

“Uncle Bill” of “the Forgotten Army” or the Leadership of Field-Marshal Lord Slim

*By Aivars Purins **

*“If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs
and blaming it on you;...*

*If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster And treat
those two imposters just the same..”*

“If”, by R.Kipling

Studying Field Marshall William Joseph Slim (August 8th, 1891 – December 14th, 1970) feels like rereading Rudyard Kipling’s “If”. This poem could almost be the best story of Slim’s life. Two of his superiors wanted to dismiss him but both times Slim was promoted to replace the two generals. He had to struggle to enlist in the officers corps, but he went on to take the post of Chief of General Staff of British Army. Biographer Ronald Lewin actually holds the belief that Slim was a marked man- “primus inter pares” (Lewin, 1976:47) - already in his early years of his life.

It is claimed that Slim commanded the first (Anderson, 1992:304) British offensive of the Second World War, but it was not a battle of lingering significance. The Japanese attack into Burma would build the occasion that would call for Slim’s remarkable addition to the war effort. He was transferred to Burma theatre on March 14th, 1942 as the commander of Burma Corps (Burcorps). At that point British were on continuous withdrawal already since January. This would develop into the Retreat- the withdrawal of almost 1500 km by May, 1942. British tried unsuccessfully to counter-act in the autumn of 1942. But Slim was only indirectly involved in this attempt; his main occupation at the time was initiated reconstruction of his force. Slim’s first and right away triumphal¹ engagement was the defensive operation around Imphal and Kohima in the spring of 1944. A year later Slim cemented the achievements of his transformed force with crowning operation that would recapture the territory of Burma². Slim met

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Victory over Japan Day as a four star general in the post of the commander of allied land forces (CIC ALFSEA)³.

Slim has been recognised as the leader without comparison. That is evidenced by the suggestion that he was selected to the post of the senior officer of British Army in 1948 mainly because of the “insistent pressure of the populace, stirred up by his former soldiers” (Dugan, 1950:34). This paper is the study of nature of Slim’s leadership and focuses on Burma campaign during the Second World War, because it was there that Slim’s leadership was put in the open for all to see. However it does look at the particular operation to the limited extend, instead focusing on Slim’s personality and its actions in the particular context. The analysis makes a consideration and substantiate that the transformational leadership of Slim was the key to the successes in Burma. Slim’s leadership as the model of transformational leadership (Bass, Riggio, 2006) is the proposition of this paper. Transformational leader as defined by Bernard Bass (1996:4) is able “to motivate others to do more than they originally intended and often even more than they thought possible”. This is a case study that attempts to draw the attention to Slim’s achievements and highlight the ever important factors of a successful leadership.

1. “The forgotten army”

Slim’s or rather Field-Marshal Lord Slim’s personality and leadership served as the catalyst in the process of changes in the British campaign in Burma. He turned around the situation of the complete failure- “the longest retreat ever carried out by a British Army” (Lewin, 76:58) - to the point of being claimed by one of his biographers to be the greatest British general of the Second World War (Lyman, 2005:261). The first part of the paper will explore the changes by looking at three parts: why, how and with what the catalysis or changes were accomplished by Slim.

1.1 The objectives of change

At a time there was certain disbelief that Japanese may ever move into Burma. And when they did it in January of 1942, there was no one really responsible for preparation or actual defence of Burma (Slim, 2000: 10). British position was “a house of cards, erected on the quicksand of false hopes” (Lewin, 1976:79). Two month later in a search for efficiency it was

decided to organise the two divisions in Burma as the Burma Corps and introduce Slim to the theatre as the Corps Commander. And two more months later – on May 19th – the last unit of the Corps withdrew from Burma to India after almost 1500 km of retreat over the five months. The most distressing aspect of the retreat, according to Slim, was the lack of defined strategic objective. From his point of view this was the factor that turned the failure into disaster (Slim, 2000:535). “Commanders in the field... must be clearly and definitely told what is the object of the campaign” (Slim, 2000:536) was Slim’s conclusion about the causes of the Retreat.

