

INTRODUCTION

There was a man of genius, who might well have become also a man of destiny

Winston Churchill¹

Much of what he preached strategically, operationally, and tactically, was flawed, and some of it was downright nonsense.

Major General Julian Thompson²

These two quotations provide but a tiny sample of opinions of Major General Orde Charles Wingate (1903–44), a well-known and controversial figure in both Britain and Israel. His reputation, and popular image, stem from three episodes occurring late in a military career beginning with his graduation from the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich, in 1923 and ending with his death in an air crash in Burma in 1944. First was the Palestine Arab uprising of 1936–9, when Wingate, then a captain in the Royal Artillery, was authorized by two British General Officers Commanding (GOC) Palestine, General Sir Archibald Wavell and General Sir Robert Haining, to train Jewish policemen, in British-organized irregular units, in his personal brand of counter-insurgency. These included Moshe Dayan and Yigal Allon, and they, and, later, Ariel Sharon identified Wingate as a major influence upon Israeli military thought.³ However, he roused strong feelings even then, as he deployed Jewish units, in majority Arab areas, in pre-emptive and reprisal attacks on Arab villages believed to be hiding insurgents, and used some robust methods to extract intelligence from captured suspects.⁴ The second episode came late in 1940, when Wingate was summoned by Wavell, now Commander in Chief, Middle East, to take over an operation organized by G(R), an offshoot of the MI(R) covert warfare branch of the British War Office, aimed at escalating and steering guerrilla resistance in Italian-occupied Ethiopia. For this, Wingate utilized ‘Gideon Force’, a purpose-organized regular formation, cooperating occasionally with local tribal irregulars.⁵ It was after Ethiopia that Wingate began to advocate what he claimed was a new form of warfare, designated Long Range Penetration (*sic*), based upon his interpretation of his operations in Gojjam and which he argued held the key to victory against the

Axis.⁶ In Britain, Wingate is best remembered for the third episode, his command of brigade-sized Long Range Penetration Groups, light infantry units, ostensibly using 'guerrilla' methods, and supplied and supported by air, in two major operations deep inside Japanese-occupied Burma, Operations *Longcloth*, of February–May 1943, and *Thursday* of March–August 1944. *Thursday* opened with two LRP brigades being inserted by air, and also featured a specialist unit of the United States Army Air Force (USAAF), No.1 Air Commando, providing transport, supply by airdrop and battlefield close air support.⁷

Wingate's Long Range Penetration Groups are better remembered as the *Chindits*, a propaganda name derived from Wingate's mispronunciation of *Chinthey*, the stone griffin-figures which guard Buddhist temples in Southeast Asia; as part lion, part dragon, they seemed an apt symbol for an air–land force, and their religious significance to the Burmese was not lost on Wingate, either.⁸ Wingate suffered his fatal air crash during *Thursday*, and much of the literature upon him centres on a posthumous controversy concerning whether his Chindit operations were cost-effective in terms of lives lost versus objectives attained. To Wingate's detractors, they were unsound, wasteful of lives and resources and an unnecessary diversion from the 'real war', the destruction of Japanese formations in main-force battle. Conversely, among friends and supporters, Wingate is remembered as a military genius of the highest order whose ideas played a decisive part not only in defeating Japan in Southeast Asia but in earlier operations in Palestine and Ethiopia also.

This controversy solidified in the 1950s around two works, Volume III of the British Government's *Official History of the War against Japan*, authored largely by the former Director of Staff Duties, India, Major General S. Woodburn Kirby, and *Defeat into Victory*, the memoirs of the main British land forces commander in Burma, Field Marshal Lord Slim.⁹ Both clashed bitterly with Wingate when he was alive, and both question not only his professional abilities, but his mental stability also.¹⁰ Wingate was certainly 'different': brought up in the Plymouth Brethren, he regarded the Old Testament as literal history and political tract, became a fanatical Zionist and Islamophobe and laced his speeches and, sometimes, official writings, with portentous, Biblical rhetoric; in an army making a fetish of smartness and 'grooming standards', he was often scruffy and fully bearded, and on operations, wore a filthy uniform and old-fashioned solar 'topee' helmet; he ate six raw onions a day, and ordered all his officers to eat at least one; he often carried out business in the nude, brushing himself with a wire brush instead of washing, sometimes during official briefings and press conferences, and carried an alarm clock to time his meetings and show those around him that 'time was passing'.¹¹ Moreover, even Wingate's admirers agree that he could be a bloody-minded and disputatious individual of strong and frequently unorthodox opinions on many matters, who apparently went through life seeking out feuds, and completely unafraid to 'name and shame' those he saw as thwarting him, including senior

officers, in official documents.¹² Yet, he could also be brittle: he attempted suicide in 1941, after the Ethiopian operation, due to a combination of depression, exhaustion and dementia arising from cerebral malaria, and the literature is full of anecdotes of tantrums, sulks and occasional physical assaults on soldiers and even subordinate officers.¹³ More sinister allegations have been made: in the late 1990s, an Israeli journalist, Tom Segev, suggested that Wingate committed atrocities in Palestine, a claim taken up with some enthusiasm by Israeli revisionist historians, anti-Zionist websites and, predictably, Palestinian nationalists.¹⁴ Wingate's many idiosyncrasies are taken as signs of madness by his detractors.¹⁵ In reaction, several of Wingate's friends and former subordinates, including Sir Robert Thompson, Major General Derek Tulloch and Brigadiers Michael Calvert and Peter Mead produced books in rebuttal, a process continued into the 1990s by the prolific, vociferous but sometimes misfiring David Rooney.¹⁶

