



Frede Pedersen, in his room in Nørresundby, Denmark, recalls his time as a Corporal in No5 Commando. He fought against the Japanese in Burma. Photo: Henning Bagger

Jungle War in Burma

By Peter Harmsen

Frede Pedersen, a resident of Nørresundby, north of Aalborg, just turned 91. Almost 70 years ago he was at war in Burma. He was a corporal in the British army and the enemy was the Japanese - or the Japs, as the British called them.

"You might say I was two years in hell. Burma was the worst place you could possibly end up. And the Japs weren't a joke. They were cruel to their prisoners. I'm happy we weren't captured – the lucky ones among us," said Fred Pedersen.

While mopeds and buses passed by peacefully outside, he was sitting at his dining table explaining what it was like to be involved in the bloodiest conflict in world history.

World War II was raging everywhere from the Arctic to the Equator, but few places saw fighting as long and bitter as in the Burmese jungle.

Fred Pedersen recounted the worst experience of them all. It was a day when he was on patrol. One of his friends was hit by several shots and was severely wounded. He screamed loudly and threatened to reveal patrol's position. Frede Pedersen grabbed his gun and killed him.

"It was a pity, but there was nothing else to do – in order to rescue the others and save myself. And I wasn't reproached."

"Afterwards, the officers told me I was a hero. I didn't see it that way. I cried," he said.

Frede Pedersen had been a sailor in the merchant marine when the Germans occupied Denmark in 1940.

He had volunteered for the British Army and finally ended up with the Commandoes.

The training was tough. They used live ammunition. But it was necessary to prepare the soldiers for war.

That much was clear after Frede Pedersen had arrived in Burma. He was involved in several major engagements. One afternoon the Japanese began a massive attack on his position, and many of his comrades were killed. One of them had helped him operate a machine gun. Suddenly, he rolled over and was dead.

But most of the time was spent on small patrols in the jungle. There was no real frontline, and the enemy could be anywhere. You had to look up and down, right and left, all the time.

"We would never cross a river without seeing what was under the surface. They had placed bamboo sticks. And it wasn't fun to get one of those up your foot. They went through boots and everything. So we were careful," he said.

One of Fred Pedersen's tasks was to take Japanese prisoners so they could reveal their strengths and their plans. It was not easy, since the Japanese considered it dishonorable to surrender and they would rather die.

"They killed themselves in all kinds of ways. And when we found them dead, we didn't bury them. We buried the only Englishmen, our own," he said.

Sometimes the Japanese had tied explosives to the corpses of their own soldiers. When a British patrol came by and began to go through the equipment of the dead Japanese, it all blew up. Everything was dangerous in the jungle.

Japan had started the war in 1941 with an attack on American, British and Dutch possessions in Asia. And the British has been shocked at Japan's brutal way of waging war. It had brutalized them too.

Wounded Japanese people shouldn't expect to get any help, according to Fred Pedersen.

"That was their own problem. We had our medical corps, and they didn't do anything for them. Of course, the Japanese officers were treated, since they could cough up their secrets. We would find out one way or another. We had interpreters who knew Japanese," he said.

If Japan was enemy number one, the country was almost as hostile. Burma had almost no good roads and railways. So one of the biggest problems was getting supplies to soldiers in the field. Donkeys turned out useful for that.

Transport planes also dropped food and ammunition. But the jungle was so dense that the crews sometimes overshot, and it all ended up with the Japanese.

"I remember once it happened three days in a row. We had to eat fruit and things like that, whatever we could get. Someone said, why don't we eat a monkey? We were that hungry. But no, I didn't like the idea," said Fred Pedersen.

The Commandos' best friend in the jungle was a mongoose. It hunted snakes for them. It always wanted to lie near Frede Pedersen when he slept.

"I wish we had two or three more of those. A few soldiers were bitten by snakes. They got injections immediately. It had to be fast. And it was. They survived that way. But then they died in different other ways," he said.

In the summer of 1945 the war against Japan ended, and some months later he went back to England. Denmark had been liberated from the Germans, and for the first time in six years could Frede Pedersen return home.

"I could have stayed in the British army. But no, I said, I want to go home. The Danish army also wanted me, but I said no again. They understood. You've done enough, they said."



Frede Pedersen and his medals. Photo Henning Bagger

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