

# **The British Empire at War Research Group**

*Research Papers*

**No. 1 (2010)**

**‘The Colonial Film Archive and the British  
Empire at War, 1939-1945’**

**Ashley Jackson, King’s College London**

The *British Empire at War Research Papers* series publishes original research online, including seminar and conference presentations and synoptical essays.

**Series editors**

Ashley Jackson and Yasmin Khan

British Empire at War Research Group

Defence Studies Department, King's College London

Email: [britishempireatwar@gmail.com](mailto:britishempireatwar@gmail.com)

Website: <http://britishempireatwar.org/>

### **Background and abstract**

The ‘Colonial Film: Moving Images of the British Empire’ project was sponsored by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the British Film Institute, the Imperial War Museum, and the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum between 2008 and 2010. (see <http://www.colonialfilm.org.uk/>) Led by Professor Colin MacCabe (University of Pittsburgh) and Dr Lee Grieveson (UCL), the project organized numerous viewings of colonial era films as well as discussion seminars. It also produced a book, *Film and the End of Empire*, published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2011.

I was invited to participate in some of the project’s 2009 events relating to the Second World War, and to give a paper at one of the two conferences organized by the project team. This paper, therefore, is based on my presentation to the ‘Film and Empire’ conference at the University of Pittsburgh in 2010. It outlines the extent of the Empire’s involvement in the Second World War before reviewing the Colonial Film project’s database and the extent of its coverage of the Empire’s war effort.

### **About the author**

Ashley Jackson is Professor of Imperial and Military History at King’s College London and the author of numerous books and articles relating to the history of the British Empire.

## **The Colonial Film Archive and the British Empire at War, 1939-1945**

For some time historians have acknowledged the importance of various forms of media in prosecuting the war – particularly in the recruitment of colonial soldiers and propaganda relating to the justness of the cause and the ultimate invincibility of the Empire and the Allies (though beyond these obvious propaganda themes, there were sometimes more subtle ones; ‘Indian News Parade’, for example, in emphasizing that African troops were in Asia to help defend people, sought to mediate the poor reputation of people whom many Asians feared and looked down upon). The importance of films in bringing news of the war to people in the Empire and in Britain has also been recognized, along with the profusion of other forms of war-related media (such as radio, civilian and military newspapers, and posters). But there has been little opportunity to *view* films and use their content – to be able to see, on a large scale, the types of moving images recorded for the purposes of propaganda and the documenting of the war by the armed forces, British and colonial government agencies, companies, and amateur cameramen and women. With the Colonial Film project, films and descriptions of films are now available in abundance, and historians of the Empire and the Second World War have been given eyes to see.

### **The imperial war effort**

Before considering the nature of the films to which the database acts as a gateway, we will review the extent of the imperial war effort and some of the major themes that emerge from the study of the Empire at war. Though Britain is a European land, its greatest defeat of the Second World War occurred in a tropical peninsula seven thousand miles away, its greatest victory in an African desert. The British Empire

*defined* Britain's war between 1939 and 1945. It was a war fought in imperial theatres by imperial forces for imperial reasons, whether the fighting took place amidst Atlantic swells, in the Libyan Desert, the jungles of Burma, the mountains of Ethiopia, the rubber plantations of Malaya, or the heights surrounding Hong Kong.

The need to hold history's largest empire together, and to sustain millions of troops on distant battlefields, required the projection of military power on an unprecedented scale. For example, throughout the war vast armoured convoys criss-crossed the Indian Ocean carrying soldiers and all of their supplies between Britain and imperial ports throughout the world; a high percentage of Merchant Navy fatalities were sustained by colonial subjects, largely from South Asia and West Africa; six million men staged through South Africa's ports alone, conveyed in hundreds of convoys; Middle East Command embraced twenty countries from Libya to Iran via East Africa, and supported a ration strength of a million service personnel from all over the Empire, operating out of Egypt under generals Auchinleck, Wavell, and 'Jumbo' Wilson; sub-Saharan Africa recruited nearly 500,000 men for the British Army; Australian and New Zealand divisions moved unhindered between their homelands and the Middle East; India Command recruited and sent to war two-and-a-half million men and women from the Raj; and from his headquarters in Ceylon, Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten, Supreme Allied Commander South East Asia, commanded over 1,300,000 Allied and imperial troops by 1945.

From the Dunkirk evacuations in 1940 until the invasion of Sicily and Italy in 1943, British and imperial troops were not active on the European continent, save for small scale raids and coastal operations, and the brief interventions in Greece and Crete.

