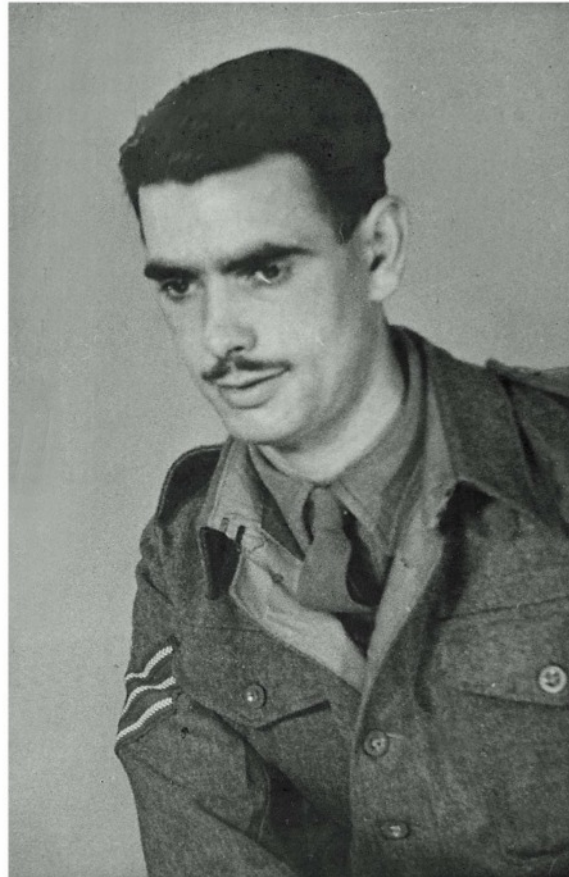


## Mission 204

A personal account of the memories  
of Ted Stuart, No. 5 Commando  
Courtesy of his son Neil.



A quick bit about my dad Ted Stuart, although it seems he was known when he first joined up as Eddie. He joined the Durham Light Infantry in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne (which is where he was from) in September 1937. He was only sixteen so lied about his age.

He went to France after war broke out with the 2nd Battalion and was wounded in the lead up to the Dunkirk evacuation, so avoided the fate that so many of his comrades experienced.

Once he had recuperated from his wound, I suspect he volunteered for what was to become No 5 Commando. He seems to have been with No 5 Special Service Battalion up in Scotland in February/March 1941, but was obviously down South in time to be part of the No 5 Commando photograph.

The only thing I know about his Commando experience was that in 1942 he was one of the volunteers to go on an unknown mission named as Military Mission 204.

He never got to do what he was initially sent to. He got picked by Orde Wingate but then contracted first malaria then two bouts of dysentery, the second which nearly killed him. After recuperating he was sent back to England about mid-1943. I am not sure if he remained with the Commandos then.

Like many men of his generation my Dad rarely spoke of his wartime experiences, especially the fighting. But at the age of almost 70 he did a GCSE English course and as part of this wrote about his experiences of the early part of this mission.

## ALMOST BUT NOT QUITE

It all began just after the monsoons were over. The year was 1942, and the place was the jungle of the Central Province of India. Not the ideal spot to experience your first monsoon but there was no choice. It was during the early days of the formation of General Wingates first expedition, when we were undergoing jungle training. At least that was the general idea, but that was upset by the weather. You can't do a fat lot of training when the heavens are continually open. All we could do, most of the time, was to stay in our tents and pretend that we were in Manchester. We eventually managed to move camp to some higher ground, which was just as well, otherwise we might have become known as the 'Water Babes in uniform.'

By the way! This was not the sort of place that I had expected to be in when I, along with several others, had volunteered for a special mission. At that time I was a member of Number 4 Troop, 5 Commando, then stationed at Dartmouth, when the great adventure began. There were twelve volunteers from the unit, for this unknown mission, eleven of these coming from 4 Troop, including the Troop Captain and one of the subalterns. We eventually embarked at Liverpool, where we met the remainder of the force, which had been drawn from each of



the Commandos still in the country. Then it was up to the Clyde to join a convoy, and it wasn't long before 204 Military Mission set sail for an unknown destination. It was real 'cloak and dagger' stuff...sealed orders, only to be opened on the fourth day at sea. As can be imagined there was much varied speculation as to where we were bound for, none of which was anywhere near the mark. There was only one man on that ship who could have even hazarded a guess as to the actual revealed destination. A Lieutenant, who spoke Chinese and was there to try to teach us the language. Anyone who knows anything about the Chinese dialects would wonder what kind of an idiot could dream up a scheme so hair-brained. However, for a while it helped to pass away the monotony of having very little to do, except look at the other ships in the convoy, watch the destroyers keeping them in station, and of course, playing housey, cards, and crown and anchor.

