



81st (West African) Division

Dec 1943 - May 1944

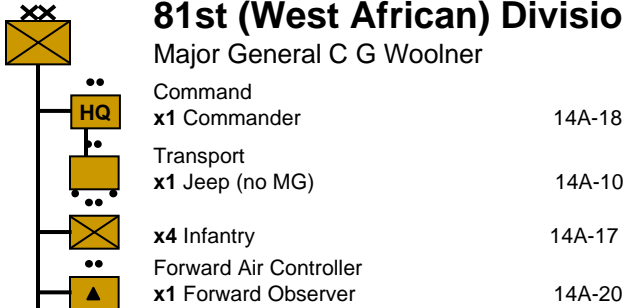
(The First Kaladan Campaign)



BG-WAFK01

81st (West African) Division

Major General C G Woolner



(a) Although administratively a part of the Brigade Groups, the Independent Light Batteries were in practice controlled centrally by the divisional CRA. Each Battery also contained a Mortar Troop, which almost always (owing to better mobility than the cumbersome guns) operated as de facto independent batteries. In May 1944, immediately following the First Kaladan Campaign, these 'field modified' organisations and practices were formalised with the creation of 101 (West African) Light Regiment and 41 (West African) Mortar Regiment from these independent batteries and mortar troops.

BATTLEGROUPS

BG-WAFK02

5th West African Brigade Group

Brigadier E H Collins



BG-WAFK03

6th West African Brigade Group

Brigadier J W D Hayes

Brigadier R N Cartwright (from 25 Mar 44)



DIVISIONAL TROOPS

FSE-WAFK01

3 (Nigerian) West African Independent Light Battery, Royal Artillery (ab)



FSE-WAFK01

5 (Gold Coast) West African Independent Light Battery, Royal Artillery (a)



FSE-WAFK01

6 (Sierra Leone) West African Independent Light Battery, Royal Artillery (a)



BG-WAFK05

1 Auxiliary Group, The Nigeria Regiment (c)

Lieutenant Colonel J W Murphy



DETACHED ELEMENTS

BG

3rd West African Brigade Group (d)

Brigadier A H Gillmore

Colonel A H G Ricketts (from 30 Apr 44)



BG

1 West African AA/AT Regiment, Royal Artillery (e)



BG

81 (West African) Reconnaissance Regiment (f)

Lieutenant Colonel R N Cartwright

Lieutenant Colonel B A Shattock (from 27 Mar 44)



ME-WAFK03

3 West African Field Company, Royal Engineers

Major R W Ferguson



(b) 3 Light Battery was not required for LRP operations with 3rd West African Brigade, so remained with the division.

(c) Each West African Brigade had a very strong 'Auxiliary Group' of soldier-porters. 1 Auxiliary Group had been detached for LRP duties, along with 3rd West African Brigade. However, it found itself surplus to requirements for Wingate's Second Chindit Expedition and consequently returned to the division during February 1944.

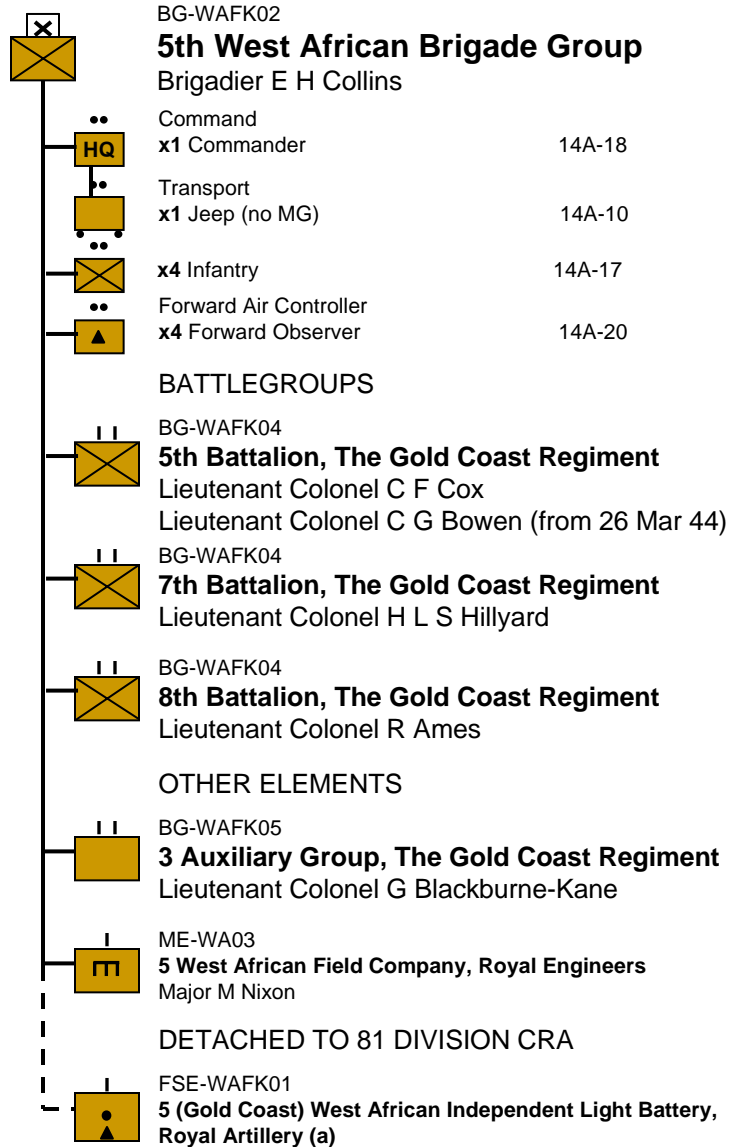
(d) Although administratively a part of 81st Division, 3rd West African Brigade was detached to Orde Wingate's 3rd Indian Division Special Force for Long Range Penetration (LRP or 'Chindit') operations and did not return to 81st Division until it returned to Africa in 1945.