The differing allied views have to take blame for the defensive and territorial attitude of mind during the Retreat. And the central issue was “Burma road” or the need to have a path to supply Chinese forces. With the fall of Burma to Japanese the land route to China was lost. United States established airlift operation (The Hump) and were looking towards a limited future campaign- just enough to open “new Burma road” from India to China. British thought that to be wasteful and advocated the recapture of Burma and re-establishment of the more effective original road as well as placing themselves in a better position for future operations against Japanese. Additional complication was the disagreement within British establishment about the possible strategic approach to the operation. Prime Minister Churchill held preference for amphibian and special approaches (Keegan, 1992:4-5) instead of traditional over-land operations. He even saw that fighting Japanese in the jungle is like “going into a water to fight a shark”⁴.

Though Slim was openly discontent about the lack of clear purpose during the Retreat, his campaign to recapture Burma was not setting up better. The priority of potential operation was unclear on the national- British- as well as Allied level. The view on operation was fluctuating from having amphibious assault – “from south” – to overland push – “from north” – and as well as the rather nebulous way of special force operations⁵ as the main axis of advance. Slim set down rather actively to distil the objective⁶. Firstly, he persuaded Mountbatten, the Supreme Allied Commander of the theatre, that it would not require more resources by being proactive – “that were 14 Army to mount an offensive into Burma proper it could do so with no more resources than those that would anyway be allocated to the defence of India” (Lewin, 1976:229). Less than three months later he had

secured the agreement of the UK and the United States on further exploitation of Slim's overland advance ("Capital") while withholding the priority in the theatre to the amphibious operation ("Dracula")⁷. This preferred operation by the superiors comes to being only at the very end and then only as a sideshow, while central place is taken by Slim's "brilliantly daring operation" (Anderson, 1992:318)⁸. It was three months after the directive when Slim changed the pace and direction of his campaign. "Capital" was transformed to "Extended Capital" and that was done entirely on his own initiative (Lewin, 1976:209) without informing the superiors (Lyman, 2005:243). He famously took the risk and implemented his vision through the capabilities of his transformed force.

1.2 The ways of change

Slim was the outsider to the traditional higher officer corps. He was a son of Birmingham ironmonger- a lower middle class family – (Anderson, 1992:318) with no claim to impressive family name. He served in the British Indian Army and had not come through Sandhurst and had some difficulties to be promoted to Lieutenant Colonel in 1938 just because of his age. Therefore he could have had some tough time to be noticed and listened to by the traditional officership, but he himself was not making that kind of mistakes. "(Slim) was most approachable, and a ready listener to the ideas of his officers" (Lyman, 2005:234). It was not a sign of politeness or undecidedness, Slim was noted for his continuously absorbing and digesting approach to the experiences. Slim was "a pondering man... a pupil-teacher in the classroom of the world" (Lewin, 1976:10).

Historian Duncan Anderson suggests that Slim's slow ascendancy to an important posting was beneficial to his professional development. Historian implies that for the first thirty months of war Slim was very much assigned to the backwater where he could afford to make mistakes (Anderson, 1992:304). The disaster in Gallabat (Sudan) against Italians made Slim to commit himself to the imperative that if he would be having two options – he will work to implement the boldest one (Lewin, 1976:108). While the attack on Vichy France forces in Syria let him learn a lot about the logistics of manoeuvre warfare. Though it was not just about gathering the personal experience; Slim also distinguished himself over that time by learning from others experiences. There are examples of Slim's readiness to learn, absorb and distil the new ways. A significant one was

during the first days in Burma theatre when Slim got into conversation with a Chinese general who was the one and only at the time that had been victorious in a fight with the Japanese. The Chinese general told the concept that would be instrumental to the victories of Slim some two years later: “If you could hold the Japanese (nine days), prevent them capturing your supplies, and then counteract them, you would destroy them.” (Slim, 2000:192)

However that all had yet to come, in the meantime the experiences of the Retreat made Slim to write the famous conclusion: “The outstanding and incontrovertible fact was that we had taken a through beating. We... had been outmanoeuvred, outfought, and outgeneralled” (Slim, 2000:115). That was to form the baseline on what to develop the victorious army. Slim saw the lack of confidence, vision and robustness in the British commanders as the cause for ineffective tactics and lost initiative. Japanese approach was creating the shock and paralysis. The exploitation of jungle, the disregard for human life and tenacity allowed Japanese to psychologically dominate the enemy. The single most significant “instrument” of Japanese was the envelopment through jungle to put a road block on the British lines of communications. At the time British were tied by the roads, what lead to “a road block mentality which often developed into an inferiority complex” (Slim, 2000:119).