Yes! That's where we were bound for! China, to train the Chinese troops. However, the War Office had reckoned without their counterparts in India, where we, after nine weeks on an overcrowded tub, disembarked at Bombay. From there to that delightful spot, so beloved of our troops...Deolali. We spent a few days there, then, for an acclimatisation period, off to Jubalpole Ridge, where we were fortunate enough to be attached to a battalion of the Green Howards, who, I must say, looked after us very well indeed. I can't recall whether it was the 1st or the 2nd Battalion, but I certainly can recall the right



royal treatment we had whilst we were with them. Although it was 1942, they were still living in peacetime conditions, which, of course, suited us down to the ground.

Lieutenant-Colonel Featherstonehaugh, the officer commanding the mission, went off to H.Q. Meerut, for further instructions as to our task. After a few days he returned with the news that nothing at all was known about any such mission and that he had been advised that we should return to the United Kingdom. This, he said, he had refused to do, stating that-'we had come to do a job and a job we would do!' You can imagine how this announcement went down with the lads, who, by now, had come to realize that this was not the sort of mission that they had volunteered for. Off to Meerut went our officer commanding again, to sort things out, and that's the last we saw of him. We did hear that he had been given a staff job but as that was only hearsay, we really didn't know what actually happened. The command of this unwanted and disillusioned mission, now known by their draft serial number, RZGHA, was assumed by Major Cooper-Keyes, and we continued on our attachment.

Meanwhile, lurking in the wings, was Brigadier-General Orde Wingate, scouring the continent for likely candidates for the force that he was building up. He must have regarded us as being sent from heaven. Over a hundred commando troops, trained in demolition, going spare. Before we knew it, we were out of our comfortable quarters in a civilised area and pitching our



tents in some remote spot in the jungle of the Central Provinces of India. However, I have digressed, only I thought that you might be interested in knowing how I got there in the first place.

So, there I was, the sergeant in charge of the commando section of number eight column ('D' Company of the King's Liverpool Regiment). After the evening meal, I was always invited, by the company sergeant-major, to join the company commander and his senior non-commissioned officers, for an evening drink and chat. This, of course, I appreciated and enjoyed, however, the habit of this evening visit was to prove of vital importance to me.

From out of the blue, the China project reared its ugly head once more and, with very little notice, the whole of my section was whipped away, leaving me the sole occupant of a line of tents. Shortly after their departure, I went down with an attack of malaria, but there was nobody around to know it. I lay on my charpoy (bed), in a raging fever, unable to move or call out and, of course there was no one to know of my plight. It was only owing to the fact that I had missed two consecutive evening sessions that the sergeant-major suspected that something was amiss, and sent one of the sergeants to see what was wrong.

My next recollection was of being in our jungle 'hospital', which was situated in a 'rest' house. These were bungalow type buildings, usually consisting of two or three



rooms and cooking facilities. Charpoys were provided for sleeping in but, normally, furnishing was sparse. As the name implies, they were intended for use by travellers to rest up in, the jungle not being the ideal place for night travel. There being a rest house near where the force was camped, it was taken over and used as a makeshift hospital, under the charge of the brigade medical officer, Captain W.S.Aird, R.A.M.C. Bill Aird was one of the finest men that I have ever had the privilege of knowing, a real gentleman, and a damned good and caring doctor.

By the time I was discharged, the force had moved to a place called Sagor, so, complete with all my kit, I set off to rejoin my unit, still mustering under the name of RZGHA. They even had a flag with the name on it and no doubt held the record for keeping their draft serial number the longest. It was a ruling of General Wingate that anyone contracting a recurring disease would have to leave the force. I was transported to the nearest railway station, or a more apt description would be that I was 'dumped in a dump', which went under the name of a station. There was no waiting room or refreshment room, and there was no European food to be had anywhere. The only refreshment to be had was from a native stall which sold hot and very sweet char(tea).

The train to Sagor wasn't due for several hours and all that I could do was to moon around this desolate spot, drinking this ghastly, sickly concoction. As time passed, I began to



feel very tired and my stomach was upset. I sat on a seat on the platform and, almost immediately, fell into a heavy sleep. I awoke with a start to see the train standing at the platform. Grabbing what kit that I could carry, I ran and put it in the nearest carriage, rushing back to collect the rest of it. Turning around I found, to my horror and consternation, that the train was moving off. Although there were plenty of people on the platform, not one had offered me any assistance, and such railway officials that there might have been were conspicuous by their absence. All that I could do was to stand, holding half of my kit in my hands, staring in disbelief, as the train, bearing the other half, disappeared into the distance.

