

*Admiral Nimitz Historic Site
National Museum of the Pacific War*

Center for Pacific War Studies

Fredericksburg, Texas

Interview with

**Mr. James Black
British and Indian Army
Royal Engineers Bengal Sappers and Miners**

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Mr. Black: My name is James Black and I served with the Royal Engineers in the British and Indian Army, in the China, Burma, India area, between 1942 and 1945. In the British Command we called this area the Southeast Asia Command.

I was born in Glasgow, Scotland, May 10, 1920. Both my parents were Scottish. My father, also James Black, served with the British Royal Marines in World War I from 1914 until the war ended in 1919. My Mother was a Keenan, her maiden name, and she was born and raised in Glasgow, but she was Scotch Irish decent. I also had an elder sister Elizabeth, three years older, and I had a younger sister, Margaret, one year younger and she served in the British Army during World War II for five years. My brother Sidney, he is younger than me and he served in the British Royal Marine Commandoes for approximately five years. All three of us were gone from home all during the war.

I enlisted in the Territorial Army, the equivalent of the National Guard in the U.S. in 1937. In August, 1939, I was mobilized as an advance guard to prepare for a general mobilization which was declared in September 3, 1939, when Britain and France declared war on Germany (before Germany invaded Poland). I served in Belgium, France and Britain approximately well over two years before America brought their forces into the war. So actually prior to volunteer for service in the Indian Army I had already served over two years of active duty in the British Army.

I served in France and Belgium and came off of beaches north of Dunkirk in May, 1940, when the British Expeditionary Force had to be evacuated to Britain.

Shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor, and America's entry into World War II, it was decided that the Indian Army expansion had to be accelerated. Now with the Japanese into the war, Indian, Burma and other countries in the Far East were threatened. I volunteered for service in the Indian Army and qualified as an instructor which was essential.

After six week of additional training, I was on my way to India. I arrived at the King George the first Bengal Sappers and Miners Indian Engineers Regimental Headquarters in a place called Roorkee, India what was then the United Provinces, around the beginning of March, 1942. This Headquarters was located 160 miles northwest of New Delhi, near the foothills of the Himalayan Mountains. On arrival at the Regimental Depot I was assigned to a training area for drivers, mechanics and machinists, to assist the Indians and become acquainted with the groups in the Regiment. In the Regiment we had Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims. I had to learn the do's and don'ts for each of their religions. We were particularly instructed never to do anything that would show disrespect for their religions or customs. In addition I also had to attend classes each morning to learn to speak Urdu, or Hindustani as it is called, in order to be qualified to be able to join and active duty company. The training of drivers was difficult as most of the young men were eighteen or nineteen had never driven anything faster than a bullock cart. They were mostly farm boys although fortunately the mechanics were people who had some knowledge of driving and motor vehicles. To this end we had a miniature road system built with crossroads, bridges and road signs in a field inside the depot. To become qualified drivers, after about three weeks on this course and passing a test then they were taken in multiple convoy vehicles on the main highway. At least once a week I would go on one of these convoys as part of my training, and I would then be in charge of the convoy. Usually we left about 6:00 AM in the morning and returned about 9:00 PM the same day. These convoys went up to the foothills of the mountains and through a thick jungle, reputed to be one of the best

hunting areas in India. It was a hair-raising experience at times on the winding roads through the jungle with inexperienced drivers.

Along with others in my group, we had approximately thirty, I had difficulty learning the language. It was realized that most of us did not know or had forgotten our English grammar it was rather difficult for us to learn the new language. If you don't know your own language too well it is awful difficult to learn somebody else's. So in addition classes were added to our daily schedule, if you can imagine, on remedial English. Now our teacher was a professor from a Roorkee University. He was a Muslim himself from up in the Punjab Province. And he had the additional task of teaching us Scotchmen, Englishmen and Welshmen how to speak our own language or understand it anyway. Well the situation at that time was desperate really and it was urgent for us to pass at least a minimal grammar test. The normal requirements were lowered considerably compared to pre-war standards. There was no time for us to get to that efficient stage and so like others I passed what was called the minimal test which was an oral test. I was able to be assigned to a field unit and combat. I became part of the 16th Indian Field Company of the Regimental Headquarters in February, 1943. One day after joining the company and without time to get to know anyone very well, we set off to travel by road to Bombay. All of the drivers and mechanics, including myself, and another English NCO and one English Officer, and one Indian Sergeant, and another NCO with twenty-five vehicles in the convoy, including our drivers of course. The other members of the company traveled by rail to Bombay. In the company at that time there were four other British Officers and three Indian, what they called Viceroy Commissioned Officers, Indian NCOs, total of approximately one hundred sixty personnel. As I said, we went by road and they went by rail.