Robert Lyman observed that “the Japanese consistently moved faster and more decisively than British” (Lyman, 2005:62). As if prescribed by John Boyd’s OODA loop⁹ – Slim intuitively recognised that his best defence would be the attack (Lyman, 2005:23) and, what is the most important, he realised that Japanese can be set in disorder by unexpected (Slim, 2000:121). Slim went on to define the four principles that would guide the operations against the Japanese. An operation must be offensive, its idea must be simple and overriding throughout and contain the element of surprise (Slim, 2000:209). The concept of defensive area (“box”) that should fight as a stronghold and envelopments of Japanese strong positions were the few important solutions to the difficulties raised by implementation of the principles. By the end of campaign in Burma he was employing blitzkrieg techniques for the first time in the eastern theatre (Lewin, 1976:230).

In contrast to the strategies of the Retreat¹⁰, Slim intentionally “gave away” territory to pull in the Japanese forces in the ground of his choosing. With the extending lines of communications and the onset of summer monsoon season¹¹ Japanese faced the disintegration of their advance. However the most exemplary product of Slim’s mastery has to be the offensive phase of campaign-the recapture of Rangoon in 1945¹². The initially planned decisive battle in the plain in front of Irrawaddy River (operation “Capital”) was replaced by the envelopment to the South to strike at the Meiktila-nerve-centre of Japanese operations- crumbling all enemy resistance in the area (operation ‘Extended Capital’). After this the forces were “punching forward as fast as their fuel would allow, isolating and bypassing significant opposition, armour raced from airstrip to airstrip, where engineers prepared for the fly-in of aircraft under the noses of the enemy”. (Lyman, 2005:253) The end of Burma campaign has to be the exemplary display of indirect and manoeuvre approach.

Two qualities that are invariably present in such successful operations are jointness and mission command. As early as 1943, Slim was convinced that successful operations were in fact “air-land” operations (Lyman, 2005:129). He believed in the need for seamless work of both services at all levels to the degree that he insisted that HQs of both services are located in a common location (Slim, 2000:546) and that they share the same mess (Lyman, 2005:129). Air supply was the distinctive aspect of Burma campaign. Slim experimented, developed and implemented also afterwards widely used methods of air transport (Slim, 2000:544), while Supreme Commander did his utmost to secure from the United States the minimum required squadrons of planes. By the end of campaign British Air Marshal concluded, that “Slim was quicker to grasp the potentialities and value of air support in the jungles of Burma than most Air Force officers” (Lyman, 2005:226). Slim had to be air-mined because he based his strategy on the air supply. As regards the mission command – it was somewhat self-explanatory to Slim (Lyman, 2005:240). In the jungle companies and platoons became the basic units. It was difficult to maintain the lines of communications as well as Slim believed in the force of empowered people. He encouraged to act “in anticipation of orders, or without waiting for approval” (Slim, 2000:542).

1.3 The tools of change

Slim formed his objectives and applied the methods and techniques of change, but the most significant was his work with men – establishing the force to execute the change. From the experiences of the early defeat it was acknowledged that there is the requirement to go back to basics – the individual training. Slim wrote down the tactical lessons that were promulgated as training directive. It started with the idea that “the jungle itself is neutral” (Green Hell, 1949). That is the later reflection on jungle warfare by Spencer Chapman, but Slim had come to similar understanding which he wanted to instil in his troops. The seven other lessons (Lyman, 2005:77) followed from this. Firstly, patrolling is the key and Japanese in the rear have to be seen as “surrounded” and not otherwise round. Simultaneously, the reliance on long and static lines of communication as well the frontal attacks on narrow fronts should be forgotten. Forces have to exploit the armour to the maximum and remember that there are no non-combatants in jungle. Nonetheless, it should be remembered that the primary fight is to be for the initiative. The fundamentality of this thinking is shown by the fact that these principles formed the basis of the British Army’s approach to jungle warfare for some decades after the war (Lyman, 2005:77).

