JUNGLE FIGHTER: MEET SHAAM LAL

Film transcript

Oh, you're one of us. You gave me a start. Don't make so much noise. I don't recognise your face – you must be a new recruit. Welcome to Burma. It's a good job I've been out here for a while. In the early days, if you were so noisy, coming out of nowhere, you'd have been met by a hail of bullets! That's one thing you soon learn in the jungle – there's no front line, as my uncles told me there was in the Great War. The enemy can come from anywhere – the perimeter is circular. They can be in front of you, behind you, come from the sides – so we have to be careful not to reveal our positions.

The Japanese send out 'jitter' parties to shake us up and try and find out where we are, shouting out, 'why are you here? Your wives are waiting for you!', 'we are your friends, Johnny Gurkha!', 'Jai Hind!'. Or they pretend to be wounded and call out for help in English or Urdu. You must not reply or fire at the sound of their voices, or you will soon be under fire. The best thing – lie still with a grenade and keep an eye open. The best way to keep watch is low down. In that position, you can see a movement, especially someone standing. Even then, wait until the enemy comes close and use a bayonet or a knife, so no flash from a rifle gives away the position you hold. A well-trained and well-disciplined unit resists the temptation to fire until actually under attack. Keep your powder dry. A windy unit lets off all its guns at the slightest rattle of twigs. I heard that one battalion once saw that they were under attack and threw grenades at the enemy but didn't take out the pins. No one was even there, just jungle noises. At least they didn't shoot. Even if it had gone off, a grenade is better as it doesn't show the enemy where you are.

Now, we are a well-trained and well-disciplined unit. 1st Battalion, 16th Punjab Regiment, 23rd Indian Division of the 14th Army. 'The Forgotten Army' – that's our nickname. But the Supreme Commander, Lord Mountbatten, said, 'I hear you call yourself the Forgotten Army? Well, let me tell you that you are not. In fact, nobody has even heard of you. But they will hear of you because of what we are going to do'.

My name is Shaam Lal, from the Punjab, and this feels a long way from the plains of the Punjab, I can tell you. I had never been into a jungle before this war. I suppose you've had jungle training too. We had to build our own shelters. We learned to live in the jungle and be comfortable in it. We saw wild elephants, tigers and snakes, and

learned to cope. We learned to respect and make use of the forest. There are a lot of snakes in Burma. We lost one or two people on that training to snake bites. I was almost one of them. Taking cover behind the bush, I heard a small hiss, like the puncture of a bicycle tyre. I moved backwards very, very slowly and saw a tiny grey snake on a branch. I smashed the butt of my rifle on it! It was a krait, one of the world's deadliest snakes. Observing the exercise, my captain was upset by the commotion – 'what's all the fuss over a small snake?', he shouted. He had to be told by a subadar that it was deadlier than a .303 bullet.

I had defeated my first enemy and now we seem to be winning the Battle of Burma. After a long time on the defensive, we are at last moving forward and the Japanese are retreating. We held out at Kohima and Impal and prevented the Japanese taking Dimapur and moving forward into India. Now they are in retreat, but it is a fighting retreat, so we are still taking casualties and we have to have our wits about us.

You may be wondering why I am fighting for the British Army – in fact, why I ever joined up in the first place. I am a Dogra – a 'Martial Race', as the British call us – and there's a long tradition of serving in the army in my village. My father said that I should always be brave, never lose heart, obey my officers and treat my mates decently, and that is what I have done. My service brings honour to my family and my village. And for me – I am fed, paid well enough, and have all the pleasures of an outdoor life. That's not to say that I don't want India to be free and independent one day. One of the officers once also asked me why I was fighting for the Allies and I said to him, 'Sahib, you share my house, it is only right that in times of trouble I should help you. But when this is all over, then we will kick you out of India!'.

If I think like that, why haven't I joined the INA, the Indian National Army? Well, I heard that was formed mainly from those who were defeated in Malaya and Singapore and offered the choice of joining the INA or being prisoners of war, and perhaps even being used for bayonet practice. The Japanese do not surrender and regard anyone who does with contempt and treat them accordingly. So, I can understand those Indians who signed up. I'd like to think I would not have done it though. I do not think that a Japanese victory would be good for India and, as I said, let us fight this battle first before we look to the future. So, for now, the INA are with the enemy, and worse than that, they are traitors. We have come across them and they do not fight well. We are better organised, better trained, and the Japanese are using the INA more as porters and 'coolies' now than fighting men. There is little honour in that.

