard underwater breathing apparatus for the OSS Maritime Unit. The unit recirculated the air through a container of chemicals that removed carbon dioxide, eliminating telltale bubbles.