I found the 'Station Master' and explained what had happened, adding some strong comments, into which some equally strong epithets had been easily absorbed. To give him his due he was profusely apologetic about there being no staff to help me, promising to arrange to have the unaccompanied part of my belongings taken off the train at Sagor. As there wasn't another train going in that direction until the next day, there was nothing left for it but to find some alternative way of reaching my destination. This entailed humping my remaining gear five miles to a supply point, where I was fortunate to get a lift to Sagor on a supply truck. By this time I was feeling really ill and I must have looked it. As soon as my mates saw me, they whipped me down to the medical tent, so twenty-four



hours after being discharged from one hospital, I found myself being admitted into another. My stomach upset turned out to be ... dysentery!

Treatment in this hospital consisted of near starvation and liberal injections of emitine, given, with much gusto, by an Angle-Indian medico. This chap would have given Eric Bristow a close game in a darts match. He would ping the needle into the arm, twist it to the position that he wanted it, and then shoot the damned stuff into you. Truly, an unforgettable character. However, I managed to survive both the darts and the starvation.

Again discharged from hospital, I was given a couple of weeks sick leave. At my request, arrangements were made for me to spend this with the Green Howards at Jubbalpore. An obvious choice really as I had made quite a number of friends whilst we were attached to them and as most of them came from my part of England, so there was no trouble with my dialect. I must say that I couldn't have had better treatment if I had been royalty. They really went out of their way to make sure that I enjoyed myself and I have never forgotten their kindness. I recall having a photograph taken whilst I was there. I took one look at the prints and immediately tore them up. Talk about a walking skeleton? I could have easily had a star part in any freak show, eight stone of skin and bones. If I turned sideways, then I couldn't have been seen at all.

Rejoining the unit, which, by this time, had moved back to



a jungle camp, I had, as was usual, to report to the medical officer. Captain Aird was pleased to see me looking so much better and, with typical Scottish hospitality, insisted that we celebrate my return with a drink. Not having any of the usual beverages used on these occasions, we sat at a table in the medical tent, somewhere in the middle of a jungle, toasting each other in iron tonic, served up in bakelite grenade caps. Shortly after that, I was posted away from the force and never saw Bill Aird again. A wonderful and much respected gentleman.

I was moved around the country, Bombay, Karachi and various minor places, eventually finishing up in Nasik Road reinforcement camp, the least said about which, the better. I went on leave to Calcutta from there, this was a two day train journey. A train journey in India could last for days, so this was something of a short hop. On this particular trip an unforgettable and entirely unexpected event was experienced. The event can be remembered but I'm afraid that the name of the place where it happened, cannot. However, it was Christmas Day when we pulled into this fairly large station, where we were surprised to see quite a number of European ladies on the platform. They were calling to us to get off the train, which we dutifully did. We were then shepherded into a large, Christmas festooned hut, and sat down to a lovely Christmas dinner, with all the trimmings, including a bottle of beer and a small present. Apparently, these good ladies were meeting every train and ensuring that all our lads, on it, had their



Christmas dinner. This, of course, was right out of the blue but I'm sure that everyone who experienced this entirely unexpected act of kindness will remember it with much appreciation.

The stay in Calcutta was quite pleasant with the exception of a rather upsetting incident. We were staying at the racecourse, where one of the stands was being used as sleeping quarters. We slept on the veranda of the stand and were provided with a charpoy and a chair and, of course, bedding. the chair was used to fold or hang our uniforms on. Well! We didn't expect wardrobes, not on a racecourse. One morning, we woke to find that our uniforms weren't there. These we found on the floor below, all piled up in a big heap. I recovered mine only to find, as everyone else did, that all the money and personal documents were missing. It transpired that this was the work of two deserters, one from the Army, the other from the R.A.F., who would quietly go around the various billets and camps, when the occupants were asleep, take the clothing, nip off to some remote spot, and there go through the pockets at their leisure. This time, however, they had been caught before they could make their getaway. Our documents were returned to us, the money being retained by the military police who, whilst acknowledging possession, stated that it would be required to be produced as evidence at the forthcoming courts-martial. As a point of interest- Oh! You've guessed? You're dead right, I never did get it back, despite official requests. The reply was



always the same, still required as evidence at the forthcoming courts-martial. I reckon that they got so attached to it that they couldn't bear to part with it.

After about a week, I was recalled from my leave, no reason being given but I surmised that a posting had come through for me. As this was what I wanted, I didn't feel so bad at having to forgo the remainder of my leave. Besides which, I had no money. Arriving back at the reinforcement camp, I found, to my delight, that I had been posted and, furthermore, the posting was the very one that I wanted. It was to the Eastern Warfare School at Lake Karakvasla, which was about thirteen kilometres from Poona. I was particularly pleased because I would be rejoining my old troop skipper, Captain Bill Manford who, somehow, had got to know that I was at the Nasik Road camp and had arranged my posting, which, I was to discover, he had done for a couple more of the old troop.

