

# On Early Air Combat in Southeast Asia

## After Wingate's Fortitude Eclipsed Mountbatten's Folly

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Early in World War II, President Franklin D. Roosevelt opposed American armed forces helping restore British colonies overrun by Japan. He nevertheless agreed in August 1943 after meeting with Prime Minister Winston Churchill and his staff at the Quadrant Conference in Quebec, Canada. An “Air Commando” Group thus was created by Gen H. H. “Hap” Arnold and led by Lt Col Phil Cochran, a 30-year-old, “hot pilot” who became Col “Flip” Corkin in a long-running comic strip. For combat in Burma, this unit was formed by Arnold after hearing British Brig Gen Orde Wingate speak at Quadrant—in stark contrast to Adm Lord Louis Mountbatten, Churchill’s chosen commander for Southeast Asia.

For Quadrant, Roosevelt also brought Army general George Marshall and Navy admirals Ernest King and William Leahy (the latter, FDR’s aide). Although major conference planning yielded Overlord, the D-Day assault upon Nazi-occupied Europe, warfare elsewhere was discussed. *The Oxford Companion to World War II* deemed Wingate’s creating so “favorable” an impression that he received “more resources than he could ever have expected.”

Generals and admirals bring *prior* credibility to conferences. Insignia of rank demonstrate authority; rows of ribbons denote extensive service if not valor; and reputations for previous sound decisions (or lack thereof) may affect listeners. Some credibility, however, is enhanced by their speaking *during* those meetings. At Quadrant, Wingate exemplified such impress.

After leading Emperor Haile Selassie’s irregular forces against Italian troops in Ethiopia early in World War II, Wingate went to India in June 1942 to organize and command a Long-Range Penetration Group. Called “Chindits” (after animal statuary guarding Burmese temples), they operated from February to June 1943 behind Japanese lines in Burma. Three thousand men started out; 800 became missing or killed; of returnees, only 600 were fit for active duty after their hunger, thirst, and disease. In small groups evading Japanese encirclement, men too sick or wounded to keep up—by orders—were left behind. As Churchill once observed, “going into the jungle to fight the Japanese was like going into the water to fight a shark.”



**Figure 1. Wingate's Chindits.** British general Orde Wingate (in pith helmet), commander of the Chindits, briefs the C-47 Dakota pilots of the 1st Air Commando, US Army Air Forces, in Burma.

Although suggesting the Japanese might be “beaten at their own game of jungle fighting,” Wingate was problematic for many British commanders. Deemed “an arrogant, out-of-control visionary,” his well-known trademarks were an Old Testament beard and a nineteenth-century, colonial-era pith helmet “from a museum.” He also favored a sweaty, smelly, jungle-filthy uniform for conferences with superiors. Churchill’s personal physician, Charles Wilson (Lord Moran), deemed him “rather unbalanced . . . hardly sane—in medical jargon a borderline case.” Nevertheless, Wingate favorably impressed Roosevelt’s accompanying commanders in Quebec, particularly General Arnold, who created Cochran’s Air Commandos.

Churchill departed for Quadrant on the evening of 5 August 1943. Wingate had arrived from India that day to report at the War Office about Chindit operations, but was ordered to appear first at 10 Downing Street, the prime minister’s residence. As Churchill’s personal physician remembered, “strange stories” had

reached London suggesting this brigadier was another T. E. Lawrence of Arabia (famed for leading Arab irregular forces against Turkish troops in World War I).

Deeming Wingate a “man of genius and audacity,” Churchill wanted “a look at him before I leave for Quebec.” Having just landed after a three-day flight from India, Wingate—in a dirty, sweaty uniform and Wolseley-era pith helmet—arrived at 10 Downing Street before Churchill left that evening by boat-train for Scotland to board the *Queen Mary* for the voyage to Canada. He was invited to stay for dinner, during which Churchill’s daughter, Mary, deemed him “a tiger of a man.” After listening for “half an hour” about jungle warfare, the prime minister decided “at once” to take him to Quadrant and said “our train” leaves “at ten.” Wingate’s wife (living in Scotland) was told to pack a suitcase and accompany him.

For the voyage to Quadrant, Wingate had only his dirty, sweat-stained uniform when arriving from India and going directly to 10 Downing Street. *Queen Mary* personnel thus loaned him naval officers’ attire. Although some fellow passengers commented adversely, the “oddity” was “typical” of one who “purposely” neglected to buy clean uniforms in Cairo where they were abundant. In his cabin, Churchill heard more from the brigadier about Chindit operations. Already having read Wingate’s written report, however, he first critiqued its “crudities” and “some phrases . . . not to my liking” nor “liking of our language.” Nevertheless, the prime minister put his general “more perfectly at ease” for Quadrant.