(e) Only a single troop of four Bofors AA guns saw action in the First Kaladan Campaign. They were flown in, along with their tractors, to Kyauktaw in late February 1944 and were flown out again from the 'Kyingri Box' a month later.

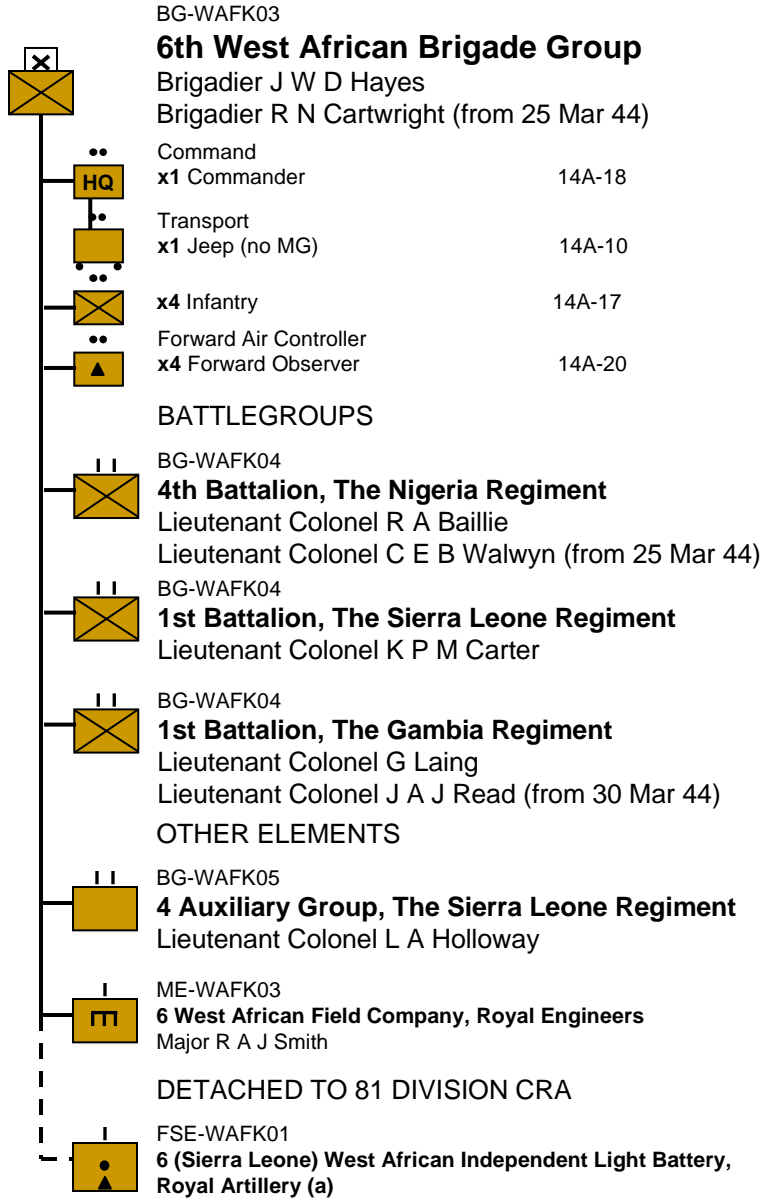
(f) Like the AA/AT Regt, the Recce Regt could not find a useful role in the Kaladan, where its Carriers and Light Recce Cars would be unable to operate owing to the terrain. Consequently it was retained by XV Corps as the Corps Recce Regiment, where it saw much useful action in support of XV Corps' main assault along the Arakan coastal plain towards Akyab before returning to 81st Division in May 1944. Having been parted from its tracked and wheeled transport, 81 Recce Regiment was used largely in a waterborne role during the Second Kaladan Campaign.