As ever, practising what he preached, Slim started by retraining his HQ¹³ from colonial and static institution to the one which could pack in a couple of hours and open up for several days at time in jungle as a properly camouflaged working headquarters and whose every member went through qualifying courses on use of all personal weapons. Slim went on to establish infantry battle schools, artillery training centres, co-operations courses with air force, experiments with tanks, classes in river-crossing and other instructional activities to train his force (Slim, 2000:146). The training ultimately expanded to collective training at the level of inter-divisional live exercises in the jungle. Training would make good start to build confidence of troops, however there is noted the revelation of Slim’s greatest strengths as a general (Anderson, 1992:313). He again single-handedly developed the theory on the foundations of morale as he called it (Slim, 2000:182). Later British Military Doctrine would call that as hierarchy of Fighting Power¹⁴, but John Boyd would conceptualise that as the three levels of war (Lind, 2003).

Depressingly high incidences of desertion as well as the picturing the Japanese as supermen of jungle were the signs of dangerously low moral in 1943 (Slim, 2000:181). Success is the easy way to high morale but Slim did not have it. He had to build it and the foundations were to be spiritual, intellectual and material, with this order of the importance (Slim, 2000:181-196). The development of spiritual foundation was relying on Slim's transformational leadership. The men had to be inspired by the cause and each needed to feel as part of something grater then themselves- as a team for common and worthy cause. The intellectual foundation was to achieve the confidence that Japanese can be beaten. Firstly, the full scale of training, then patrols in small groups and later in larger formations, but always with the numeral superiority. That was the road to the common recognition that the object was attainable. It was complimented with the belief that the army was efficient organisation that can expand on the achieved intellectual recognition of its capability. Discipline, theatre newspaper and good quality of the rest and re-enforcement camps were tools to the fully built intellectual foundation. The last material foundation was very much at the mercy of the outside decisions as example- the supplies. However there again Slim's leadership was transforming the meaning of the sulky label "the Forgotten Army" to the assertive motto of "God helps those who help themselves". Slim's contemporary Lt.Gen.Nye even went on to suggest that this ability to do so much with so little was a measure of Slim's true greatness.

Slim wrote that his 14th Army had only two items of equipment of unlimited amount from start to finish: their brains and their courage (Slim, 2000:194). Nevertheless he was concerned about the supplies¹⁵ (Slim, 2000:169). The solution to the supply anxiety was threefold. Firstly, Slim recognised the importance of logisticians by having general in charge of administration¹⁶ as the senior staff officer. Secondly, there was a strong drive to limit the need and therefore the volume of supplies. He again started with his HQ who got assigned a limited number of lorries, but there was also a widespread search for efficiencies – cutting of margins. It was managed to reduce the standard requirement of supplies from 400 to 120 tons a day for an Indian division in action, without loss of battle efficiency or moral (Slim, 2000:540). Slim stressed the enduring relationship between mobility, size of staffs and effective control, while noting the sure ability of bureaucracy to bog down itself to standstill. The last and most significant solution on this list is the self-reliance or inventiveness by necessity. Slim's

army built roads, airstrips, ships and at times even fought with the aim to assist logistical efforts¹⁷.

The binding item between the tools of change was the commanding coalition of generals. Slim was lucky, at the time of the appointment to Burma theatre to have the presence of close friends. He said that he have not heard of any other occasion when the corps commander and both his divisional commanders came from the same battalion (Lewin, 1976:41). Later Admiral Mountbatten lingered to appoint Slim as Commander of the 14th Army, but having met him, he made the appointment on the spot (Lyman, 2005:270). And there is expressed little doubt that from the end of 1943, “the whole of far Eastern campaign revolved around the Mountbatten Slim axis, ... They were complementary” (Lewin, 1976:128).

Historian Anderson writes that “Burma was a peculiarly fitting trial for Slim’s abilities” (Anderson, 1992:307). It was his people skills that allowed him develop and succeed in a form of warfare that was based on human factors then on lavish equipment (Slim, 2000:549). From putting into focus the strategic objectives to manoeuvring forces Slim pressed on the process which exposed tactical freedom in a strategic context. It was done with limited resources, but with a lot of experimenting and inventiveness. Yet Slim’s interest and capability to work with men was his core skill that made the change happen in Burma as well as uplifted Slim to the top of his profession.