Now during my stay at Roorkee Field, I became acquainted with the hardships and diseases of India had to offer. Heat was the biggest problem in the beginning as we had arrived just probably at the tail end of the

monsoon into the dry summer months. Well during these hot summer months we would start work at 6:00AM, stop midday and start work again at 3:00 or 4:00 PM. And you can imagine going in at noon hour laying down on your bed with a mosquito net pulled down around you with nothing but a pair of underpants on and just actually lay in your bed just sweating and sweating. And the result was, within a week of our arrival we had people suffering from malaria, dysentery and heat stroke. Later on from all of this sweating, came a heat rash, a thing called ring worm and a host of other skin ailments and these were not very good. A relief from the skin ailments came with the monsoon rains and cooler weather. It made a difference. But there were always plenty of mosquitoes and snakes to remind us where we were.

Actually I enjoy the time spent HQ. The quarters were the best I had that far and the food was always good.

Well that all ended when as I say, we reached Bombay. We were stationed about twenty-five to thirty miles north of Bombay in a jungle area right on the coast. We arrived there June the later part of the monsoon season. There were rivers of water and mud everywhere and an abundance of snakes and mosquitoes. Here we trained on building bridges and took part in maneuvers with other units within the command. Along with my mechanics I soon learned to erect temporary shelters so we could make major repairs on vehicles and other equipment. Later we transferred to a jungle area just right on the beach and from there we were now able to become part of combined operations and begin training as invasion forces exiting onto the beaches from landing craft. My most difficult problem at that time was learning how to waterproof our vehicles to keep them running partially submerged in the water. Particularly with the Ford military vehicles we had at that time.

In the beginning when I joined a unit I had to say I was not very proper. A limited noise of the line made it difficult to get my ideas of instruction

across pretty well. Plus I was not a very patient person at that time. Luckily for me a Hindu Officer took me aside one day and said he would like to talk to me. He was a regular Army soldier and one of the most experienced officers in the company. His name was ??? Beni Ramsi, and he quietly persuaded me to take things easy and be more patient and considerate of the personnel. Actually I was supposed to be teaching and leading and I wasn't setting a very good example. So I really got good advice from him. For slightly over two years we sat together we became very, very good friends, we became best friends. Most of my time in the company we pretty well associated with ??? Beni Ramsi, a wonderful fellow.

Things went fairly smooth from there on. I was able to settle down and really learn what I had to do. And of course it wasn't all hard work and maneuvers. Now and again we got some time to rest and we were able to play games on the beach and have swim parties and a lot of fun. Then of course we played soccer and ground hockey which were two of the favorite sports at that time. I was fortunate to be able to play on both teams with one of the British officers, Lieutenant Burr. And whenever games could be arranged we would play against other units. And also an advantage in being near Bombay we were able, maybe three or four times a month, to go into town on Sunday and see a film and dine at a good restaurant. This made a good break at that time.