(e) Like 81 Recce Regiment, 3 Field Company was commandeered to form part of XV Corps Reserve.

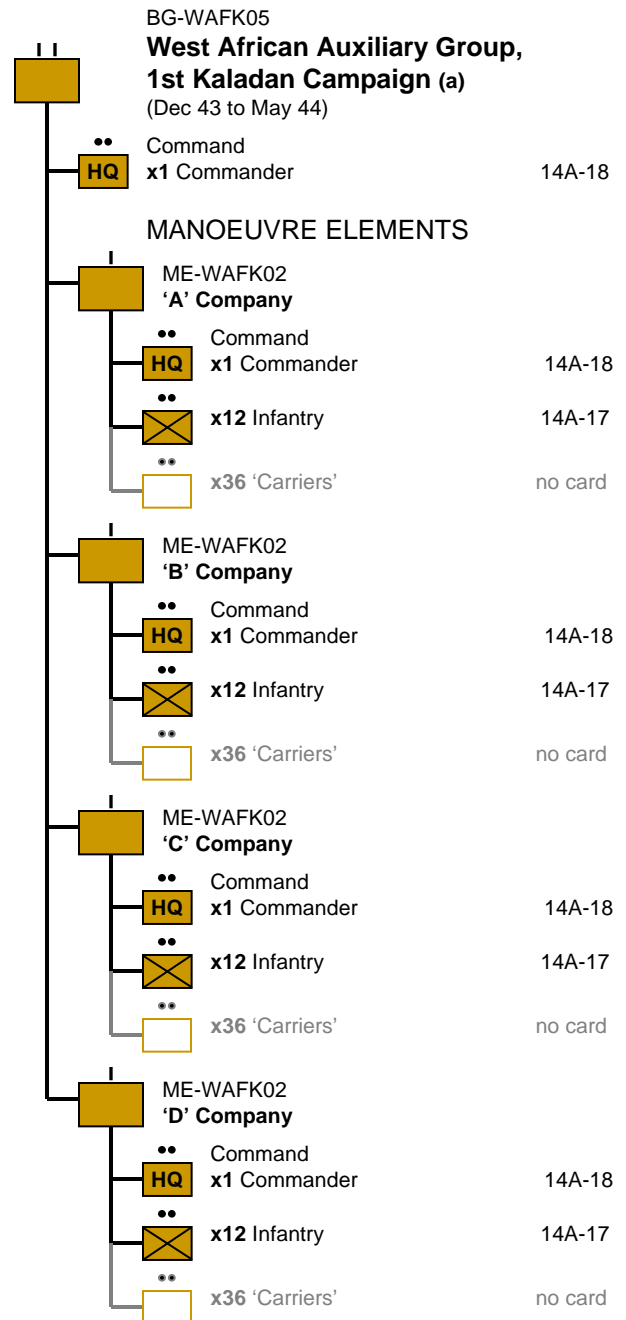
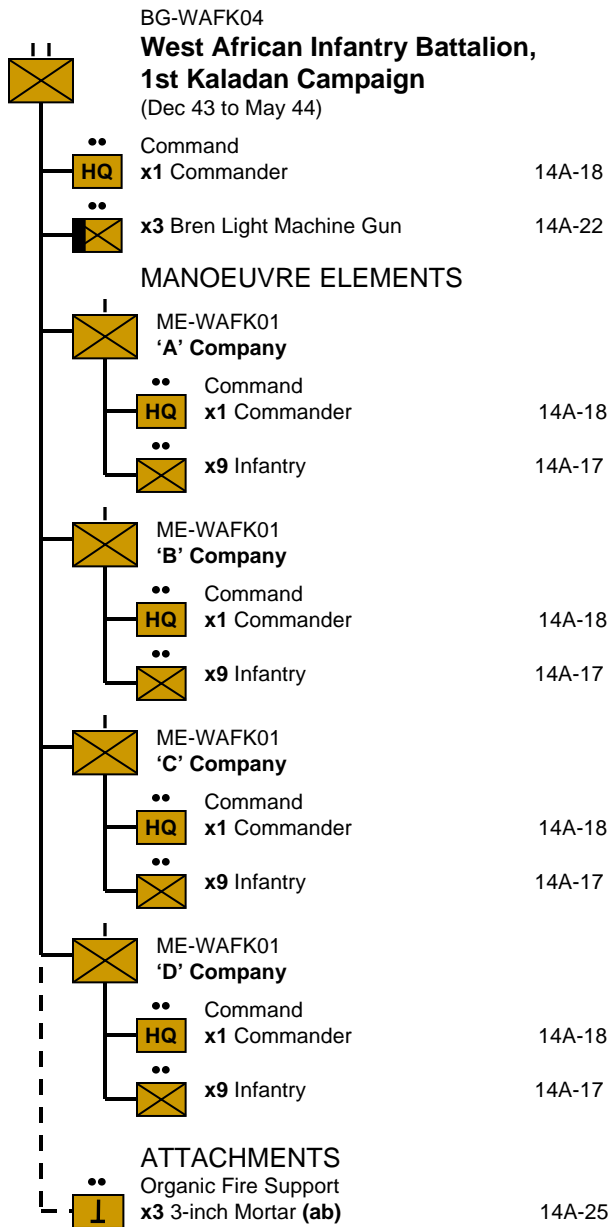
5th West African Brigade Group