The literature, therefore, centres largely upon the theme of Wingate as 'maverick': indeed, the five biographies – Leonard Mosley's *Gideon Goes to War* of 1955, Christopher Sykes' *Orde Wingate* of 1959, Trevor Royle's *Orde Wingate: Irregular Soldier* and David Rooney's *Wingate and the Chindits: Redressing the Balance*, both from 1995 and John Bierman and Colin Smith's *Fire in the Night*, from 2000 – all focus upon Wingate's idiosyncrasies, politics and battles with superiors and colleagues more than on his military ideas or practice or true historical significance. Others have tried to examine these themes, but have been hampered by two factors. The first is that Wingate's personal papers and correspondence were guarded jealously by his sisters and his widow, Lorna, who refused all access to them until her death in 1995, apparently because she disliked certain passages in Christopher Sykes' book, even though it was broadly sympathetic to its subject.¹⁷ Secondly, many relevant official papers were unavailable until the 1970s or after, under the Thirty-Year Rule for British Governmental papers. Consequently, those trying to analyse Wingate's military ideas and practice before the 1990s were forced back upon quotations and paraphrases of these papers in Sykes, the *Official History*, Michael Calvert's *Prisoners of Hope* and Mosley's *Gideon Goes to War*, as well as anecdotal material in other memoirs.¹⁸ The papers, which consist of official documents authored by Wingate or pertinent to his operations from 1926 to 1944, a mixture of his official and private correspondence from the early 1920s to his death, and other material assembled by Lorna Wingate and Wingate's friend and chief of staff, Major General Derek Tulloch, after Wingate's death, were sold by Wingate's son, the late Colonel Orde Jonathan Wingate, in 1995. Those relating to Wingate's time in Palestine went to the collection of the American publisher and politician, Steve Forbes – microfilm copies being taken by the British Library – and the remainder to the Imperial War Museum. While the Burma papers in the Imperial War Museum have been sifted and catalogued by Julian Thompson, those concerning

Wingate's early life and his operations in Ethiopia – several hundred documents and letters – were uncatalogued when the author first viewed them in 1998. The microfilmed Palestine Papers at the British Library are also un-sifted. The Burma papers have been consulted by Rooney and Royle, but apparently only cursorily, likewise Royle's overview of key files in the Public Record Office.¹⁹ Another problem arises from Wingate's literary style. Wingate was an excellent writer, frequently pungent and sometimes scabrous – his awe-inspiring rudeness about certain revered figures and institutions makes his papers a more entertaining read than most - and was always at pains to explain his reasoning in any situation. However, apart from a single, brief allusion to the British Army's *Field Service Regulations*, in his Ethiopia papers, Wingate never, at any point, credited any source other than himself for his military ideas, making any tracing of those sources conjectural and reliant largely on circumstantial evidence.²⁰

The existing literature therefore has been affected by inability or failure to utilize Wingate's own writings to assess his military ideas on his own terms and in their historical and strategic context. Were this rectified, it might give further, perhaps more accurate insight into why Wingate was and is such a controversial figure, then and now. To begin this process, some deeper exploration of the literature is necessary, beginning with the principal works on either side of the 'Wingate controversy', followed by previous attempts to 'place' Wingate in a niche within military thought and history.

Wingate's Reputation as an Issue

Just as timing played so great a part in his rise to prominence, so the moment of his death may have been propitious for him. He was killed at the height of his career and was not called upon to face the inevitable fact that his dreams and ambitions could never have been realized.

Major General S. Woodburn Kirby²¹

The whole assessment was no more than a hatchet job by little men who could not have competed with Wingate either in military argument or in battle. Not only has it failed but it has made him such a controversial figure that his reputation will live on forever.

Sir Robert Thompson.²²

The theme of a British 'military establishment' objecting to Wingate's ideas runs through the literature from the beginning. Charles Rolo, an American journalist and literary critic, produced *Wingate's Phantom Army*, an anecdotal narrative of *Longcloth*, in 1944, shortly after Wingate's death. This work is full of hyperbole of the 'they said it couldn't be done' variety: on *Longcloth*, for instance, 'The more conventional military leaders were aghast ... Wingate was

an upstart, a madman. Certainly it was not 'pukka war' as they or anyone else knew it' and he later commented that: 'Wingate's fixity of purpose led to countless clashes with brass-hats and complacent officials, outraged by his forthright methods and assaults on red tape.'²³ This theme was taken up by Major General Bernard Fergusson, who commanded a Chindit column on *Longcloth* and a brigade on *Thursday*, and author of the best of all Chindit memoirs, *Beyond the Chindwin*, his account of *Longcloth*, published in 1945.²⁴ Fergusson also published a memoir of *Thursday*, *The Wild Green Earth*, in 1946, which took up a theme first presented at a lecture to the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) in March 1946, that Wingate's ideas were a source of friction with certain others: 'On the whole [Wingate] failed to convert current military thought to his belief in deep penetration. He certainly convinced his lieutenants; but deprived of his fiery leadership and teaching, I cannot hope to succeed where he failed.'²⁵ Fergusson also felt strongly enough about the accusations evidently mounting by 1946 to include a defence of Wingate ('Some of those who now whisper that he was not all that he was cracked up to be remind me of the mouse who has a swig of whisky, and then says: 'Now show me that bloody cat') but, unfortunately for the historian, was not specific about what these accusations might be or from whom they were coming.²⁶

Similar phenomena were apparent in *Prisoners of Hope*, Brigadier Michael Calvert's account of commanding 77th Brigade on Operation *Thursday*. While most of this work is a personal narrative, Calvert included a lengthy appendix giving testimony from the postwar interrogations of senior Japanese officers on the impact of *Thursday* on their operations in 1944, his reasons for including this being:

Two of the most controversial aspects of the campaign in Burma were the two Wingate operations and the results they achieved. Could the thirteen British ... five Gurkha and three West Africa battalions and their attendant ancillary forces, bases, and RAF and USAAF effort [which made up Wingate's forces on *Thursday*] have been of greater use to the Burma campaign if employed elsewhere in a more stereotyped role?²⁷