Also we took part in training at what would be called the Chin Ditch when we were picked to go on an operation on Operation Broadway. I particularly remember an incident at that time when our commanding officer told us of meeting with one of the American glider pilots at the briefing. The American was Jackie Coogan. He was a well-known film star. The rest of the company went by rail again to Calcutta while I took the vehicles and equipment on those horrible Indian roads again, and passing through Agra on the way up north. When reaching the city of Benares on the Ganges River, we received instructions to return to

Bombay. The operation had been scaled back and we were cut from the list of participants. When we were back in Bombay, we resumed our training again an awful lot on bridges because I was loaned out to another company to experiment using rather heavy pontoons and I was sent out there to experiment on building a crane to lift these pontoons. It was interesting. We were experimenting with different kinds of equipment and ways to handle the equipment and a lot about training procedures one of which I had to spend twenty-one days teaching Indians how to ride motorcycles for use in the convoy work. I had a very interesting time, as it always seemed like someone wanted me for something so I was kept very busy.

After time, combined operations came to an end after the Bombay fire. A ship loaded with cotton and high explosives caught on fire at the docks in Bombay Harbor. The whole thing exploded destroying more than twenty-five other ships in the harbor and some of our craft of our combined operations. And also killed was practically all of Bombay fire department, the explosion was so great. And it also destroyed most of our equipment. A lot of the buildings in the dock area caught fire which quickly spread to buildings near the docks and into the city proper, and threatened to engulf the whole of Bombay. We were close to Bombay at the time when we saw all this and were the first unit to recognize the need for help. Major Boucher (?sp), our commanding officer, quickly got us and other units into the fight to save the city.

Within twenty-four hours there was the tightest security blanket imposed you could ever imagine. There was a complete clamp down on all news about the incident. This included censoring of news papers and correspondence going out over the air. We weren't even allowed to write letters for a while. All of our cameras were confiscated and all the film developing companies were forced to give up any film or pictures of the damage and I can say this is why I was never able to take any combat pictures after that. I never got my camera back. It was years after the war

ended before this incident became public knowledge, because at that time it was quite a catastrophe. A lot of stuff was destroyed and I'm sure they didn't want the Japanese or the Japanese friends to know about this. So it was quite a tragedy at the time. Afterward, I read an article about it in Reader's Digest about twelve years ago and it's the only article I've ever seen about this incident.

While we were in Bombay and we had suffered through all this, I just happened to be going to the company office and I passed through the tent of my friend Lieutenant Bird, and I say this to illustrate how quickly we lost people, he was lying in his bed and I asked him what the problem was and he said he had a cold. Well sad to say, he died that night from polio.

Sometime around April or May, 1944, I don't have actual dates, we became part of the 33 Indian Corps that helped to break the Siege of Imphal in Kohima. There a greatly outnumbered group of British and Indian troops had held the Japanese at bay and stopped the Japanese Army from actually getting into India proper. There was very close hand to hand, eyeball to eyeball fighting and by sheer guts and determination they decided to deny the enemy to enter the India proper. At one time at the outcome of the battle we fought just about across the length of a tennis court. We fought under horrible conditions, monsoon rains, battling diseases like malaria, and dysentery. Typhus was rampant and of course we had the ever present leaches. They were terrible. We were completely surrounded for quite a while by the Japanese, but food, ammunition and other supplies were dropped in by low flying aircraft of the allied air forces. They also used to supply us because we experienced similar conditions as we pursued Japanese all the way to Rangoon and out of Burma. This successful action relieved a lot of pressure on the builders of the leader road on the northern part of Burma. They were building a leader road to connect up with the Burma Road.

As we advanced on the way to the Chindwin River, building and improving roads through the mountains and jungles, I really had a hard time keeping up with the company. Vehicles were breaking down, getting stuck in the mud and developing other problems. So at the rear of the convoy or company, we worked hard long hours to keep the company going. When we reached the Chindwin River the company built a fully floating Billy Bridge on the narrow, fast flowing part of the river. I found later that this was the biggest fully floating Billy Bridge of World War II. I was never able to confirm that but I read about it in a book somewhere.