6th West African Brigade Group



Infantry Battalion & Auxiliary Group Organisation



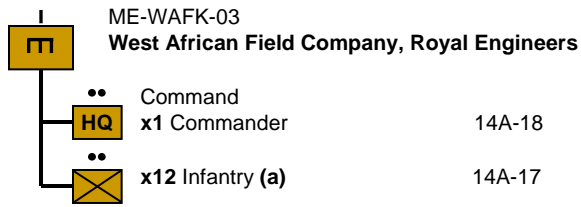
(a) Owing to large quantities of 'Carriers' West African 3-inch Mortars may move at 4/4 rate.

(b) 81 Division did not receive 'Supercharge' 3-inch Mortar ammunition until the end of the First Kaladan Campaign. Consequently the range is limited to 40 inches (1,600 yards).

(c) Although Boys ATRs were officially on the order of battle for 81st Division, they were left behind in order to save weight. The threat from Japanese tanks was absolutely nil until the lower, cultivated parts of the valley were reached at Kyauktaw.

(a) The 'Auxiliary Groups' were what made the two West African divisions truly unique. These Groups were each in excess of 2,000 strong, more than three-quarters of whom were 'Carriers', carrying phenomenal loads on their heads in West African fashion (as much as 85lb) in addition to personal kit. These were not civilian porters; these were trained soldiers (albeit in the most part armed with nothing more than a machet and a grenade or two). These men made it possible for the West Africans to penetrate country that had previously been thought impenetrable. Even mules could not compete with the degree of jungle mobility afforded by 'Carriers' (and columns of mules could not defend a perimeter or rally themselves after an ambush, or collect drop canisters or build jungle airstrips). Organisationally an Auxiliary company would support an Infantry Battalion or Brigade HQ. These companies could then be subdivided into four platoons, with each Auxiliary Platoon supporting an Infantry Company.

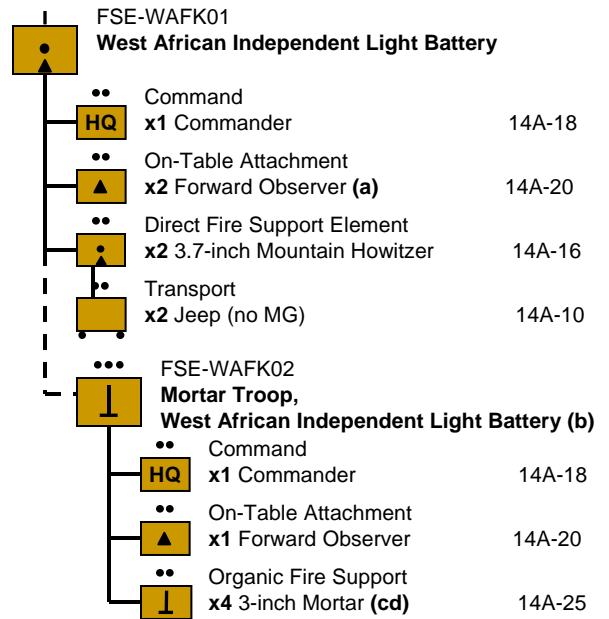
West African Support Elements



(a) May perform engineering tasks.



(a) A single AA Troop was flown into Kyauktaw in late February 1944 to help defend the airstrip there. It was flown out again from the Kyingri Box a month later.