Forceful answers to this question were supplied by Kirby and Slim in the 1950s. In Volume III of the *Official History*, Kirby included an 'Assessment of Wingate' – the only Allied commander in Southeast Asia to have such – which began by attributing Wingate's success as much to the patronage of Wavell and, later, the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, 'who claimed Wingate as a genius', as to the validity of his ideas.²⁸ Moreover, 'Whether his theories were sound or unsound, he appeared as a 'doer' at a time when something desperately needed to be done [about the dire predicament the Allies faced in Southeast Asia].'²⁹ Kirby then implied that Wingate's success in getting his ideas put into practice owed more

to force of argument and skilful self-publicity than to their intrinsic merit, leading, as he became more ambitious, to megalomania:

The way in which his ideas on the use of long-range penetration forces grew in Wingate's fertile imagination would form an interesting psychological study. From his early conception of lightly armed troops penetrating behind the enemy lines and attacking communications as part of a larger operation by conventional forces, the operations of [the Chindits] clearly became in his mind the only means by which northern Burma could be dominated. Subsequently, much increased in numbers, the force would become the spearhead of a victorious advance through southern Burma, Siam and Indo-China to win the war against Japan.³⁰

So determined was Wingate to demonstrate this model that 'his handling of his forces became unsound', Kirby listing a series of perceived mistakes from both Chindit operations to support this claim.³¹ Wingate was 'so obsessed by his theories that he forgot that victory in Burma could be achieved only by the defeat of the enemy's main forces' and, in his belief that lightly equipped columns could defeat the Japanese, he underestimated them as an enemy.³² However, his influence with Churchill resulted in one-sixth of all British infantry in Southeast Asia being 'locked up in LRP formations suitable only for guerilla [*sic*] warfare.'³³ To Kirby, Wingate's ideas represented an egregious misdirection of manpower and resources, based upon shaky concepts, imposed upon the army in Southeast Asia largely by Churchill.

This was echoed by Slim in *Defeat into Victory*. Slim was candid about his clashes with Wingate, summarizing him as a 'strange, excitable, moody creature' and offering the reader several opportunities to contrast Wingate's histrionics with his own calm self-assurance.³⁴ He opened by dismissing Gideon Force – which had consisted of regular troops commanded by British officers – as '*Shifra* or brigands' and by doubting whether a repeat in Burma would work 'against a tougher enemy and in country not so actively friendly.'³⁵ Wingate was later described as 'strangely naive when it came to the business of actually fighting the Japanese', an enemy who would not be scared into retreating by threats to their rear, but would have to be defeated in battle, Wingate's forces being too small and lightly-equipped to do this.³⁶ This was demonstrated by *Longcloth*, an operation in which several hundred men died, but which had 'no immediate effect on Japanese dispositions or plans' and provided a 'costly schooling' in jungle fighting: its only tangible value was as propaganda and a slight rise in British confidence in fighting the Japanese in the jungles of Burma.³⁷ However, Wingate would not accept this and – two ranks subordinate to Slim, a full general – repeatedly threatened to report Slim to Churchill.³⁸

In his chapter on 'lessons learned' from the Burma campaign, Slim berated the plethora of special forces formed by the British in the Second World War, claiming that 'Any well-trained infantry battalion should be able to do what a

commando can do; [in Burma] they could and did' and arguing that special operations in future should be limited to small parties carrying out sabotage, subversion and assassination, on the lines of the Special Operations Executive (SOE): 'Private armies ... are expensive, wasteful and unnecessary', a drain on manpower leeching the best personnel away from units having to fight the enemy's main armies in battle.³⁹ Kirby and Slim agreed broadly, therefore, that Wingate foisted an allegedly 'unsound' form of warfare upon British forces in Southeast Asia principally via the patronage of high-level figures, and a degree of personal bitterness over this is apparent from both authors. Slim also demonstrated animosity towards 'special forces' in general, as a drain on forces intended to destroy the enemy's main armies in battle.

Slim's testimony must not be discounted as a factor in subsequent assessments of Wingate. He is the only British senior commander of the Second World War whose reputation has not undergone any serious historical revision or reassessment, perhaps due to the literature on him being dominated by a small group of well-published but mainly 'popular' authors, most prominently Ronald Lewin, Duncan Anderson and Robert Lyman, who revere him unquestioningly and view *Defeat into Victory* as the infallible final source not only on the war in Burma – far more so, it seems, than contemporary documents and testimony – but on many aspects of modern warfare in general. Needless to say, Wingate does not get an easy ride from this group. Lewin's biography of Slim contrasts Wingate's approach to fighting the Japanese with Slim's unfavourably throughout, and describes Wingate as 'untruthful', 'disloyal' and 'highly wrought, almost manic in his oscillations between euphoria and pessimism', while Wingate's defenders, principally Derek Tulloch and Michael Calvert, are accused of 'special pleading'; Anderson compared Slim with Sun Tzu's 'Heaven Born Captain', and described Wingate variously as 'entertaining delusions of grandeur' and 'near hysterical'; both authors belittle *Longcloth*, Anderson dismissing an operation on which several hundred soldiers died as 'all flash and dash', a glorified jolly jape.⁴⁰