The Battle of the Atlantic, which provided Britain with its food and armaments lifeline and the wherewithal to become a *place d'armes* ready for the D-Day assault on Fortress Europe, was testament to Britain's historic links to the non-European world. Confined in Europe by German power and the defeat of its principal ally, France, for Britain the struggle in the Mediterranean and Africa became the primary focus of land warfare. Added to this, the war against Japan dragged Britain's strategic planning eastwards, as did the German threat through the Caucasus to the oil wells of Mosul and Kirkuk. For the British imperial state, survival depended upon control of the sea lanes, not only of the Atlantic but also of the Indian Ocean, as well as victory in the lands on that ocean's rim where 'sideshow' campaigns proliferated - in Burma, East Africa, Iran, Iraq, Java, Madagascar, Malaya, and Sumatra.

Between 1939 and 1945 Britain had to fight two distinct wars, one a European struggle to defend continental allies from German invasion and then to safeguard the British Isles themselves as the Battle of Britain unfolded in the late summer skies, and as Allied strength slowly mounted in preparation for the re-invasion of Nazi-occupied Europe (the war against Germany sustained in the meantime by the weight of Bomber Command's offensive and the ceaseless activities of Royal Navy and RAF units protecting European and Atlantic sea lanes). The other war was a distinctly imperial conflict made more deadly than Britain's past global struggles by the enmity of Japan in addition to that of two European Great Powers. The two conflicts – European and imperial – overlapped in the Mediterranean, where Mussolini's Italy was roped into Hitler's European war whilst pursuing its own imperial ambitions in the Aegean, Africa, and the Middle East.

In reviewing the Empire's war, one is repeatedly struck by the incredible diversity of the war experience of British men and women and hundreds of thousands of men and women from the colonies and dominions, as the forces of the British Empire were shunted around the world to defend its key strategic points and even its tiny outposts, and to defend Britain itself: Canadians flocked to Britain in the first winter of the war and entered Hong Kong weeks before its surrender; New Zealanders sailed across the Indian Ocean to Palestine and Egypt, where along with Australian, Indian, South African and colonial empire servicemen they fought across North Africa; Ceylonese artillerymen were dispatched to guard cable and wireless stations in the Cocos Islands and the Seychelles; Pioneers from Swaziland supported the Eighth Army in Italy, Libya, and Tunisia; Trinidadians joined the RAF and Honduran loggers felled trees in Scotland; Fijians fought alongside Americans in the Central Pacific; South African aircraft flew over Ethiopia and Madagascar; and Indian Army battalions torched the oil wells and put up a spirited defence of Borneo when the Japanese landed.

This brings us to consider the range of theatres of war that characterized the British war effort, and that those at its summit, such as Britain's warlord Winston Churchill, had to conceptualize and plan across in orchestrating a global conflict, its command, logistics, and intra-imperial and intra-Allied diplomacy and politics. There came to exist, as the war unfolded – often in unexpected ways - a number of broad, interconnected theatres of conflict: There was of course the war in Western Europe and the Battle of the Atlantic, and the interconnected theatre linking the Mediterranean world, Southern Europe, North Africa, and the Levant. This stretched further east and was bound up with the Middle Eastern theatre from the Levant through Iraq and Iran to the borders of India, and all of this, through the logic of sea

routes and the nature of a war fought at great distances, was linked to a ceaseless and enormous maritime operation around the Cape and across the sea routes of the Indian Ocean. This region linked the war efforts of the Empire in Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East to the major land operations in South Asia and South-east Asia. Further east still, whilst always subsidiary to American power, the British Empire was heavily engaged in the war in the Far East and the Pacific, primarily through the deployments of Australian forces, later joined by substantial British naval resources. Enormous regional commands and military formations, such as Middle East Command (with its subsidiary, East Africa Command), South East Asia Command, Persia and Iraq Command, the Mediterranean Fleet, the Eastern Fleet, and the British Pacific Fleet, coordinated operations in these regions, under the supervision of the Chiefs of Staff and Prime Minister. There were then numerous inter-allied commands, such as the Allied outfit in French North Africa under Eisenhower, and Wavell's short-lived American-British-Dutch-Australian Command based in Java.