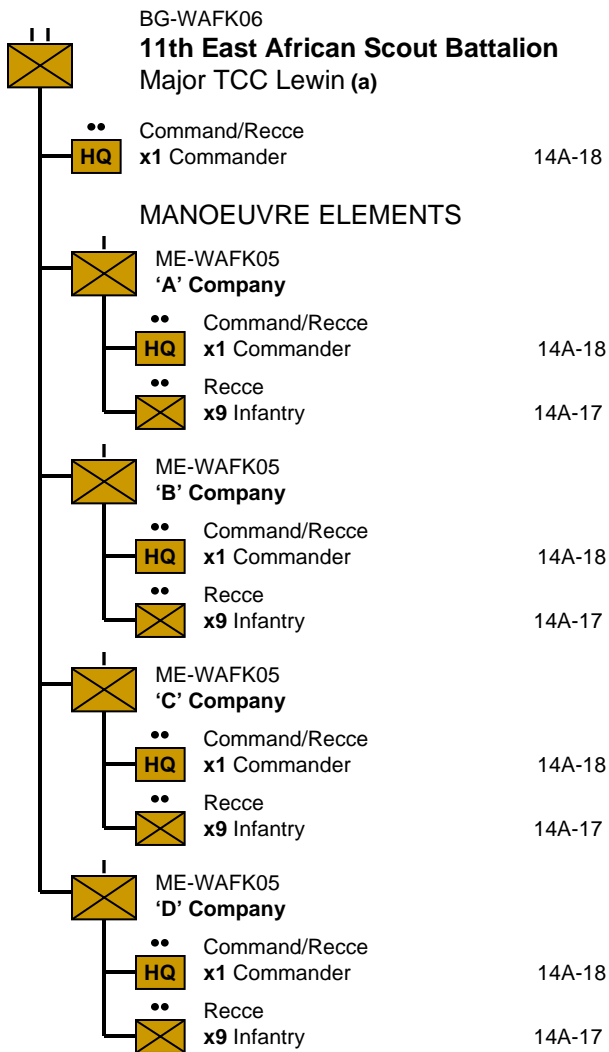
(a) Each Forward Observer controls a Troop, or half-battery of guns (i.e. one model), but may equally call for the whole battery (see the British Artillery Tutorial). However, these units were dogged by mobility and communications problems throughout the campaign and were frequently unavailable.

(b) Each Light Battery also raised a Mortar Troop in addition to its official order of battle. These proved to be the most useful and hard-working elements of West African artillery, as their high degree of off-road mobility (aided by the Auxiliary Groups) enabled them to get close enough to the action to be of some use. Consequently they spent their entire campaign operating as independent de facto batteries. The Mortar Troops also regularly controlled the fire of Infantry Battalion mortars posted nearby.

(c) Owing to large quantities of 'Carriers' West African 3-inch Mortars may move at 4/4 rate.

(d) 81 Division did not receive 'Supercharge' 3-inch Mortar ammunition until the end of the First Kaladan Campaign. Consequently the range is limited to 40 inches (1,600 yards).

Elements, 11th (East African) Division



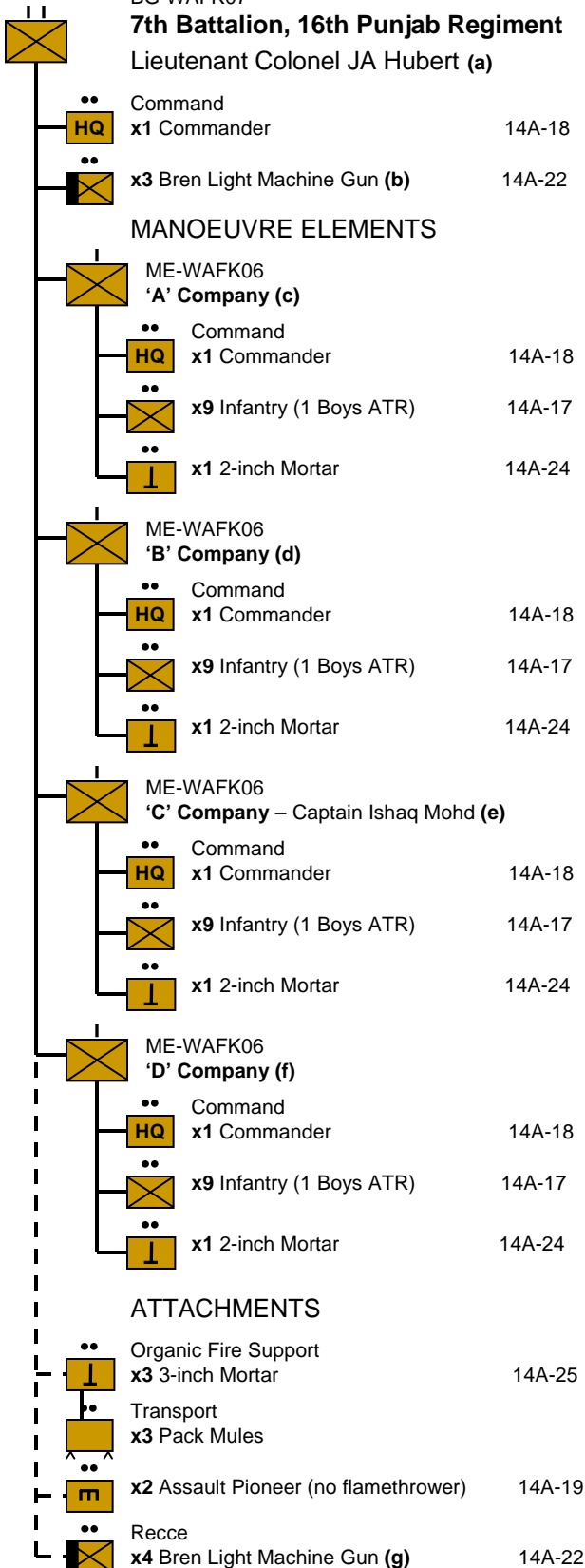
(a) The 11th East African Scout Battalion was raised by 11th East African Division over and above divisional establishment (they already had the usual, mechanised Recce Battalion). Consequently it was free to be loaned to 81st (West African) Division, to fill the gap left by the detached 81st (West African) Recce Regiment. Indeed the battalion's light, dismounted nature suited 81st Division's mission very well. The 11th EA Scouts caught up with 81st Division over a month into the campaign, at Sippalaung (near Paletwa) on 29th January 1944. As a consequence, the battalion had no time to get used to its new division (indeed the East Africans spoke entirely different languages to the West Africans, who called them 'Jumbos' after the traditional East African (Swahili) greeting of 'Jambo'). This may have had some bearing on what was to happen a month later. On 3rd March, the 11th EA Scouts were scouting east of the Kaladan and the town of Kyauktaw, when they were suddenly attacked by a regimental-sized force of Japanese troops (this was 'Kubo-Butai'). Being scouts, and having no weapons heavier than Brens, the battalion was utterly scattered. This began a chain of events that led to the withdrawal of the entire division from the Kaladan and the end of the First Kaladan Campaign.