2. “Uncle Bill”

“Those who do not wish to go on that journey, we will not send” (Macintyre, 2003) began Col.Collins of Royal Irish Regiment in his now legendary “rallying cry” on the eve of Iraq War in 2003. His “simple and stirring prose-poem for the 21st-century soldier” (Macintyre, 2003) draws upon the affluent history of British military leadership. Leadership authority John Adair is drinking from the same well of British military leadership when he states: “Wellington and Nelson, Slim and Montgomery – yes, the armed services do grow leaders.” (Adair, 2007) Slim is the one of “Churchill’s generals” that is not only mentioned often in the same sentence with the selected few (Lyman, 2005:2), but he is also prized by the comparison to Guderian, Manstein and Patton (Anderson, 1992:319).

Clearly, the military competence is common characteristic of all these towering men, but capacity of leadership must be the one excelling them.

2.1 A discourse on nature of leadership

It is reported that Socrates was convinced to say that while “tactics” is important (Xenophon), the ability to lead is the overshadowing force. He justified a merchant for a post of “general” instead of military man, because of the former’s shown capacity to lead (Xenophon). Socrates view is beautifully reinforced by author John Buchan as quoted by J.Adair: “The task of leadership is not to put greatness into people but to elicit it, for the greatness is there already” (Adair, 2007).

“[Men] would rather be led than managed,” (Adair, 2003:253) was also what Slim said, believed and practiced. He recognised the importance for the leader to be knowledgeable about the jobs of subordinates, but he was clear in pointing out that there is one knowledge that should always be present in the leader – that of men (Adair, 2003:71). Though Slim appeared to view the actual nature of leadership to be a somewhat mysterious. “It is an extension of personality. Leadership is an extremely personal thing” (Slim, 1963). He did not see much in what is currently called functional leadership theory. It was an approach too much managerial. He felt some sympathies towards the so-called situational leadership theory, but only up to a point beyond which the technical competence of the leader holds increasingly diminishing importance. Conversely Slim was a distinct proponent of quality approach to leadership.

Slim produced his own list of the qualities he saw required in the personality of successful leader. Courage, Will-power, Judgement, Mental flexibility, Knowledge and Integrity are the six qualities of a leader suggested by Slim. Mental flexibility was the quality of a leader that attracted the most attention of Slim. “The hardest test of generalship is to hold (the) balance between determination and flexibility” maintained Slim. He recognised the determination of his opposition – Japanese in Burma, their boldness and confidence (Slim, 2000:118), but that he considered also as their Nemesis – “lack of flexibility was a major Japanese fault” (Lewin, 1976:185). The failure by Japanese field commanders to exploit the actual encirclement of British forces in Burmese capital in the early stages of the Retreat (Slim, 2000:14) or the stubbornness to continue to engage harder

but less strategic objective as Kohima instead of Dimapur (Lewin, 1976:185) are the two of the experiences for Slim to say that Japanese leaders lacked an important quality of leadership – the courage to recognise a mistake and overcome it by the mental flexibility. “Time and again you will see in leaders a conflict between flexibility of mind and strength of will ... (but) every man must work this balance out for himself” (Adair, 2003:184). Slim agreed that it varies, but he still could not stress enough the critical importance of this quality to a leader.

2.2 Slim as a transformational leader

“Leadership is not imposed like authority. It is... wanted by the led” (Holmes, 2004:340). Leadership could obviously be exercised by authority however the authority without leadership can only “buy” the compliance and then only for a short term. It is rather difficult to see how an authority in the military could be operating without the leadership, when the circumstances of challenge require the leadership the most. Slim was visibly carrying out the leadership by stimulating and inspiring followers to achieve extraordinary outcomes and, in the process, developing his leadership skills as a prototypical transformational leader (Bass, Riggio, 2006:3).