Am I proud to be a Dogra soldier? Well, I am proud of my battalion, and in my battalion we have Dogras, Sikhs and Punjabi Muslims, and I am proud of all of them. I wished I was a Gurkha and only five feet tall instead of the almost six foot I am. The bigger you are, the bigger target you make.

Can I give you some advice? You are turning to an old hand, but my pleasure. Make sure you take your Mepacrine. Disease can account for more casualties than the enemy. Mepacrine will give you a better chance of avoiding malaria. But there are other diseases too: tick typhus, dysentery, cholera. Hygiene is important here and you'll get to know a few leeches, I think. Once, we were shot at when crossing an open paddy field and we had to lay in water for half an hour. Every one of us had 40 to 50 leeches hanging off us and spent a good half hour in removing them. Some leeches can go through the lace holes in your boots. The most fearsome were elephant leeches, some six to nine inches long in drainage ditches – 'chaungs' – or rivers. We took them off with a lighted cigarette. That's the best way. If you try and pull them off, you can leave the head in there, and that can become nastily infected.

I must warn you too that the fighting can be very intense, often hand-to-hand. There have been some heroic defensive actions down to the last bullet, last man. And beware of wounded enemy, as they often have a concealed grenade and will take you with them, or wait until you walk past them and then shoot you in the back. In battle you reach an extreme sense of hatred. But it goes away. You feel sad. How insane war is. But if you don't kill the enemy? He will kill you.

What's this? Oh, you noticed it. It's half of a Japanese 'good-luck flag'. I've been told they are given to Japanese soldiers, signed by family, friends and colleagues with messages of support and good wishes. Maybe he looked at it sometimes and thought of his home, like I think of my village sometimes. This one was taken when the first Highland Seaforths, part of one brigade in our division, attacked enemy positions at Lokchao Bridge during the advance to Tamu. In the fighting, two of the Highlanders killed the Japanese soldier who was carrying this flag. They could not decide which of them should keep it, so they tore it in half. Sadly, a few days later, one of them was himself killed, and his portion lost. This is the other, which was given to me. It doesn't seem to have been very lucky so far. Perhaps you would like it? No, of course not.

What I think of the Japanese? Well, at first, given the speed with which they captured Malaya and Singapore and drove the British Army out of Burma, we thought they were supermen – undefeatable. But we learned. Every day we were on manoeuvres

of some sort or another, patrols – day and night, ambushes, water crossings, forced marches. The methods used by the Japanese were well known. We had to beat them at their own game, using roadblocks, flank attacks, the cover of the jungle, and we found that they were beatable. Tough, yes, but not invincible. One thing we all noticed was that the Japanese never seemed to fear death. They were very, very brave.

What am I doing here? This is the DZ – the drop zone – for supplies. We have supremacy in the air now which has been very helpful. It means that air cover can be brought in to support operations, and that supplies can be dropped. With all the different troops fighting out here, there are 30 different types of ration having to be supplied to remote terrain. And you have to be careful, too, where the supplies come down – you don't want to be hit by a package of rice. I heard that one of the Chindit soldiers was killed by a bale of fodder being dropped for their mules when they were behind enemy lines early in the war. But as I say, we're on the offensive now, driving the Japanese back and out of Burma. You'll do all right here. You've picked a good time to arrive. Off you go.

What about the monsoon? The monsoon makes it difficult to move and engage the enemy and has often led to a suspension in fighting, a close season. But now, Lieutenant-General Slim wants us to press on and keep driving the Japanese back, not give them the time to regroup. There are rumours saying that when we reach Tamu we'll be relieved by another unit and go back to India. This would mean a reduction in pay, so I'm not all for it. And if you say that makes me a mercenary, I will not say a word about it except that I am yet to meet a soldier of any rank and of any nationality who is doing work without accepting any money in return. Besides, having been on the defensive for so long, I am keen to take part in the victory. A victory for the Allies, and a victory for India too. Jai Hind!