The military, naval, and air formations that fought in *all* of these theatres under the banner of the British Empire were highly multinational in nature; they contained units and personnel from a multitude of the Empire's colonies, dominions, and associated territories. Examples are legion and include the Anglo-Canadian armies that invaded Normandy alongside the Americans in June 1944 and the great multinational armies such as the Eighth and Fourteenth and the lesser known Tenth Army (formed as the main body of Persia and Iraq Command). Bomber Command featured thousands of Australians, and Canadian land, air, and naval forces fought around the world. British Empire formations often included units and personnel from other Allied countries – one thinks of the American Volunteer Group flying in defence of Burma, and the



enormous American and Chinese forces that were a part of what the British still rather narrowly define as ‘the Burma campaign’. There was then the Polish Army in the East, formed and armed under British auspices in Iran before deployment in the front line, as well as Free French formations fighting with the Eighth Army in North Africa. The RAF’s Fighter Command famously featured pilots from various foreign countries. It is also worth noting that British Special Forces, such as the Special Air Service and the Special Boat Service, originated in the Second World War and utilized imperial knowledge and personnel drawn from the dominions.

In addition to the geographical extent of the imperial war effort and the diversity of the military commands and formations that conducted it, several other key themes in the study of the Empire at war should be highlighted. One is the shared experience on the home front of people living in Britain, Burma, Jamaica, Nigeria, Malta, Mauritius, Malaya, or Hong Kong – rationing, dietary change, air raid precautions, blackouts, profiteering, inflation, war savings schemes, recruitment into civil defence and military units, requisitioning of public buildings, and the construction of defences and airstrips. Many territories of the British Empire also suffered the horrors of invasion and lengthy enemy occupation.

Another key theme in viewing the Empire at war is the importance of imperial infrastructure in prosecuting the war – dock and port facilities, roads, railways, and pipelines – often constructed at short notice by hastily-draagooned colonial labourers. Another theme is the use made of existing and ad hoc economic structures to aid the Allied war effort; the tea planters association in Assam turned its resources to the construction of military roads, for instance, executives from Far Eastern merchant

houses such as Jardine and Matheson joining the covert war behind enemy lines, and inventions like the Middle East Supply Centre and the West African Supply Board helped align the supply and demand of imports and exports. Another theme is the rise of American power and entry of American forces into many parts of the Empire or areas of British influence, including Iran, West Africa, India, and the islands of the Pacific.

### **The Colonial Film database**

Having reviewed the imperial nature of the Second World War and the extent of colonial participation in it, the chapter turns to a consideration of the Colonial Film project's utility for historians of the British Empire and the Second World War. As a new resource, it is invaluable, unique, and exciting. Any scholar researching an aspect of the Empire's war history will find references in this database to films that can enrich his or her work. A search under the term 'Second World War' on the Colonial Film website yields 1,257 hits, and it is from a survey of that list that this section is drawn. What is most spectacular about this new resource is the manner in which it allows the historian to focus on overlooked territories, such as Cyprus or the Cocos Islands, and overlooked colonial units, such as the Indian Air Force, King's African Rifles, or Cyprus Volunteer Force.

The collection adds rich detail and inspiration to creative engagement with traditional archives, as the historian attempts to recreate and examine a lost world of colonial rule and tumultuous global conflict. Not only does the database provide a portal to these invaluable moving images, be they filmed for propaganda purposes, for the official military record, or by an off duty soldier with a camera in a foreign land, but

each reference is accompanied by an excellent synopsis. In addition to the synopsis, a significant proportion of the 1,257 references are accompanied by ‘context’ and ‘analysis’ paragraphs. These meticulous pieces, written by Richard Osbourne and Tom Rice, amount to comprehensive essays providing expert context for the film in question.

In trawling through the archive, several strong themes emerge. They include casualty evacuation and the treatment of wounded soldiers; military training and exercises; detailed studies of military equipment such as fighter aircraft, bombers, flying-boats, warships, tanks, and artillery pieces; ceremonies and victory parades; troop entertainment shows and sports fixtures; the visits and meetings of dignitaries and senior officers; army advances and RAF strikes in Burma and the wider South East Asia Command region, including French Indo-China and Thailand; operations in the Dutch East Indies both during and after the end of the war; news of colonial soldiers for consumption in home societies; Japanese surrenders, war crimes trials, and prisoners of war release and repatriation; and information for the British public about the colonial contribution to the war effort.

In terms of geographical distribution, the overwhelming preponderance of the films relate to the India-Burma-Ceylon-South-east Asia theatre of war, and the islands of the Indian Ocean. Coming in at a distant second is the North Africa-Mediterranean-Southern Europe theatre, including the islands of Cyprus, Gibraltar, and Malta. There are then films relating to East Africa (particularly the Abyssinian campaign), the Iran-Iraq command, and Hong Kong. Even smaller groups of films cluster around territories such as the Bahamas and Borneo.