Elements, 404 LoC Area Troops (7/16th Punjab)

BG-WAFK07

7th Battalion, 16th Punjab Regiment

Lieutenant Colonel JA Hubert (a)



(a) Like 5/9th Jats and 1st Tripura Rifles, 7/16th Punjab were an unbrigaded battalion, attached to 404 Line Of Communications Area at Chiringa. 7/16th Punjab followed in the wake of 81st (West African) Division's line of advance and relieved the 5/9th Jats at Daletme on 6th February 1944. As the Africans moved on down to Kyauktaw, 7/16th Punjab also established a company base at Paletwa, though it remained under the direct control of XV Corps HQ, rather than 81st Division. Following the African reverse at Kyauktaw and 81st Division's subsequent orders to march west through the Mayu Mountains, 7/16th Punjab now found itself in the front line, having to mount a difficult fighting retreat back up the Kaladan Valley to Daletme and thence to Frontier Hill. XV Corps designated Lt Col Hubert as the commander of 'Hubforce' and placed 1st Gambia (which was retreating up the Pi Chaung river to Daletme) and 1st Tripura Rifles (which was scouting in the area of Frontier Hill) under his command, with orders to hold the Frontier Hill/Mowdok area throughout the Monsoon Season and to keep up the pressure by aggressively patrolling into the upper Kaladan Valley. With the Japanese 'Kubo-Butai' (four battalion battlegroups under the command of Colonel Kubo, 111th Infantry Regiment) in hot pursuit, 7/16th Punjab turned to face them just west of the Indian/Burmese border in early May 1944. In their rear, 1st Gambia was digging in right on the border, at Frontier Hill, while the 'Trips' were scouting on the flanks. The Trips' patrols were soon driven in and after determined attacks, the Punjabis fell back through the Gambian position at Frontier Hill. Holding attack after attack for a week, the Gambians were eventually relieved by the Punjabis, but with their position outflanked and overlooked, and under relentless attack for a further week, Hubforce was forced to withdraw to Mowdok, leaving Kubo-Butai in possession of a few square miles of Indian soil (much to the delight of their INA battalion).

(b) These Brens were the AA Platoon, which more often than not were used without their heavy AA mounts, simply as the Battalion HQ Defence Platoon.

(c) A Company was Dogra.