During the voyage, Wingate addressed the Imperial Chiefs of Staff when Southeast Asia received “prolonged discussion.” As chief of staff, Gen Alan Brooke recalled discussing “what could be done” to prove to Americans that “we are in no way” neglecting “operations in Burma.” Wingate thus spoke in Quebec on 17 August when Quadrant attendees had “quite a good meeting” at which he “gave a first-class talk” about warfare against Japanese forces that had overrun Burma. Agreement ensued: another Long-Range Penetration Group should operate on a “considerably extended scale.”

At Quadrant, Viscount Sir Antony Head, British Secretary for War, recalled Wingate’s speaking “rigidly to the point” and fixing attention of listeners “thoroughly weary of the arts of eloquent men,” that is, Churchill and Roosevelt. Moreover, he spoke “with as much candour [*sic*] as though he were addressing his column commanders.” For example, Great Britain’s Indian Army troops were a “system of outdoor relief” (in Head’s polite paraphrase), but the “impropriety”

did not detract from merit of the “performance.” Churchill embraced eloquence; Wingate preferred profanity.

The British anticipated acrimony at Quadrant. Formal minutes have bracketed words, “bickers” and “bickering,” when Burma was discussed on 19 August. Whereas Roosevelt sought only a land route to supply China, Churchill wanted “operations” to “reach Singapore as quickly as possible” (causing FDR’s “cool reception”). Believing Britain also sought “a controlling interest” in the Dutch East Indies when recaptured, Admiral King’s response included what Admiral Leahy called “undiplomatic language, to use a mild term.” Following Quadrant from afar, Gen Douglas MacArthur lamented the Dutch East Indies “turned over to the British” after being “neutralized” by his South-West Pacific operations; for “past experience” indicated “it might be difficult to pry them loose.”

Amid acrimony, Viscount Head recounted communication whereby Wingate “excelled himself in a modest and stirring account, packed with matter, delivered with hardly one look at his notes.”

He had the mysterious ability to make his presence felt without insistence. He rarely asked to speak but waited until he was invited, and somehow, by the expression of his face or whatever goes to impress personality, he made it difficult for others to pass him over in the course of debate. Sometimes, when his opinion was sought, he paused for as much as 15 seconds, (which can seem like 15 minutes), before giving his answer.

Long pauses did not suggest zeal extolling empire in Parliament but rather judiciousness to Americans suspicious of British colonialism.

Before Quadrant, at a 7 January 1943 White House meeting, Roosevelt insisted that American warfare on the Asian mainland be limited to opening the Burma Road to China. Marshall thus recommended any such combat be “confined to the northern part of Burma,” and Leahy proposed calling it “The Burma Road Operation.” On 6 April 1943, however, King warned Roosevelt that the British Chiefs of Staff prefer recapturing the “whole of Burma” so the route to China would be secure, and Marshall said they wanted its “complete” reoccupation. FDR thus opposed American “white troops” helping restore a British colony. Nevertheless, when Marshall urged “some offensive action” there or “China would be lost,” Arnold reiterated an “obligation to open the Burma Road.”

At Quadrant, Wingate favorably impressed Leahy, who lauded his “daring initiative and imagination and superlative courage.” Furthermore, Marshall

found him “strong for me . . . in the class of Lawrence of Arabia but for his death” (in an American aircraft accident). This brigadier clearly differed from previous British generalship in Asia. Defending Malaya and Singapore, Gen Arthur Percival received a telephone call on 7 December 1941 from the Crown Colony Governor, Sir Shenton Thomas, about a Japanese attack and assumed, “Well, I suppose you’ll shove the little men off.” With a total of almost 70,000 uniformed personnel, Percival surrendered them to General Yamashita’s force of 35,000 men. Of 32,000 Indian Army troops surrendered, many joined a Japanese-sponsored “Indian National Army” against the British Raj. Percival’s other troops became prisoners of war after British officers, in tropical uniform shorts, were photographed striding with a white flag to surrender.

Although some Americans deemed Mountbatten “a man of great energy and daring,” many British officers perceived an “aristocratic playboy” in “a political job, of course.” As noted in Sir Anthony Eden’s *Quadrant* diary, Wingate was a “refreshing contrast” for people “doubtful of Mountbatten being up to” becoming Southeast Asia commander-in-chief—when several Americans found SEAC signifying “Save England’s Asiatic Colonies.”

