

BRITISH OFFICER ROBERT MOLE - ACTIVE in ARAKAN during WW2 - HAD IMPORTANT and REVEALING INSIGHTS and EXPERIENCES

by Rick Heizman

Robert Mole served with the British armed forces as a Civil Affairs Officer - CAO - during WW2, mostly in Arakan. He learned and could speak both Burmese and Arakanese languages. A CAO officer acts as a liaison between the Army and civilian authorities and populations, basically assisting the local population of civilians that are trapped, effected, refugees, or soon to be effected by war. In this case, during WW2, the Japanese were advancing quickly and brutally to the farthest corner of Burma - which is Arakan.

(Arakan = Rakhine State, Arakanese Buddhists = Rakhine Buddhists) **bold** is mine

Robert Mole wrote about Northern Arakan:

"I was to report to the DCCAO with 15th Corps; this meant that my destination was Bawli Bazaar (20 miles north of Maungdaw town) in North Arakan. The one area which I hoped to avoid was North Arakan, since the part under our control was populated entirely by Chittagonians, and there were no Burmese or Arakanese there. (at that time it is right after the 1942 Maungdaw Massacre where the Buddhists were genocidally cleansed from the land - and any Buddhist trying to go anywhere there was in mortal danger) Tine Che, who had been with the rest of our Burmese staff since we had reached India, said he would go with me, though I warned him that he would probably find himself the only Burmese" (Tun Che was Robert Mole's loyal servant for many years. Mole had also studied and spoke both Burmese and Arakanese)

*"North Arakan had been peopled by a mixture of Arakanese Buddhists and **Muslims of Chittagonian origin**. After the collapse of the administration in 1942, communal strife had broken out, with the result that the two communities had become segregated, the Chittagonians concentrating in the north and the Arakanese in the south. Between the two was a sort of no man's land. **The area occupied by the Chittagonians now became so Indian (Muslim) that the Burmese and Arakanese languages were no longer understood; and all the Buddhists pagodas and monasteries were destroyed.**"*

*"As a result of the communal disturbances (the 1942 genocide of Buddhist Arakanese by Bengali Muslims that killed all the more than 100,000 Buddhists of Northern Arakan) which occurred in 1942 after the British evacuation from Arakan and to which I have referred before, the entire population of this area was now Muslim. **They were Chittagonian by race and spoke a type of Bengali. Only a very few could speak Arakanese, a dialect form of Burmese, and we relied almost entirely on interpreters for communication with them.**"*

*“One grew rather tired of seeing only Chittagonian civilians, wearing their little white Mohammedan caps, and with their shirts invariably hanging outside their longyis. **They were not a people who could inspire much affection**, but they had their good qualities, and I was told of Chittagonians who went unconcernedly about their work in the fields while fighting raged around them.”*

Here, he remarks about the many Arakanese Buddhists who fled into British territory, across the Naf River, into Chittagong, for safety, after the Burmese conquest of Mrauk-U, the royal capital of the great Buddhist Kingdom of Arakan in 1784. (The British India Empire ruled right up to the Naf River). At that time Chittagong was mostly Buddhist - and had been a part of the Kingdom of Arakan for a couple of centuries. The name Chittagong comes from the old Burmese name *Tsit-ta-gung*, or *Sittaguang*, which means ‘to make war is improper’.

“Across the Indian border there were settlements of Arakanese Buddhists, whose forebears had fled into British territory during the Burmese invasions of Arakan at the end of eighteenth century. They spoke their own dialect of Burmese and dressed in the Burmese fashion, and it was something of a paradox that we in North Arakan should have to cross into India (now Bangladesh) to see Burmese villagers and to hear Burmese spoken.”

Here, Mole refers to the many thousands of Arakanese Buddhists who had to flee for the lives, with the help of Officer Mole, to safety in Dinajpur, India (now Bangladesh), during the Maungdaw Massacre of 1942, where 30,000 Buddhists were killed in Maungdaw alone, and many thousands more, up and down the Mayu Peninsula and in Buthidaung. The Bengali Muslims also torched hundreds of Buddhist villages in Maungdaw Township, causing 100,000 terrified Buddhist villagers to flee. When the war ended, and the British came back, they were aghast at the carnage that had happened, and demanded that the Bengali Muslims let the returning Buddhists reclaim their ancestral villages - but the Muslims did not cooperate with that, and very few of the ruined Buddhist villages were able to be reclaimed by their rightful owners.

*“Once I went back to my old stamping-grounds of 1944 – Bawli (20 miles north of Maungdaw town, still on a dirt road) and Kappagaung (a few miles north of Maungdaw town) – and found it greatly changed. In place of military camps and dusty roads there were now thriving villages and green paddy fields. **The area was still completely Chittagonian, but the people had a pretty good idea that it could not be long before the Arakanese refugees were allowed back.**”*

Officer Mole comments on the claim that some Bengali Muslims make - that they were promised a Muslim-Only State by British officers, for their assistance in fighting the Japanese. This claim was modified later, when, the claim was that Burmese Leader U Nu promised to grant them a separate, autonomous Islamic State (in exchange for votes, which U Nu desperately needed during the 1958 elections).