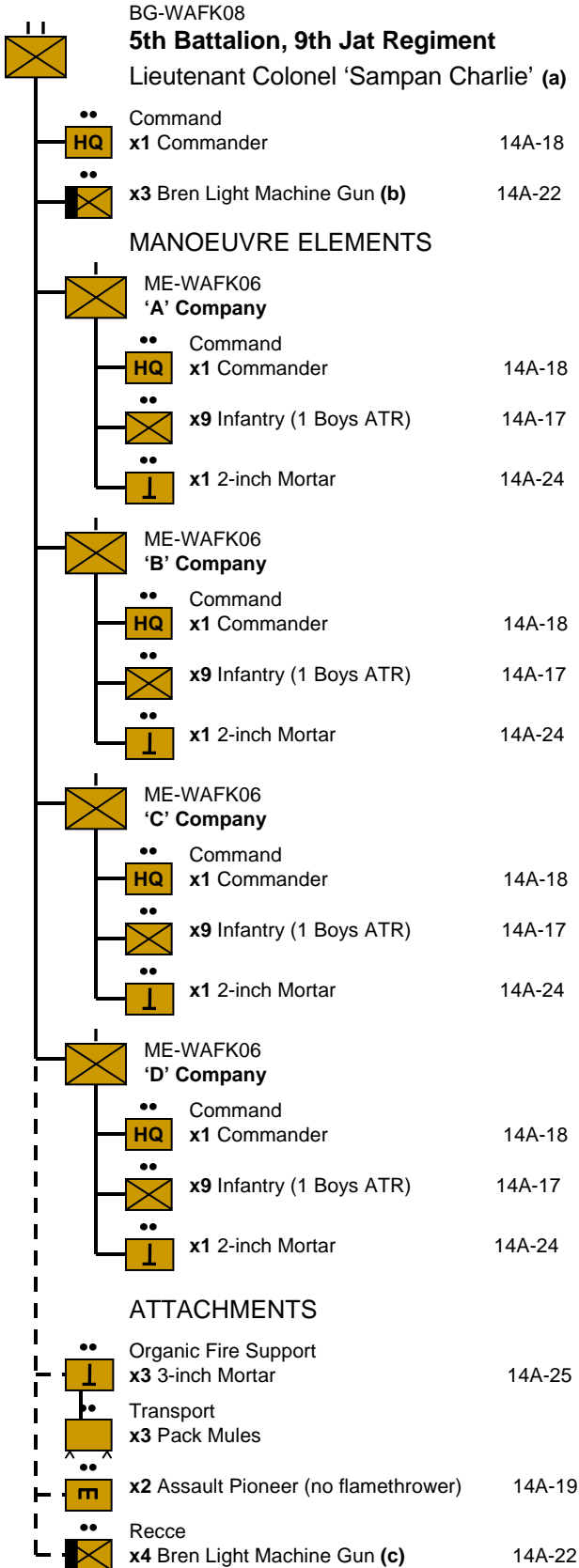
(d) B Company was Sikh. They fought a battle against fellow Sikhs (2 companies of them) of the 1/1st 'Subhas Bose' Brigade INA, at Frontier Hill.

(e) C Company was Muslim.

(f) D company was Hindu.

(g) These Brens belong to the dismounted Carrier Platoon (often referred to as the 'Assault Platoon' in many battalions).

Elements, 404 LoC Area Troops (5/9th Jats)

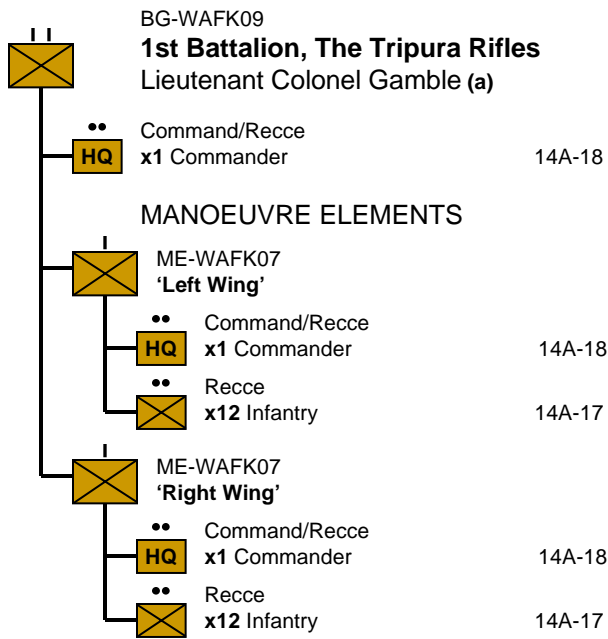


(a) Like 7/16th Punjab and 1st Tripura Rifles, 5/9th Jats were an unbrigaded battalion, attached to 404 Line Of Communications Area at Chiringa. The battalion was given new orders during the Monsoon Season of 1943. They were to move up to Mowdok on the Burmese border, in order to establish a firm base of operations and to provide a secure environment for waterborne transport to bring tonnes of supplies up to Mowdok and for the West African engineers to push the 'West African Way' (a new jeep track from Chiringa, through Mowdok and Frontier Hill and onwards. Once established at Mowdok, the Jats crossed the border into Burma, establishing company bases at Labawa on the Pi Chaung (a major tributary of the Kaladan, which ran parallel to the Kaladan for much of its course and served as an alternative route south) and at Satpaung and Daletme on the Kaladan. They also established platoon patrol outposts further south and successfully pushed Japanese and BTA patrols well away from the West African forming-up areas (in this task they worked closely with the 1st Tripura Rifles, who had fought here in 1943 and had patrolled the area ever since). Once 81st (West African) Division had passed through on its way south the 5/9th Jats were relieved by 7/16th Punjab and withdrew to Mowdok and the Sangu Valley. Consequently the 5/9th Jats did not see much combat in this campaign, but could serve as a useful 'backstop' force in a miniatures campaign. Unfortunately I have been unable to discover the name of the battalion commander beyond his nickname: 'Sampan Charlie' (undoubtedly earned through the Jats' efforts to get tonnes of supplies upriver to Mowdok, utilising hundreds of commandeered native boats).