After building the bridge, we had what you could call a short time to rest so we were working around the bridge and the roads. I remember Christmas Eve, 1944, the Japanese Air Force attack the bridge, attempting to destroy it. One bomb struck the bridge but failed to explode. It went harmlessly through the wooden deck and went between two of the pontoons and didn't do any damage and was easily repaired. I'd like to report that at that particular time, all of the troops in Burma were badly undernourished. I was more fortunate by being with the Indians and being an Engineer. Food had not been a priority and that was one of the reasons the troops were so susceptible to the illnesses, typhus and cholera and of course malaria which was terrible. But somebody had the great idea of dropping meat for the British troops who hadn't had meat in months. They dropped this meat a day before Christmas so that these British troops could have roast beef for Christmas dinner. Unfortunately, the British anti aircraft gun units which were defending the bridge, had nothing to cook this meat in. My commanding officer brought the Sergeant Major of the British gun crews to see what I could do about it. I managed to make a drawing and give it to a couple of mechanics and we made them a field oven as I called it so that they could roast their meat for Christmas dinner. And Christmas day I could smell it...terrific...so the Sergeant Major brought me over a piece and thanked me for making his oven.

That was the condition that most of the troops fought under. Food was scarce, and supplies were very hard to get to them. It was the worst country in the world to work in. Plus, there were no roads of any kind. Most of the time, the airdrops were concerned with ammunition and supplies, to keep the vehicles and other equipment moving.

After we built the Chindwin River bridge we set off to proceed in the direction of Mandalay and crossing of the Arawaddy River. There we built rafts with Billy Bridge equipment, and any equipment we could build a raft with to ferry the troops across the river which was probably fifteen or sixteen hundred yards at that crossing. While we were preparing for all this simultaneously we sent groups of men out to take part in diversionary actions in other parts of the river, drawing some of the Japanese forces away from the main crossing. Once we got the bulk of our columns across the river we loaded these rafts with supplies and sent them downstream toward Rangoon. We headed around the point in the river near the oil field because when I got to the rendezvous the whole river was just covered with an oil slick. It was probably a leak from the oil fields that had been blown up during the retreat from Rangoon up to northern India by the British and Indian forces.

While some of the rafts did not make it to the rendezvous, we were in a real hurry at that time, I was forced to go back up the river in a motor boat at night, which normally was a no-no in the jungle even almost all the way to Rangoon. You didn't move around at night. You formed a defense perimeter and just held position until you could see what you were doing the following day. But against all rules and regulations, we needed these supplies so up the river I went in a motor boat. Fortunately before this, we had found a Japanese fighter plane that had been shot down in the jungle and I had removed the two landing lights. One of them I used as a searchlight on the motor boat and was able to locate these rafts which were stuck on sand banks on a bend in the river. The river hadn't been dredged in over three years and this was the results of it.

Well with the motor boat pulling and men in the water pushing, we managed to get them all afloat and send them down the river. Actually it was amazing we weren't attack by the Japanese patrols which were still active in the area. Of course I was told about this later. It didn't do much for my shattered nerves when I also realized later that I had gone on this trip unarmed. I guess some times it pays to be lucky.

From then on it was a race to get to Rangoon and try to be the first column to enter the city. A week ahead of being in Rangoon the intelligence had reported and given us a wonderful list of all the Japanese officers and senior NCOs and where they were located in the city, which was an amazing piece of work. We were not first into the city. The combined operations had landed to the south of Rangoon and two parachute battalions and landed in Rangoon and they captured the city. Once having captured the city, instead of coming north to me it was coming south. I suppose it was planned that way, but we had hoped to enter Rangoon first. Although the big rush truly was to enter Rangoon before the monsoon started. Operating in a monsoon was very difficult.

During all this, Major Boucher, our Commanding Officer, and a couple of other officers were rotated out and replaced by new officers. I didn't know at the time but found out afterwards that there was some ruling that those of us who had served our three and a half to four years overseas, it was deemed time for us to be replaced and this was what was happening.

The other engineer that had been with me when we left India, and as soon as we got to Imphal, he was replaced then and the new replacement Sergeant luckily for us at the time, was very familiar with Billy Bridge building and was a great asset during construction of the Chindwin River bridge. When we reached Rangoon it was almost a complete new group of British personnel. All of the officers had been replaced, but fortunately I knew the new commanding officer and a couple of the other officers.