The conceptual alternative to transformational leadership would be transactional one, but that is not something one could apply in Burma. There soldiers at a point in campaign had begun to refer to themselves as “the Forgotten Army”. This sign of the breach in the covenant at the mental level had to be bridged in the hearts of men. Slim set out to build “that intangible force which will move a whole of men to give their last ounce to achieve something, without counting the cost to themselves” (Slim, 2000:182). Slim was about to perform transformational leadership and there is said to be four components of transformational leadership: idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualised consideration (Bass, Riggio, 2006:5).

Slim’s idealised influence was exposed by generating the collective sense of mission. General was distinctive in his “identification of himself with his men, ... men of (his) army...spoke of fighting with, not under him”. Slim committed itself to get the men know him. It was his conviction that he has to speak to all and every combat unit of the Army. “My platform was

usually the bonnet of my jeep with the men collected anyhow around it" (Lyman, 2005:65) he wrote about his reach out to every one of the half-million in the army. In doing so he made men familiar with himself as well as he strived to stress that even the seemingly inconsequential effort as telephone operator's, sweeper's or quartermaster's orderly's do matter, fits into and contributes to the whole success.

The other aspect of his idealised influence is his mental stamina and resilience in the face of challenges. "He never knew when he was beaten. By retaining his composure he was able to retain the confidence of his men" (Lyman, 2005:63). Without exceptions Slim spoke to men cheerfully, "carrying in his hands the gifts of faith and self-confidence" (Lewin, 1976:91). The confidence he was radiating, argued psychologist Norman Dixon, was earning him the affection of his men "...perhaps more than any other commander ... since Nelson" (Lyman, 2005:66). By the middle of Burma campaign General Slim become universally called by his man as 'Uncle Bill'. This sobriquet is the symbol of the partnership Slim was building. However, the most symbolic display of collective sense of mission building was also a little bit theatrical: "When any of the forward formations had to go on half rations, as throughout the campaign they often did, I used to put my headquarters on half rations too" (Slim, 2000:195).

"But in the end every important battle develops to a point where there is no real control by senior commanders. ...the dominant feeling of the battlefield is loneliness," (Lewin, 1976:71) said Slim. That is why he felt the need to be engaged with the every man, because there is required "the resolution and spirit of each man" (Lyman, 2005:137) to go on even if he is all alone in the thick jungle. Slim conceptually recognised and considered important the second component of transformational leadership- inspirational motivation. He is said to be almost the only one form British generals of the Second World War, who possessed "the common touch- the ability to communicate high ideals in simple language" (Anderson, 1992:314). Slim was winning over his subordinates by manifestly talking sense (Lewin, 1976:126). Biographer Ronald Lewin goes still further and suggests that "the essence of Slim's achievement with the 14th Army was precisely this- the ability to communicate the faith that moves mountains" (Lewin, 1976:137). The inspirational motivation by Slim must have been as good as it may get.

The third component of transformational leadership is the intellectual stimulation. Maybe that is because of many years spent as student, instructor and commandant, but this element of transformational leadership almost seems to be inherent to Slim. "Commanders' conferences were not unlike post-graduate university seminars, with Slim as Chairman, guiding but not dominating discussion" (Lyman, 2005:233) observed historian Duncan Anderson. Slim was not in favour of decisions by committees, however he was very much "a natural democrat, sparing no pains to elicit from his subordinates a full spectrum of opinion about any important problem" (Lewin, 1976:194). And he was given the views and even the adverse ones, because he was respectful, approachable and good listener. Slim did not only consolidate and value the views, he "was also quick to pass on credit to his subordinates rather than accept it for himself" (Lyman, 2005:234). Still the intellectual stimulation was encouraged the most by the allowances to make mistakes. General Slim adopted a policy of allowing commanders to make mistakes "as long as they proved that they were able to learn from them" (Lyman, 2005:148). It must be because of his personal experience and a suspected concurrence with the Einsteinian aphorism that "anyone who has never made a mistake has never tried anything new" (Thomke, 2003:5).