Yet, by the end of the 1950s, other works had appeared suggesting that Wingate had made enemies long before Burma, in particular, *Wingate's Phantom Army* by Wilfred Burchett (1946) and *Gideon Goes to War* by Leonard Mosley. Burchett's politics must be considered in any reading of *Wingate's Phantom Army*: a journalist and a lifelong Marxist, Burchett spent most of the 1950s and 60s in North Korea and North Vietnam, and was effectively exiled from his native Australia for tricking Australian prisoners of war in the Korean and Vietnam Wars into participating in enemy propaganda through a combination of blackmail, promises of special treatment, and posing as a journalist conducting 'interviews' wherein they were steered into condemning their government or confessing to 'war crimes'; he was a lifelong apologist for the communist regimes in North Korea and Bulgaria.⁴¹ Burchett portrayed Wingate as a kindred spirit,

anti-imperialist and anti-British, and suggested that Wingate's politics lay at the heart of a quasi-revolutionary mission which framed his military operations. In Palestine, Burchett alleged, Wingate almost single-handedly turned the tide of the Arab revolt, against obstruction from an anti-Semitic British High Command; later, Wingate saved Ethiopia from 'international sharks ... racketeers and stock market strategists' by transforming previously half-hearted and inept British attempts to stimulate guerrilla warfare in Ethiopia.⁴² Mosley also presented a Wingate at odds with colleagues: he had Wingate dismiss General Headquarters, Jerusalem, as 'a gang of anti-Jews', and implied that the passivity of timid Jewish politicians and the Islamophilia of the British was condemning Jewish settlers on the frontiers of Palestine, 'with nothing but a few rook rifles per settlement' to massacre until Wingate galvanized them onto the offensive and shamed the British authorities into supporting them.⁴³ Echoing Burchett, Mosley portrayed Wingate as rescuing Ethiopia from a British colonial establishment which half-welcomed the Italian occupation and treated its Emperor-in-exile, Haile Selassie, with supercilious dismissiveness until Wingate launched a one-man assault upon the staff in Khartoum.⁴⁴

That the 'establishment' might be extracting retribution via the published record was argued in the 1960s and 70s by Tulloch, Mead and Thompson. Tulloch had been a close friend of Wingate's since their time together at the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich, in 1920–2, and served as his Brigadier, General Staff (Chief of Staff) on *Thursday*. He was consulted by the authors of the *Official History*, and, according to Mead, became growingly disturbed by the tone of the drafts he read, particularly after Kirby became involved.⁴⁵ He held a large body of Wingate's official papers – now added to those in the Imperial War Museum – and in 1972 produced his own account of Wingate in Burma, *Wingate in Peace and War*, based on these. That Tulloch was writing to defend a departed friend is obvious throughout this work, which revolves partially around a perceived conspiracy to cancel *Thursday*, instigated by the Supreme Allied Commander, Southeast Asia, Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten, who allegedly preferred amphibious attacks directed at Singapore and Sumatra.⁴⁶ Once *Thursday* was launched, Tulloch claimed, Wingate planned to divert Chindit columns away from their initial mission, which was to support Chinese forces under the American General, Joseph Stilwell, advancing into central Burma in an attempt to restore land communications with China, and redirect them towards attacking the communications of the Japanese 15th Army, then engaged in its offensive against Imphal and Kohima, in what Tulloch called Wingate's 'Plan B.'⁴⁷ Tulloch therefore developed one major existing theme, the notion of 'Wingate versus the establishment' and suggested a new one, that his military prescience may have impacted upon the decisive battles of the Burma campaign.

In 1972, Tulloch asked Peter Mead to assist him with research and 'advise what more could be done to correct the Official History's assessment of Wingate.'⁴⁸ Mead was a Royal Artillery officer who had served with Tulloch on Wingate's staff on *Thursday*, and later transferred to the Army Air Corps, finishing his career in 1964 as its Director, with the rank of brigadier. After Tulloch's death in 1974, Mead continued his task of rebutting the *Official History's* perceived calumnies against Wingate, and produced *Orde Wingate and the Historians* in 1987. As the title implies, this was the first published historiography of Wingate, but much of it was a deliberate counterblast against the *Official History*. Upon reading the latter work in the 1970s, Mead dedicated himself 'to unbend[ing] a piece of bent history.'⁴⁹ The central theme of Mead's work was the existence of an official anti-Wingate 'line to take' originating shortly after Wingate's death. Mead presents extensive evidence for this, but much of it anecdotal, circumstantial and uncorroborated: for instance, a story told him by Calvert, that Calvert had discovered in the War Office the minutes of a high-level meeting where it was decided 'to discourage future officer intake [*sic*] from modeling themselves on Wingate', because Wingate was 'a divisive influence in the Army', and also what he interpreted as derogatory comments made about the Chindit operations in Sandhurst and British Army Staff College training literature.⁵⁰ Mead's overview of the existing literature was thorough but slanted, with anything less than hagiography being viewed as under the influence of the 'conspiracy', even the broadly sympathetic works by Sykes and Shelford Bidwell.⁵¹ However, alongside this was some interesting original research, in which Mead demonstrated from documentary evidence that some senior officers were, indeed, obtuse about Wingate's ideas and also discovered the testimony of certain Japanese senior officers to the impact of *Thursday* upon their Imphal-Kohima offensive, apparently available to Kirby and his co-authors and, apparently, ignored by them.⁵²

To further 'restore' Wingate's reputation, Mead enlisted the support of perhaps Wingate's highest-placed and most powerful posthumous supporter – Sir Robert Thompson. Thompson served throughout the Second World War with the Royal Air Force (RAF), including as an air liaison and forward observation officer on both Chindit operations and later became a globally respected expert on counterinsurgency, in which capacity he advised the administration in Malaya during the communist guerrilla insurgency of 1948–60 and the Nixon White House in the latter stages of the Vietnam War; his *Defeating Communist Insurgency* is still regarded as a seminal work in this field.⁵³ Although he had written the foreword to Tulloch's book, Thompson did not, apparently, read the *Official History* until 1977, at Mead's suggestion. After doing so, he accepted Mead's argument that official recognition and, by implication, correction of perceived inaccuracies in the *Official History* would be the only means of settling the controversy. They subsequently presented the Cabinet Office with a suggested

appendix, drafted by Mead, pointing out the alleged errors in the *Official History* and referring the reader to Sykes, Tulloch or Mead for guidance: their request that this be pasted into all copies of Volume III of the *Official History* has yet to be granted.⁵⁴ Thompson, thereafter, was an outspoken defender of Wingate in print and on television, and his memoirs, *Make For the Hills*, published in 1989, contained five chapters – nearly a quarter of the book – devoted to the Chindit operations and an extended assessment of Wingate.