“One of the Muslim Township Officers assured me, in the course of this tour, that a promise had been given in 1943 by one of our early Civil Affairs Officers that North Arakan would remain exclusively Muslim forever. Since, as I have explained, large parts had been predominantly Arakanese Buddhist before the war (and the 1942 Genocide), it was inconceivable to me that any such promise could have been given. The claim smacked a little too much of Mr Mohammed Ali Jinnah, whose map of the future state of Pakistan was said to have included north Arakan. Before I left Arakan we were making preliminary plans for resettling the Arakanese in the north.”

Mole describes some of the work he did as a CAO officer:

“My work with the troops - part from my regular social visits to brigade headquarters - included such matters as agreeing in what areas civilians could carry on their cultivation without endangering the security of any units, dealing with complaints that they were cultivating too near to military camps, warning the local villagers when a unit wanted to do some firing practice, investigating complaints when their cattle were hit in such practices, and arranging for the maintenance of the airstrip at Bawli.”

Mole’s work in Mrauk-U - the spectacular ruined capital of the Buddhist Kingdom of Arakan. The Japanese army used the ruined royal city as a major army base and weapons depot in Arakan. Under some of the largest temples were spiraling underground corridors in which Japanese soldiers lived and slept, as well arms, ammunition and explosives were stored.

“We were perturbed by the amount of arms and explosives left in the area. Besides those issued by Force 136 (a British Special Operations Force), there were those which had been abandoned by the Japanese in their retreat. Our troops too, when they moved on, had left a house in Myohaung (Mrauk-U) full of ammunitions; I had to place a police guard on it for about a month until the army made arrangements for some of the ammunition to be removed and the rest destroyed. Japanese bombs had been left lying about the town, and there were also some Allied bombs which had failed to explode when dropped. I asked for a bomb disposal squads, who spent about 10 days in Myohaung (Mrauk-U) and exploded all the bombs that they could find. From time to time a villager would be brought to our hospital who had picked up something which proved to be a grenade and had had part of his hand blown off.”

“The Inspector and I toured our charge as much as we could. Our main objectives as we went round the villages were to assure the people that the Japanese had gone for good and the British administration was back, to call on all persons in possession of firearms to bring them in for licensing, and to ask for the villagers cooperation with the police in reporting the presence and movements of dacoit (robber) gangs. These little communities made such arrangements as they could to welcome me and to celebrate the arrival of the first British official since our evacuation. I was invited to meals in their houses, and one evening a

Burmese pwe (music, dance, comedy) was organized. The people were really out to enjoy themselves, and one of the items in the pwe was a song composed in my honor.”

“I inspected all the historic pagodas to find out what repairs if any, were needed. One of the smaller ones had collapsed on one side, but most of them required only to be cleared of grass and scrub. No maintenance had been carried out since the Japanese invasion, and I thought that, for both archaeological and political reasons, it would be a good move to pay for the pagodas to be cleared. I obtained permission to do this, and the local people turned up willingly to work; they even agreed to give one day’s labor free. When we had finished the pagodas, we started clearing the site of the old palace-city and the walls. Before the war a collection of old stone inscriptions had been housed in a small building near the government offices. These I found lying scattered, some with pieces broken off. I was fortunately able to find the former caretaker who, to my surprise, produced from memory a diagram showing where each stone had stood, and could tell me exactly how many were missing. In fact very few were lost, and I had the stones collected and set up in a temporary shed until such time as an archaeological expert could come and examine them.”

And, Officer Robert Mole’s perspective on the huge influx of Indian immigrants - in this case Indians means both Hindus and Muslims from India, however, the Muslim immigrants far outnumbered the Hindus, and indeed there were issues with both, but, the Hindus assimilated, and had no problem living in a predominantly Buddhist country, whereas the Muslims constantly made loud demands, issues, and problems.

“The demand for field labor in the early days was such that great numbers of Indian immigrants arrived. Their much lower standard of living enabled them to compete on favorable terms with the Burmese for land tenancies. Moreover, the Burmese cultivator’s need for capital soon drove him and his land into the hands of the Indian moneylenders. Lower Burma was rapidly overrun by Indian immigrants, who came to work in the delta rice fields and in the ports. Had it not been for them, the economic development of Burma could not have proceeded at such an astonishing pace, but the social problems raised by the presence of ultimately over a million immigrants of alien race and religion and a lower standard of living were considerable. Not only were Indians employed as laborers, many were brought over by the British to staff the lower ranks of the new administration, and even in the last days of British rule the majority of the subordinate officials in such departments as the posts and telegraphs, the railways and public works, were Indians. There was no love lost between the Burmese and the Indians.”

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