The last conceptual component is the individualised consideration. At a point in this memoir General asserts (Slim, 2000:184) that the direct approach to the individuals is the way to achieve the surge in the fighting spirit. However this seems to be forgetting the enduring presence of a trait of his personality. "Slim was profoundly interested in people, with all the strength and weaknesses of the human condition, far more than he was interested in rank or status, behind which personal frailties lay obscured" (Lyman, 2005:115) asserts Slim's biographer Robert Lyman. From early civilian employment till the last public engagements he has applied the principal thought that a person is never a statistics. "(Slim) recollections are studded... with... precise and vivid details about individuals." (Lewin, 1976:113) He knew that he have to approach individually to be heard, but he also was well aware that everybody is special in his own right.

In Burma campaign he had to be sensitive about the individual interests. His Army consisted of only about 19% British troops, while more than half of troops were Indian (Lyman, 2005:227). Despite the knowledge of languages (Gurkhali, Urdu and Pashtu (Lewin, 1976:111) it was impossible

to reach literary each and everyone, but it is claimed that he was instrumental in creating the atmosphere of credibility in the Army to the lowest possible level of hierarchy. On the other end of this attentiveness to the individual is his unique relationship with two most famous and “picturesque” officers in the theatre – Wingate and Stilwell. Both were very challenging personalities. However they were placed under Slim’s command and Stilwell actually choose to be subordinated to Slim. Stilwell, an animated American, found Slim as the only British officer to whom he felt to be able to be subordinated, despite the fact that the operational command of the Stilwell’s forces normally would have had to be done by a higher level command than Slim’s.

These examples underline Slim’s aptitude to pay attention to the individual thereby enabling him to pull off the conception of shared ownership, commitment and involvement. Slim was looking to avoid as much as possible the staff officer positions during his military career. He recognised himself being much better employed at commanding positions – leading the troops. The transformational leadership is a comparatively young management jargon; however the leadership executed by Slim in Burma presents itself as the prime example of what we currently call the transformational leadership.

Conclusion

Slim is the personality nowadays most associated with the turnaround executed by British in Burma during the Second World War. The fact that the turnaround actually was attempted is itself significant; it required the strength to face the low priority of the theatre and the most destabilising experiences of the long British retreat. Slim was shrewd to establish at the start that British were not mentally, intellectually or materially prepared for the war with Japanese. He observed Japanese warfare and introduced the tactics that neutralised British disadvantages and at the same time formulated the principles of coming operations that would make possible to take away from Japanese the initiative. And along the way Slim established practice of jungle warfare and air supply that would have an enduring effect.

“Slim was a complete general” (Lewin, 1976:210), wrote Ronald Lewin, however this completeness hanged very much on Slim’s leadership skills.

At the end of the Retreat there was not a problem for people to recognise a disaster. It was the opposite – the disaster was seen on much greater scale than it was justified by the reality. The Japanese invasion into Burma was the stumbling block of British troops, but Slim was a source of energy that would get the army back on its feet and brace it to turn the doom of defeat into the assurance of victory. Trust, integrity and loyalty are said (Lewin, 1976:142) to be the founding concepts of Slim's life pattern. They were the bridge from Slim defined list of qualities he was seeking in a leader to the notion of transforming leadership. This triangle of personality, traits and process of leadership formed Slim's paradigm of transformational leadership – "the ability communicate the faith that moves the mountains" (Lewin, 1976:137).

Transformational leadership is about releasing people's inner force therefore it is not surprising that Slim maintained the view that Burma campaign holds a timeless significance (Slim, 2000:535). Beyond leading his man in a very "hands on" manner, Slim provides an example of leadership that not only emancipates individuals but also controls this newfound strength to the profit of his objectives. Coalition framework, multinational force, ultimate jointness and indirect and flexible approach are all the important concepts that Slim work through in transforming and leading his force.

Whatever the form or scope of warfare, Slim was convinced that there would continue to be two requirements- "skilled and determined junior leaders and self-reliant, physically hard, well disciplined troops" (Slim, 2000:549) while the victory would go to "the tougher, more resourceful infantryman" (Slim, 2000:540). These issues must have been perceived as "a bit" oldish in the "massive retaliation" environment of 1956 when they were written, but they sound more than actual today. He was the leader that saw and insisted on the importance of the individual and there he felt to be placed the true and perpetual role of the leader – to lead and empower the men.

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¹ General Slim was knighted for the success in Kohima/Imphal battles.