Thompson claimed that Wingate was first to realize that air supply could grant British forces superior relative mobility to the Japanese in the jungle and also, more contentiously, that he advocated close air support of troops fighting on the ground in the face of some apparent resistance from the Royal Air Force (RAF). He claimed also that Wingate was alone in advocating an overland offensive into northern Burma from India. Thompson's core argument was that resentment against Wingate, culminating in the 'hatchet job' of the *Official History*, came largely in reaction to Wingate's unsettling personality and the radicalism of his military ideas, which others in India simply did not understand.⁵⁵ Thompson was unequivocal about Wingate's historical significance: after presenting his assessment of the Chindit contribution to Imphal and Kohima – that it was a key factor in the Japanese defeat, and might have been greater, with more resources – Thompson commented that every time he saw the photograph of Slim and his Corps Commanders being knighted on the field of Imphal after the battle, 'I see the ghost of Wingate present. He was unquestionably one of the great men of the century.'⁵⁶

A central message conveyed by several key works in the literature, then, is that Wingate aroused such strong feelings during his lifetime that the disputes he engaged in continued decades after his death. Numerous authors portray Wingate taking on a perceived 'military establishment', which, by the 1960s, was personified by S. Woodburn Kirby. Moreover, this 'establishment's' principal objection to Wingate was that he presented new forms of warfare challenging accepted ideas, a view confirmed, apparently, by Kirby and Slim. It follows from this that investigating the nature of those ideas might provide some indication of why Wingate was such a controversial figure: however, there appears to be disagreement among the few investigating them.

Previous Work on Wingate's Military Ideas

The operation was, in effect the old cavalry raid of military history on the enemy's communications, which, to be effective against a stout-hearted opponent, must be made in tactical co-ordination with a main attack elsewhere.

*Field Marshal Viscount Slim, commenting on Operation Longcloth*⁵⁷

From a point of view of statecraft, you do not try to make heroes of guerrillas ... [B]ecause if you do, every young man wants to copy that revolutionary or guerrilla. What you must do is give all the kudos to your regular army, just like the Tsar did on the retreat from Moscow ...

Brigadier Michael Calvert⁵⁸

[A] masterful description of manoeuvre warfare ...

General Sir Michael Rose, on Calvert's *Prisoners of Hope*⁵⁹

There seems to be little agreement even among Wingate's own colleagues and contemporaries as to where his military ideas and practice fit. Kirby described the Chindits as guerrilla forces; to Fergusson, a proud Highland Scot, Wingate was a leader of irregular forces in the tradition of Robert the Bruce and Bonnie Prince Charlie, while the novelist John Masters, who was Brigade Major, then acting commander of 111th Brigade on *Thursday*, stated explicitly they were based on the Long Range Desert Group.⁶⁰ Subsequent authors can be divided broadly into those viewing Wingate as a leader of guerrilla irregulars, those seeing him as waging guerrilla operations with specially trained regular troops, and those, usually military officers, writing in staff college papers or publications based upon them, who attempt to project military doctrine of their own time onto Wingate's operations, with Wingate 'pioneering' said doctrine. Among the 'Wingate as guerrilla' school, Michael Elliot-Bateman placed Wingate firmly in the context of 'people's war' while Robert Asprey and David Shirreff also described Wingate purely as a leader of irregulars.⁶¹ Yet, Otto Heilbrunn, John Terraine and John W Gordon put Wingate in the 'special forces' camp, Heilbrunn in particular seeing him as one of several commanders of the Second World War creating special units to execute guerrilla-style warfare deep in the enemy's rear.⁶² This has some support from the official historian of British airborne forces, Lieutenant Colonel Terence Otway, who treated *Thursday* as a massive and protracted airborne operation.⁶³ Of those seeing Wingate as a pioneer of 'advanced' forms of warfare, Major Luigi Rossetto of the Canadian Army argued specifically against the 'Wingate as guerrilla' school, claiming that Wingate was attempting a practical application of Basil Liddell Hart's 'Theory of the Indirect Approach', and Robert Lyman's military biography of Slim, from 2004, also attempted to place the Chindit operations in the context of Slim's wider application of a form of 'indirect approach'.⁶⁴ Conversely, Major John Atkins, another British Army officer, has contended that Wingate pioneered 'nonlinear noncontiguous military operations', an apparent staple of post 1990s American military doctrine.⁶⁵ It appears, therefore, that there are multiple interpretations of Wingate's military ideas and practice, and with little agreement between them.

Closest to consensus are the 'Wingate as guerrilla' school. Elliot-Bateman's anthology, *The Fourth Dimension of War*, was produced in 1970, against the background of the Vietnam War. His keynote essay dwelt upon how Sun Tzu's

The Art of War had influenced 'people's war', by which he meant the collapse of enemy resistance via a mixture of selective military action, guerrilla warfare, espionage and subversion as, he argued, had been practised by Mao Tse-tung in the 1930s and 40s and Vo Nguyen Giap between then and 1970.⁶⁶ Wingate's operations in Ethiopia and Burma were presented as examples of Sun Tzu's concept of *cheng* and *ch'i*, sometimes mistranslated as 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary' force; as Elliot-Bateman explained it: '[T]he extraordinary or indirect force (known as the 'ch'i' force) act where and when their blows are not anticipated, while the normal force (known as the 'cheng' force) fixes or distracts the enemy'; depending upon circumstances, either may be the decisive force, but Elliot-Bateman clearly endorsed Sun Tzu's exhortation to 'use the normal force to engage; use the extraordinary to win.'⁶⁷ While guerrillas could act in either role, Elliot-Bateman argued that Gideon Force and the Chindits represented *ch'i* in action, with the rest of Slim's forces in Burma being *cheng*.⁶⁸ However, there were differences: Wingate's operations involved infiltrating the enemy rear with specialist regular troops, whereas 'classical' guerrillas came from the local populace; moreover, whereas 'classical' guerrilla forces required the unqualified support of the majority of the 'people', long-range penetration forces did not.⁶⁹ Wingate may have encountered the ideas of Sun Tzu, perhaps via the 1910 translation by Lionel Giles, but in the absence of any direct evidence, speculation is all that is possible.