It was another long journey and once again I underwent the, now familiar, feeling that all was not well with my stomach. By the time we reached Poona station, in the late evening, I was feeling really ghastly and very tired. Fortunately I was met at the station by some of the boys from the school who, observing the state that I was in, whisked me away to the camp, gave me a warm drink and put me to bed.

Early next morning I received a visit from the School medical officer, Captain R.S. McCormack, an Irishman with a very blunt manner. A man who didn't suffer fools gladly, regardless



of their rank, but who had a marvellous sense of humour. He was accompanied by his sergeant, George Varley, a Yorkshireman who could vie with his captain for humour. Aged about forty, a non-smoker and teetotal, George had, in his younger days, played rugby league for Castleford and county cricket for Northants, if my memory swerves me right. We hit it off from the start and soon became very good friends. Captain McCormack began to give me a thorough examination, eventually straightening up.

"You know what you've got, don't you?" he said.

"Yes sir," I knew only too well, "dysentery."

"Dead right, my lad," he confirmed, turning to George. "Get him to hospital as quickly as you can Sergeant. I'll ring them and tell them that you're on your way." He stayed chatting with me until the transport arrived.

Before long we had arrived at Number 3 British Military Hospital, Poona, and I was soon tucked up in bed, feeling more than a little bit under the weather and, extremely sorry for myself. Soon, dysentery working the way that it does, I felt the need to go to toilet. There being no nursing staff around at the time, I clambered out of bed, wobbled my way out on to the veranda, then down to the toilets which were at the far end. Whilst I was engaged in the process of complying with the demands of my body, unwelcome as they were, I wondered what on earth could have caused all the commotion that I could hear going on outside. It wasn't long before I found out the reason, for as soon as I appeared on the veranda I was seized



by two orderlies and carted off back to my bed, with a relieved looking ward Sister in attendance. Seeing me settled safely in bed, she proceeded to give me a rare ticking off, most of which I can't recall but I do remember how she finished...

"On no account whatever," she lectured, "are you to get out of bed again. If you require toilet ask and the orderly will get you a bed-pan and bottle." There didn't seem much point in saying that there was no staff around that I could ask at the time. What I didn't realize at the time was just how seriously ill I was, and it wasn't until some weeks after that this was brought home to me. I felt rough, of course, but this I put down to tiredness as well as stomach trouble.

As I say, it was some weeks before the real extent of my condition was revealed to me. I was then, happily, well on the way to recovery, able to sit up, smoke my head off and, what's more...go to the toilet on my own. My good friend the ward Sister was due to return to the United Kingdom and the newly arrived Sister was being introduced to each case by the Medical Officer. They eventually got to my bed, where I was sitting up looking the picture of health. I can't remember the M.O.'s name but I can still picture him. He was a Captain, about thirty years of age, slightly built, with dark hair, a small moustache, and he wore spectacles. Not given to much humour, but now he beamed at me.

"Now, Sister," he said, "this is our proudest case. We had actually given this chap up at one time."



I felt my jaw drop. "Pardon?" I spluttered.

"Oh yes!" he continued "Naturally we didn't tell you but you certainly gave us a fright. It was a bit touch and go for a while." They moved on.

As I pondered this remarkable piece of news, various happenings which, at the time of my admittance, had puzzled me, began to make sense. The extreme quietness of the ward, people talking in whispers mostly. My Commanding Officer, Lt-Col. Ingham-Clarke, coming in to pay a visit almost every day. The visits from the lads from the unit, most of whom I didn't know and had never previously met. I could clearly recall the Medical Officer, Matron, Ward Sister, and the hospital Sergeant-Cook, all grouped around my bed, each trying to persuade me to eat, tempting me with all sorts of delicacies, but I didn't want anything, except to be left alone. One of the terrible effects of dysentery is that you can easily lose the will to live and I had seen this happen. They managed to keep me alive but I must admit that I didn't know much about how they did it. However, I lived and was eventually discharged from the hospital and returned to my unit, with whom I had only spent one night. Here I spent several months recuperating in one of our camps, Fort Singah, an old Maharati fort some 4,500 feet above sea-level, until, due to the efforts of my Commanding Officer, I was repatriated back to England.

I have had quite a number of upsets with the old tummy because it will never be quite right. However, I am still alive



and into my seventies now, but had it not been for the skill of the R.A.M.C. doctors and staff; the care and devotion of the officers and other ranks of the Queen Alexandra's Army Nursing Corps; and people like Bill Aird and 'Doc' McCormack, it might not have been 'almost but not quite'.

## Ted Stuart