² There were two other forces in parallel action against Japanese in Burma at different times. Chinese forces under the formal command of US General Joseph Stilwell were engaging Japanese from China, while British organised two special forces (Chindits) operations- long range patrols- large formations going deep beyond Japanese lines.

³ CIC ALFSEA: Commander-in-chief Allied Land Forces South East Asia

⁴ (Lewin, 1976:123) *“Going into swampy jungle to fight the Japanese is like going into a water to fight a shark. It is better to entice him into a trap or catch him on a hook and then demolish him with axes after hauling him out onto dry land”*. his is the full text of memo written by Churchill to the Chiefs of Staff on May 8, 1943. There could be claimed that Slim was actually exercising this approach to the problem, but he was doing that exactly by going into the jungle.

⁵ There continues to be debated the role of the two Chindits operations (Long range penetration operations). However, there is rather broad agreement that the first operation definitely provided boost to morale in the Army.

⁶ It is interesting to note that Slim himself was very certain about the direction he would have to explore- it would be from the north. He developed 14th Army badge with the sword, hilt upper most, what is even against the prescriptions of the heraldry.

⁷ The full text of the relevant paragraph of Quebec conference directive (16/09/44) reads the following: *“3. If Dracula has to be postponed until after the monsoon of 1945, you will continue to exploit Operation Capital as far as may be possible without prejudice to preparations for the execution of Operation Dracula in November 1945”* (Lewin, 1976:197).

⁸ Slim changed the operation (“Capital”) from the limited one where was planned to engage Japanese forces on the shores of Irrawaddy to the operation (“Extended Capital”) that combined further advances over Irrawaddy on Mandalay with an undercover enveloping movement to south striking the logistics and command centre of Japanese armed forces at Meiktila. At much higher scale and level, but this was an execution of “hammer and anvil” tactics that was so well developed and applied in tactical engagements of jungle.

⁹ OODA- observe, orient, decide and act. This is a popular result of Col. John Boyd work, which represents his studies of the epistemology, game theory, military experience and history. The idea is that the one that is able to orient and act first would confuse the opposition and gain advantage.

¹⁰ Battle of Imphal/Kohima (March 1944-June 1944).

¹¹ The monsoon played the significant role also in the two other years of the campaign. The chase of the Retreat by Japanese halted with the onset of annual monsoon in 1942, while the predictable date of the start of monsoon was the target date for recapture of capital- Rangoon- in 1945.

¹² Battle of Meiktila and Mandalay (Dec 1944-March 1945).

¹³ It is meant here the HQ of 15th Corps. Slim commanded this unit from June 2, 1942 till October 22, 1943.

¹⁴ *“The hierarchy of Fighting Power comprises three inter-related components: conceptual, moral and physical”* (Burton, 2000:28).

¹⁵ There was also another important and critical concern- health issues. It was a special challenge in the jungle environment. Slim estimated that malaria, dysentery and exhaustion made sick some 80 per cent of the fighting men of the Retreat. In 1943, the ratio between sick and wounded to be evacuated was around 120 to 1. Slim made this issue as a personal one. He kept a chart in his office plotting the volume of sick at hospitals. He adopted the approach that the prevention is better than curing. That was the practical application of up to date knowledge on prevention, early treatment, with extensive use of air evacuation. However there was much dependence on the rise of morale- leadership factor again was the critical one to execute the changes. Slim was quick to dismiss a commanding officer if he failed to implement punctually the prescribed prevention programme.

¹⁶ That was a post taken by Major General Alf Snelling

¹⁷ General Slim explaining in this in a eloquent way: *“If man realise that everyone above them and behind them is flat out to get the things required for them, they will do wonders, as my men did, with the meagre resources they have instead of sitting down moaning for better.”* ‘No boats?’ asked Slim rhetorically to the Press Club in 1946. *‘We’ll build ‘em! No vegetables, we’ll grow ‘em! No eggs? Duck farms! No parachutes? We’ll use gully! [woven jute] No road metal?’*

Bake our own bricks and lay'm! No air strips? Put down bithess! [Hessian strips soaked in bitumen] Malaria, we'll stop it! Medium guns busting? Saw off three feet of the barrel and go on shooting! Their motto, 'God helps those who help themselves'" (Lyman, 2005:144).