(b) These Brens were the AA Platoon, which more often than not were used without their heavy AA mounts, simply as the Battalion HQ Defence Platoon.

(c) These Brens belong to the dismounted Carrier Platoon (often referred to as the 'Assault Platoon' in many battalions).

Elements, 404 LoC Area Troops (1st Tripura Rifles)



(a) Like 7/16th Punjab and 5/9th Jats, 1st Tripura Rifles ('The Trips') were an unbrigaded battalion, attached to 404 Line Of Communications Area at Chiringa. They were unusual in two distinct ways: First they belonged to the forces of one of the quasi-independent 'Princely States', rather than the Indian Army proper. Second, like the 11th East African Scouts, they were very lightly equipped for scouting; not for digging in and defending, nor assaulting. Their organisation was most unusual, being two 'wings' rather than the usual three or four companies (nominally called 'Left' and 'Right' Wings, though this was not necessarily how they were deployed in the field). By December 1943 the Trips were old hands in the border area, having conducted a fighting withdrawal from the Kaladan against the Japanese 1/213th Infantry in early 1943 and having remained on the border ever since. Their role in the First Kaladan Campaign was initially in conducting reconnaissance and counter-reconnaissance activities during the build-up to 81st (West African) Division's offensive. Later, with the withdrawal of the division, the Trips found themselves attached to 'Hubforce', along with 7/16th Punjab and 1st Gambia. They were involved in flanking, screening and patrolling throughout the Battle of Frontier Hill.

81st (West African) Division Unit Quality

Experienced

West African Light Batteries (Including Mortar Troops)
7/16th Punjab
1st Tripura Rifles

Trained

All other elements of 81st (West African) Division
5/9th Jats

Raw

11th East African Scout Battalion

Modelling And Painting 81st (West African) Division

Model Availability

At the time of writing there is only one really suitable range of 15mm figures for the British/Indian/African XIVth Army and that is the superb little range by Peter Pig. They do a complete range of infantry, with all the necessary small-arms and battalion support weapons you might need (including mules and handlers). However, most of these come in packs with mixed helmets and bush hats, which is some might find annoying, as the West Africans only took their bush hats into the Kaladan (the detached 81st WA Recce Regiment wore helmets, though).

Be aware that almost all photos of West African troops in Burma are from the Second Kaladan Campaign of late 1944, in which many are wearing shorts, often with bare feet. This does not seem to have been the case in the First Campaign as the shorts appeared during the Monsoon interval of June-July 1944, when the division implemented a lot of changes gleaned from the lessons learned from the First Campaign and went even lighter in terms of equipment. However, I do wish that Peter Pig would produce some West African figures in shorts!

On the subject of wish-list figures: There isn't a suitable 'Carrier' figure on the market and nor is there likely to be! While various Colonial ranges have porter figures, there aren't any in battledress and British webbing, with a bush hat balanced precariously on top of the load (if Peter Pig is reading this, I'd like a variety of loads – boxes, bundles, 3-inch mortar components, barrels and donkey-engines... all with the bush hat balanced on the top).

3.7-inch Mountain Howitzers are available from QRF/LKM Direct. Sadly they are a little bit pricey and you have to buy a fairly useless European-themed crew with each gun. But at least you don't need many! Skytrex/Old Glory produce a very nice CMP 15cwt Truck and everybody produces Jeeps. Battlefront/Flames Of War produce a lovely Bofors model. Peter Pig again produces suitable XIVth Army vehicle and gun crews in bush hat.

For the Indian battalions, feel free to mix in helmeted figures. You could also use Battlefront's excellent 'Italy British' range for some extra variation and their 'Indian' range (in turbans) for the Sikh companies of 7/16th Punjab.

Painting

81st (West African) Division went into the field in the old tropical 'KD' (Khaki Drill) uniforms, with long trousers. However, they received their first issue of 'BDJG' (Battle Dress Jungle Green) by airdrop during February 1944 and before long the whole division was wearing XIVth Army's Jungle Green (though undoubtedly they must have looked quite mixed 'n' match for a while).

Being rear-echelon security battalions, I would imagine that the Indian battalions would have been quite a long way down the pecking order, so may also have been still in KD or mixed 'n' match (many units dyed their own uniforms JG in the field).

Bush hats were typically a reddish khaki colour; very similar indeed to British Army Battledress as worn in temperate climates. This was wrapped about with a 'puggaree' (a turban or wrap) in KD or JG, though these often fell off in the field.

Webbing was the British '38 Pattern. Originally ochre in colour (often described as KD, but it was actually much more yellow ochre than the grey-beige of KD uniforms), it was often dyed JG by units in the field or by factories in India. Alternatively, it was given a coat of vehicle paint (in green or black) to protect it from damp and rot.