Robert Asprey published *War in the Shadows* in 1975 with a similar remit to Elliot-Bateman: 'to explain the Vietnam war to American readers in the historical terms of guerrilla warfare.'⁷⁰ Asprey, too, assessed Wingate as a guerrilla commander, but was more prosaic than Elliot-Bateman, contrasting what he called the 'qualitative' ideas of Wingate with the 'saturation' approach of T. E. Lawrence, a distant relative of Wingate's to whom this work will return. Asprey did not define terms, but it can be inferred that he understood Wingate's approach to centre upon small units of hand-picked and highly-trained men, striking at key targets, while Lawrence aimed at infesting enemy-held areas with as large a number of locally-recruited partisan irregulars as possible, to pin and distract the maximum number of enemy troops.⁷¹

David Shirreff's *Bare Feet and Bandoliers*, from 1995, is the only published book-length history of Wingate's operations in Ethiopia. Shirreff did not dwell on theory, but he was unequivocal that Wingate was attempting a guerrilla war using local irregulars, comparing the Ethiopian 'patriots' with the Spanish guerrillas of the Peninsular War of the 1800s and Lawrence's Arabs. He argued that guerrillas were used most effectively to attack enemy lines of supply; cooperation with regular forces usually impaired them, but 'the most effective patriot forces were those which had a hard core of regulars', Shirreff contending that Wingate's aim was to insert just such a 'hard core' consisting of Gideon Force, which comprised two battalions of Ethiopian and Sudanese regular troops under British officers.⁷² These

authors concur in portraying Wingate as a new kind of military leader, attempting to create 'extraordinary' forces, based upon guerrillas organized around units of specialist regular troops, to wage protracted warfare in the enemy rear.

The second group of authors concentrated on the 'special force' characteristics of Wingate's operations, although not ignoring the guerrilla aspects, either. Otto Heilbrunn's main academic interest was guerrilla warfare as practised by communist movements in the 1950s and 1960s, but his *Warfare in the Enemy's Rear*, from 1963, dealt with 'The forces of the rear ... the airborne troops, the Special Forces, the partisans and certain elements of the air forces' in the Second World War.⁷³ He placed Wingate's Chindits in *two* contexts, firstly the many 'special' units – Commandos, Long-Range Desert Group, Special Air Service – raised by the British in the Second World War, secondly, the history of guerrilla warfare.⁷⁴ The Chindits were regular soldiers trained in guerrilla methods, 'they would harass the enemy in guerrilla fashion, they would weaken him by destroying his supply dumps and supply lines, and they would tie down his forces which would have to protect their communications ... and hunt the intruders.'⁷⁵ However, Wingate moved them towards 'conventional' operations, aimed at seizing and holding ground, on Operation *Thursday*, which hinged upon Strongholds, fortified bases, supplied by air, from which Chindit columns sortied against Japanese communications.⁷⁶ Heilbrunn argued that this reduced numbers available for aggressive operations, most men now being tied up in defending the Strongholds. Overall, however, Wingate's main contribution to military thought, according to Heilbrunn, 'was his demonstration that professional soldiers could profitably adopt guerrillism [*sic*] and we have drawn the conclusion that they [the Chindits] could have disorganized [*sic*] and demoralized [*sic*] the enemy, as they were ordered to, had they been given the chance.'⁷⁷

John W Gordon's essay on Wingate in the 1991 anthology, *Churchill's Generals*, placed Wingate even more firmly in the Special Forces camp:

To look at Wingate is to look at the British style of warfare. For, while virtually all major combatants in World War II experimented to some degree with so-called 'special forces', it was the British experiment with them that holds pride of place both as to scale and expectations. Moreover ... Orde Wingate must be seen as Winston Churchill's paramount theorist and most committed advocate of their use.⁷⁸

Gordon traced the British interest in 'unconventional operations' from Lawrence to Churchill, who, in the post-Dunkirk period saw them as the best means to strike back at the Germans. Churchill, he claimed, was inspired by the 'conjunct operations' of the Napoleonic Wars and by the supposed extensive use of Special Forces by the Germans in 1939–40, leading to his creation of the Commandos, the Parachute Regiment and SOE.⁷⁹ Wingate created the largest special force of the war, with Churchill's backing; however, 'The units ... would not be

made up of guerrillas, with their free and easy ways, but of soldiers acting with the discipline, training and reliability of regular formations.⁸⁰

Interestingly, the one published analysis of Wingate's operations by a true peer – a British officer of similar age, rank and experience – concentrated exclusively on their 'regular' aspects. Lieutenant Colonel Terence Otway commanded 9th Battalion, the Parachute Regiment, in the Normandy landings of June 1944, where he won the Distinguished Service Order and lost most of his battalion storming the German gun batteries at Merville. In 1951, he was commissioned to author the Official History of British airborne forces in the Second World War, this work being significant in presenting an assessment of Wingate, from another official historian, at odds with Kirby's. Otway's remit was to extract 'lessons learned' from the British use of airborne forces in the war, and *Thursday* was analysed accordingly, as an airborne operation, reliant on air transport, support and supply. Otway began by commenting that *Longcloth* 'showed clearly the scope offered for applying new methods in the Burma theatre ... prov[ing] that the power of supply and control [of behind the lines operations] was limited only by the number of aircraft and trained crews available.'⁸¹ His narrative of *Thursday* stressed the air aspects – air supply, casualty evacuation, close air support, construction of airfields in hostile territory by airborne engineers, supporting three air-inserted brigades 'embedded behind the enemy's lines and more or less at the centre of four Japanese divisions.'⁸² Subsequent operations by these brigades created a 'clamp' upon Japanese communications in northern Burma, undone when the Chindits were ordered north to support Stilwell.⁸³ Otway evidently did not view the Chindits as a purely guerrilla force, his narrative emphasizing the fierce, protracted battles taking place around the Strongholds, and the role of the Air Commando in inflicting mass destruction upon the Japanese. In Otway's professional opinion, the Chindits were an air-inserted all arms main force unit capable of major engagements inflicting heavy casualties upon the Japanese.⁸⁴ Moreover, they succeeded in this role:

The main lesson that emerged from these operations was that Wingate's theories on Long Range Penetration ... had proved correct in detail ... His force had gnawed a hole in the entrails of three Japanese divisions which had weakened them to such an extent that their eventual collapse was complete.⁸⁵

Another interpretation was presented by Luigi Rossetto in 1982, in *Major General Orde Charles Wingate and the Development of Long-Range Penetration*, the published version of his master's thesis for the Royal Military College of Canada, from 1967. Rossetto contended that Wingate's concept of long-range penetration was an offshoot of Basil Liddell Hart's 'strategy of the indirect approach' – following the line of least resistance to the enemy's most vulnerable areas, there to 'dislocate' his forces from their command, control and supply.⁸⁶ Wingate and Liddell

Hart met in 1938 and corresponded afterwards, Wingate sending Liddell Hart copies of his training notes and memoranda for his operations in Palestine, and Liddell Hart providing Wingate with a letter of introduction to Churchill; Liddell Hart also claimed that Wingate's actions in Palestine had been influenced by him.⁸⁷ Rossetto presented the hypothesis that Wingate was attempting a new form of warfare, combining the 'indirect approach' with his own ideas and resembling the Soviet concept of 'deep battle', associated most closely with Marshal Mikhail Tukachevsky. Therefore, according to Rossetto, authors who judge Wingate simply as a guerrilla leader or as a commander of Special Forces miss the point.⁸⁸

This was original, but, for reasons discussed already, Rossetto had to rely upon the works of Mosley, Sykes, Slim and Kirby, papers available at the Public Record Office at the time, and some material on Palestine he obtained via contacts at RMCC to support his case. Inevitably, therefore, his hypothesis was based largely upon secondary sources, and he was unable to establish any *direct* link between Wingate's ideas and Liddell Hart's, apart from the latter's own testimony, nor did he demonstrate empirically how the Chindit operations might have been the 'indirect approach' in action. The possibility of a link between Wingate's military thought and Liddell Hart's had been touched upon by Shelford Bidwell in his history of *Thursday*, and dismissed: '[I]t must be said that Wingate was no 'Liddell-Hartist'. He was a 'Wingate-ist': in his arrogance he admitted no mentor', an observation borne out by Wingate's never citing any source but himself for his ideas.⁸⁹ Nonetheless, that there might be a link between the indirect approach and Wingate's concept of long-range penetration had become a theme in the literature.

This was taken up by Robert Lyman, a former British Army officer, in *Slim, Master of War*, in 2004. Lyman's title is indicative of his core argument and stance: it was Slim who continued the tradition of Liddell Hart: 'Slim's real contribution to the art of war was to provide a practical bridge between the original theory of the 'indirect approach' expounded by Major General J. F. C. Fuller, Sir Basil Liddell Hart and other members of the 'English' school of military strategy during the inter-war era, and the modern [post 1990s] doctrine of 'manoeuvre warfare', encapsulated by Lyman as 'the concentration of force to achieve surprise, psychological shock, physical momentum and moral dominance', which he saw as demonstrated in Slim's victories at Imphal and Kohima in 1944 and Meiktila in 1945.⁹⁰ Wingate's role in this was to organize 'long-range 'hit and run' type operations [*sic*] behind enemy lines', in opposition to Slim's approach, which was to mass the greatest British force available against Japanese weaknesses.⁹¹ Lyman clearly viewed Wingate as more of a media and propaganda creation than a serious strategist, arguing that *Longcloth* had no strategic rationale, was a far from unambiguous vindication of Wingate's ideas, but was built into a major victory by GHQ India in order to boost morale. After this, the resources directed to Wingate

by a grateful Churchill resulted in Wingate growing increasingly out of control, demanding large-scale operations on the Japanese lines of communication, yet 'Slim knew that Wingate could never hope to achieve the decisive advantage he sought. His aircraft-supplied troops, light in artillery and bereft of armour, would exhaust themselves quickly', something Lyman saw happening in the latter stages of *Thursday*, another operation launched without 'strategic imperative'.⁹² Wingate was in 'strategic competition' with Slim and is, in many ways, the villain of Lyman's book. The resources diverted to *Thursday*, 'a colossal military blunder', according to Lyman, were sources unavailable for Slim's planned decisive battle on the Imphal Plain, but Slim had no choice but to accede, due to pressure from Churchill; Wingate's 'arrogant assumption that nothing else in the region mattered, and ... the offensive methods he used to obtain what he wanted' led to numerous clashes with the stoic Slim, who seems to have understood the role of LRP better than Wingate himself.⁹³ If Rossetto's hypothesis is combined with Lyman's, this could be portrayed as a clash between two different interpretations of the indirect approach, were it not for Lyman's filtering his findings via his reverence for Slim and failure to establish empirically any link between Slim and Liddell Hart (and there is no record of any direct correspondence between them at the Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives at King's College or in Slim's papers at Churchill College, Cambridge). Moreover, Lyman contradicted himself: in his introduction, Slim was clearly influenced by the 'English manoeuvrist' school of strategy, the indirect approach in particular, yet, later, he merely shows a 'common ancestry' with this 'school', arising from 'the demands of intelligent soldiering' rather than any theoretical input from elsewhere.⁹⁴