Wingate’s Chindits now operated with Cochran’s aircraft inserting them by air, evacuating casualties, attacking Japanese ground targets, and bringing in supplies (including mules). This American force consisted of 20 B-25 Mitchell medium bombers, 30 P51A Mustang fighter-bombers, numerous Waco gliders, and 13 C-47 transport planes (the military version of the venerable DC-3 also towed gliders). With American production capabilities, Cochran’s command was a proverbial drop in the bucket. But if that was all Wingate needed, no *carte blanche* was restoring British colonialism.

Roosevelt even contributed a Chindits’ counterpart: “Merrill’s Marauders.” Code named Galahad, the 5307 Composite Group of about 3,000 infantrymen was commanded by Brig Gen Frank D. Merrill. Having previously refused Gen Joseph Stillwell’s request for American ground forces in the China-Burma-India theater of war, FDR sent them after *Quadrant*. Although Cochran’s command was miniscule, no other World War II special operations rivaled the one Wingate advocated in Quebec.

At *Quadrant*, Wingate differed markedly from Brooke, whose tongue was “shooting out and round his lips” with “the speed of a chameleon.” As Admiral King added, he “talked so damn fast.” Although Brooke attributed his lack of favorable impress to American “mental sluggishness,” King found it “hard to

understand what he was saying.” More significantly, Wingate differed markedly from Mountbatten.

Brooke’s transcribed diary for *Quadrant* lamented at length “one of Dickie Mountbatten’s bright ideas.” For North Atlantic warfare, the Admiral advocated “aircraft carriers” made from a floating, frozen compound of ice and wood pulp called “Pykecrete” (after its inventor, Geoffrey Pyke, a scientist on Mountbatten’s former Combined Operations staff). Although Brooke thought he was “pulling our leg,” Mountbatten “was in earnest”; for if bombed, craters presumably would be filled with water to freeze quickly and restore flight decks. Brooke lamented: “Heaven knows how much money went down the sink over this project.” When Mountbatten pleaded to explain them at *Quadrant*, Brooke replied, “To hell with Habakkuk! We are about to have the most difficult time with our American friends and shall not have time for your ice-carriers.”

Nevertheless, as a “heated” meeting was concluding, Mountbatten rushed up to remind Brooke of Habakkuk, who therefore asked Marshall if he and the American Chiefs “would allow Dickie to give an account” of the project. They agreed. After attendants brought in two large cubes and placed them in the room, Mountbatten said “the cube on the left was ordinary pure ice, whilst that on the right” was less liable to splinter and thus “far more suitable” for “aircraft carriers.” Having brought a pistol to fire shots at the cubes, he would “prove their properties.” When “all rose and discreetly moved behind him,” Mountbatten fired at the block of ordinary ice. A “hail” of splinters struck attendees. “Dickie” then said, “now I shall fire at the block on the right to show you the difference.” The rebounding bullet “buzzed round our legs like an angry bee,” nicked Admiral King’s trousers and narrowly missed the British Chief of Air Staff, Marshall Charles Portal. An officer, who left the room earlier, heard the shots and remarked, “Good Heavens, they have started shooting” at each other. General Arnold sought an axe to chop contemptuously at Pykecrete.

Yes, England accomplished epic martial endeavors. From 26 May to 4 June 1940, almost 300,000 men of the British Expeditionary Force trapped in France were evacuated off an open beach at Dunkirk by civilian yachts, fishing boats, and various other shallow-draft vessels—during what Churchill eloquently deemed Great Britain’s “finest hour.” Equally epic was the aerial defense of England by the Royal Air Force, the “so few” to whom “so many” eloquently owed Churchillian “so much.” Nevertheless, in June 1942, at Tobruk in North Africa, British generalship surrendered almost 30,000 men to Erwin Rommel’s

significantly smaller Axis force. Moreover, to defeat the Deutches Afrika Korps at El Alamein in October 1942, Gen Bernard Montgomery needed 1,029 tanks to the DAK 496 as well as 195,000 Eighth Army troops to defeat an Axis force of 104,000 men with barely 50,000 Germans.

As a result of Quadrant, General Arnold gave Wingate “as much assistance as possible” because “I liked his initiative and imagination, his resourcefulness and his courage” as well as “mystery of personal chemistry” that “can never be pinned down.” After “one look at that face” atop a uniform smelling of “jungle and sweat and war,” one knew: “Hell, this man is serious.” And “when he began to talk, you found out just how serious.” Wingate’s fortitude trumped Mountbatten’s folly—and Arnold formed a storied unit in US Air Force history: Cochran’s Air Commandos.

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