As soon as the reorganizing and initiation was completed we were then put to work rerouting the main road into Rangoon around the extended Mingaladon (sp?) Airport runway. There had been a couple of accidents earlier evidently because the runway was too short for large transport planes to land safely.

I remember the war in Europe had ended long before we arrived in Rangoon, I was listening to the shortwave radio and I heard about the end of the war. I knew there was a British outfit near us, and I crawled out to the edge of our defense perimeter and I shouted out to these British soldiers....did you hear the great news fellows? The war in Europe is over. And the reply I got back was...don't tell us, tell the Japs.

Anyway, by the time we got to Rangoon the war was over and what was happening then was an arrangement that had been made, that as soon as the war in Europe was over Britain would start to hand over the control of the Indian Army. When the British officer was rotated out he was replaced by an equal ranking Indian officer. Just before two of our officers were replaced with Indian officers. This was the start of the phasing out of the British control of Indian regiments. With this reorganization of the company, we now had three British officers and three Indian officers, including a very capable medical officer who was an Indian. He had been with us all the way up to Rangoon and had done wonderful work.

While we were working on the road, I was given instructions to give up all my heavy vehicles, and it almost broke my heart having nursed them all the way down to Rangoon. Then I realize that we had to slip down to only very light vehicles and invasion equipment. That meant that we would be able to move faster and lighter and only have enough rations, whichever beach we landed on, they would last us five days pending proper supplies being sent up.

Well this was the first indication I had that we be back on combined operations and we were going somewhere else. We board the ships in Rangoon Harbor and left Burma to invade Malaya. Our objective was Peni (sp?) Island. It's a beautiful island just off the northwest course of Malaya. The island had an airport which we were to repair or rebuild as necessary for use by the allied forces. We were several days at sea before coming in to ????. We did not attack as planned, we were told we were to hold back until further orders. Three days later we were informed about the atom bombs and the Japanese surrender. Our Marines and the British Navy went ashore on the island first they disarmed the Japanese and accepted their surrender briefly. While the Japanese were being moved to the mainland we landed and took up residence in formerly British barracks the Japanese had been using. We were welcomed by the people of the island with no big fanfare and immediately started to work on the airport. Actually, the only people on the island were at that time were Eurasians and Chinese. All the British had been taken away and were in prisoner of war camps or some of them had probably been part of the big retreat up through Burma with British forces. The only people on the island at that time were Eurasians and Chinese.

We started work on the airport. The main idea was for Allied forces to use it as a stopover for flying allied prisoners of war to hospitals in India for treatment before sending them on their way home. All of these prisoners were in very poor shape physically from starvation and cruel treatment as Japanese prisoners of war. I learned later from one of these prisoners that the Japanese had forced them to dig their graves. The intent being, as soon as the invading forces landed in Malaya, these prisoners were all to be executed. It was estimated that there were 60 to 70,000 allied prisoners in Malaya and Thailand at that time. And this would have been an enormous massacre. I later met other people and confirmed this.

By the end of October or November, 1945, we had completed our work on the island and we were moved over to the mainland. As usual I was at the rear end, the last to leave and in making sure all of our equipment and vehicles were safely on their way on the ferries and on their way over to the mainland. Much to my surprise as I approached the entrance to our new quarters I was greeted with the turnout of the guard in full khaki dress orders. The Indian soldiers had managed to smuggle their dress khaki uniforms and full color turbans all the way from India for this special day. They liked to dress up. They were very proud of themselves and were grinning like Cheshire cats as I saluted them passing the garters (sp?). That night at dinner I was informed by a visiting intelligent officer my job was over and I was free to leave the next day. I was able to hitch a ride on a plane to Singapore and go home.

Four days later I sailed from Singapore with the first group of Dutch and British civilians who had been in these prisoner of war camps for over three years. We sailed into England just before Christmas, 1945. The ship was greeted by the men of South Hampton and other dignitaries to welcome the civilian prisoners home. Much to my surprise while watching I thought I recognized a fellow standing on the pier as they were lowering the gangplank and I said to the fellow next to me...I think that's my brother. He said where. So I told him his name and four or five started shouting his name and who should it be but my brother. He had gotten wounded in Normandy and had gotten permission to leave the hospital and come and meet the ship with me on board it. They had found out that I was among the batch coming home at that time. So that was a nice welcome home.