An alternative 'placing' of Wingate was made by another British Army officer, Major John Atkins, in a monograph produced for the US Army Command and General Staff College, arguing that operations in Burma pioneered another key concept of post-1990s military doctrine, 'nonlinear, noncontiguous operations'. Rather than forming a solid 'front', facing the enemy, units aim to strike him in depth, using seaborne or airborne movement, and air support and air supply in lieu of conventional artillery and communications respectively, as Atkins argued, the US military have attempted in the post-2001 'War on Terror'.⁹⁵ Wingate pioneered this type of operation and, perhaps unsurprisingly for a student at US Army Staff College, Atkins suggests his inspiration may have been the Confederate cavalry raiders of the American Civil War.⁹⁶ Like these forces, Wingate's initial aim was to fill the enemy rear areas with mobile units, which would concentrate to attack key enemy installations, then disperse and use their superior mobility to avoid retribution.⁹⁷ From the attachment of the Air Commando, these operations were supported effectively by battlefield airpower, Atkins describing the accuracy of air attacks on *Thursday* as 'superb'.⁹⁸ Overall, the Chindit operations 'demonstrated that mobile, noncontiguous, nonlinear

operations could succeed when supported by airpower', setting an example soon followed by all British forces in Burma.⁹⁹ Contrasting with Lyman, Atkins not only saw Wingate as playing a valuable role in Burma, but as a forerunner of twenty-first-century warfare.

The main impression gained so far is of attempts to project the ideas and concepts of others onto Wingate's. To some, Wingate was a guerrilla commander, to others, an airborne commander or practitioner of manoeuvre warfare; he might also be a disciple of Sun Tzu, Robert the Bruce, Nathan Bedford Forrest or Basil Liddell Hart. Moreover, most of these works consist of interpretations of the published work either of Wingate's peers and contemporaries or his biographers – and even those who knew him best could not agree on what he was trying to do or what spurred him to do it. This begs the question of what a survey of Wingate's own papers and other contemporary documents might yield different from this, leading to the main guiding question of this particular work, *how far did the military thought and practice of Major General OC Wingate really part company with British Army doctrine of his time?* Our principal contention, based on study of Wingate's official and unofficial correspondence and other original material pertaining to his operations, is that the answer is 'Not as much as some people claim', that Wingate did not attempt any significant departure from British Army war fighting methods of his time, but his ideas were derived from several practices visible in the British Army of the period, and which were utilized by several British theatre commanders. Moreover, there appears to be no single discrete model for Wingate's operations, no 'mould' into which they can be fitted as neatly as some have tried. Rather than being identifiable as distinct guerrilla, airborne or special forces, Wingate's long range penetration operations combined all three methods, relying upon a core of lightly-armed regular forces, some inserted by air in later operations, cooperating with local irregulars and supported by airpower, operating against vital targets in the enemy's rear, forcing him to disperse his strength and be destroyed in detail, either by Allied heavy forces or LRP forces themselves. It is also apparent that Wingate's ideas evolved organically from his time in Palestine onwards, and had multiple roots. His military experience was gained exclusively in or around Britain's imperial possessions in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. The British Army of the time specialized in fighting the 'small wars' prevalent in these areas, developed coherent operational practices involving all-arms columns penetrating enemy territory, and, as early as the 1920s, was experimenting with air supply and close air support of these columns. The use of combined-arms columns, operating in cooperation with local irregulars, was extended into operations against regular armies from 1917 onwards, most notably by Lawrence, one of the inspirations for the doctrine for directing armed resistance in Axis-occupied territory devised in 1939 by Lieutenant Colonel Colin Gubbins, then with MI(R), and applied by G(R) – an offshoot of MI(R) – in planning for Ethiopia.

It was this operation that Wingate took over in late 1940, and his activities in Ethiopia were based clearly upon his own interpretation of this existing doctrine, modified by conditions he discovered there. Wingate's writings indicate that the operational concept he developed subsequently was rooted explicitly in what happened in Ethiopia, and also that he intended to apply it in Burma until conditions there modified it further. Wingate's operational thought and practice was therefore multi-causal, evolving constantly, and accorded with a number of other practices of the British Army of his time and before.

What follows is not a work of biography: that job has been done, excellently, by Sykes and Royle. Rather, it is an attempt to trace the development of Orde Wingate the military thinker and commander in the context of the British Army of the time, from commissioning to death. The next chapter summarizes British Army doctrine in the inter-war period in both 'small' and 'large' wars, and, in the case of the former, focuses on the evolution in thought from Major General Charles Callwell to Major General Charles Gwynne, authors of the two most influential works on this type of operation in this period. The next chapter summarizes Wingate's experiences in Sudan, in 1928–33, and its possible influence on what came after, before discussing Wingate's opinions of Lawrence. Chapter 3 covers Wingate's time in Palestine, 1936–9, and demonstrates that Wingate's activities with the Special Night Squads were far from the departure from British counterinsurgent methods that the literature claims so frequently, but actually formed an integral part of a British military strategy which defeated the Arab revolt by 1939. That Wingate's thought and practice demonstrably fit into contemporary British strategy is also a theme of Chapter 4, which covers Ethiopia in 1940–1. The chapter demonstrates that the use of specialist forces to wage irregular and guerrilla warfare against Germany, Italy and their occupied territories was a cornerstone of British strategy in this period, principally because the British expulsion from the Continent gave them little other option. The next two chapters deal with the Chindit operations, and demonstrate that the Chindit concept evolved organically from a model resembling the operations Wingate had commanded in Ethiopia, based upon the different geography, both physical and human, of Southeast Asia, the nature of the Japanese as an opponent, and the greater resources available. Indeed, it was due to the latter that Wingate's plans not only evolved, but escalated, from his original scheme, involving auxiliary operations combining small numbers of British troops with local partisans, to a plan to inflict decisive, theatre-level defeat upon the Japanese through a major air–land offensive. Wingate hoped to prove this final concept on Operation *Thursday*, the operation on which he was killed. The final chapter attempts to analyse and establish Wingate's true 'place' in British military history, based upon this new evidence.