The Indian Army, I might add, was an all volunteer Army. I think it was approximately three million strong. The largest volunteer Army ever raised. Approximately one and a quarter million of them fought in Burma, making them about sixty percent of all the multi-national forces in the 14th Army.

General ??? was in command of all the action in Burma. The Army was comprised of all ethnic groups in India, people from Burma, East and West Africa, British, a few Australians, Canadians and the Air Force and Gurkas of course from Nepal, the Americans under General Stilwell were also under the command of General ??? as well as the Chinese, was also under the command of General Stilwell.

The Supreme Commander of all these operations in South Asia, was of course Lord Mountbatten who had such a big part in the transfer of Government from British to Indian after the war. This International Army, I estimated, and it has been proven, handed Japan the biggest defeat of the war. I don't want to underestimate the ability of the Japanese Army. They were excellent, absolutely well disciplined, they didn't give up ground easily and they usually fought until they were all killed. In fact I saw very few prisoners all the time we fought and they usually fought to death. And of course they suffered the same hardships that we did. And they succumbed to diseases and all the things we had to put up with.

At Kohima where a lot of the action took place, there is now a monument to fallen comrades. And lying side by side, just where they died during the invasions, are Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, all buried side by side. On the monument is inscribed the Kohina Appita (sp?). It goes this way:

When you go home tell them of us and say, for you tomorrow.

We gave our today.

And I think that is a very fitting thing to pass on to future generations. Although there will be a lot of criticism and a lot of second guessing going on, the difficult job had to be done and it was certainly wonderful that all these different religions and nationalities could come together and fight side by side and do a good job.

Once arriving back in England and going to regimental headquarters, I was given one month leave and of course was welcomed back home by my family. The strangest thing was, when I got off the train in my hometown, my mother had come down to the station to meet me and she walked right past me. Didn't even recognize me. I say this because most of us at that time who came right from where we had been fighting for three years had lost weight. We all lost weight. The average was fifteen or twenty, some lost as much as thirty pounds of weight. And of course, she was quite mortified, but things got sorted out okay. But she worried a lot about me because I'm even months later when I came out of the Army I still couldn't eat a big meal, my stomach was so used to getting along with so little. But we all did get wonderful welcomes from our family, churches and other organizations we belonged to.

I feel the war had an effect, especially on my father, who by the way did suffer recurring malaria bouts from World War I. But it really seemed to have aged my parents, but maybe it was because I had been gone for four years. I noticed it definitely wore down my father because he had visions of World War I and he imagined my brother and I especially probably going through some of the things he went through. And of course he thought of my sister being stationed in England on anti-aircraft batteries and on radar and things like that. She was also in areas that were heavily bombed, so I imagine that had a lot to do with wearing them down and making them look so old by the time I got home from overseas.

I spent another six months and for a while I was a battalion Sergeant Major of a holding battalion in England where people like myself came from overseas and when their time was up we would send them away for their demobilization. And when there were people who still had time to go we would ship them off to Europe to for occupation or other places where they could be used.

I finally got out of the Army in June, 1946, and later I went in the Merchant Navy as an engineer and sailed between Canada and Britain. But that wasn't what I wanted to be. I originally intended to be that, but it just didn't seem the thing for me to do, so in 1947 I immigrated to Canada. In 1948, I met my wife from my hometown of Glasgow, Scotland. She had also served four and a half years in the Royal Air Force and we got married in 1949, we had two children, a boy and a girl and then in 1960, we came to the United States having passed all the tests to become eligible at the American Embassy in Toronto, Ontario. I have been living in Southern California ever since then and enjoying the good life.

I am very active in two veteran's organizations, the China, Burma, India Veterans Association and the Burma Star Association, the first American branch here where it covers all of the United States. I keep busy with them and keep getting with old comrades and remembering those who have gone on before us.

Transcribed by:
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