One of the most enjoyable aspects of watching these films is the simple pleasure derived from seeing moving images of periods and places that one might have an intense research interest in. Just to see people *living* and to be able to view aspects of everyday life – a street scene in Colombo, entertainments on board a troopship (a good sequence aboard the British Indian line's troopship *Dilwara*), or footage of a convoy being escorted by a Royal Indian Navy vessel – are a joy. To focus briefly on Ceylon, an overlooked strategic island that this author has an interest in (and that is very well represented in this collection): *A Day in Ceylon* (1943) shows vibrant street market scenes, military checkpoints, and people queuing outside a cinema to see Disney's *Fantasia*. *Shore Leave in Ceylon* (1940) is a seventeen minute amateur film made by Lieutenant George Blundell. The archive captures unusual and little known aspects of the war, such as *Life with an Air Sea Rescue Unit* (1944), which documents the work of the RAF's 236 Air Sea Rescue Unit based at Kayts, a small island off Ceylon's Jaffna Peninsula. Air-sea rescue operations saved many service personnel and civilians from drowning after enemy attacks on shipping, as well as crew from downed aircraft. *Ceylon Flying Boat Base* (1944) gives extensive information about the RAF's flying-boat base on Koggala lagoon in southern Ceylon, from which flew the Royal Canadian Air Force Catalina that spotted Admiral Chuichi Nagumo's mighty carrier and battleship fleet as it steamed north to attack Colombo and Trincomalee in April 1942. It is a unique documentary record of this important base, its force composition, personnel, and operations.

There are many other examples of films that shed light on little-known aspects of the war, and the ways in which it involved diverse people working in unusual places:

there is a film about Operation Wallop, for example, an anti-piracy operation north of Penang in August 1946 in which British units worked with their Japanese captives. There are films showing anti-malaria operations conducted by military units, and an offensive against the Hur, a Sufi Muslim community in Sindh province against whom the British had been battling for years. There is also a film of an Auxiliary Territorial Service Training Centre in Sarafand, Palestine, where women from Palestine, Yemen, Trans-Jordan, and India underwent training for the army.

One of the archive's main strengths relates to the reconquest of Burma by imperial troops and their American and Chinese allies. There are many films showing infantry and armour advances on various Burmese towns and cities and enemy strongholds, as well as footage showing the aftermath of fighting (for example, the result of a Japanese fighter-bomber raid on the road to Yamethin in central Burma in April 1945), or scenes shot in towns shortly after their capture (*Mandalay After the Action*). There is also a lot of footage documenting RAF airstrikes against Japanese positions (mainly in Burma, but as far away as Bangkok and Saigon), and footage showing the all-important road lines of communication. There are then a number of films documenting Japanese surrenders and Allied victory parades (*Allied Victory Parade Rangoon*, 1945). It is an extraordinarily rich collection, invaluable to future historians of 'the Burma campaign'.

Many of the films, whatever the purpose for which they were made, document military operations and exercises. *Fortress Ceylon* (1945), which tells the story of the island's war effort and for propaganda purposes emphasizes the togetherness of the imperial and Allied struggle, is more valuable as a record of the Japanese raid on the

island on 5 April 1942. It is one of the very few existing films documenting the attack. The viewer sees Japanese aircraft flying in formation, air to air combat as RAF fighters engage the enemy, the work of ARP wardens and ambulance and fire crews, and downed Japanese aircraft. Another film shows ‘invasion exercises’ involving elements of Force 121. Soldiers scale a cliff face in East Africa defended by troops of the King’s African Rifles. The exercise was held in 1942 at the causeway connecting Mombasa to the mainland. The attackers are from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion The South Lancashire Regiment and the exercise is watched by Major General Robert Sturges (commanding the invasion of Madagascar), Brigadier Francis ‘Frankie’ Festing (commanding 29<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade, used in the invasion of Madagascar), and the Commander-in-Chief of the Eastern Fleet, Admiral Sir James Somerville. It is clear that this exercise took place ahead of the invasion of Madagascar in May 1942, conducted by units that were to be involved in that operation. Indian units on active service receive a fair amount of coverage in films such as *In the Mountains of the Apennines with the Jaipur Infantry* (1944); *Indian Troops in Damascus* (1941); and *Indian Troops in the Mareth Line* (Tunisia, 1943). *Australians Lead Assault on Borneo* (1945) is one of the very few films featuring Australian forces.

One film shows the cruiser HMS *Ceylon* in port at Colombo and illustrates the utility of the archive as a record of important civilian and military figures, of indigenous people recruited into British military structures, and of the types and functioning of military hardware. The ship’s chaplain talks to Ceylonese dignitaries, including D. S. Senanayake (a member of Ceylon’s War Cabinet and later the first prime minister of independent Ceylon) and there is music from the band of the Royal Marines. The dignitaries pose beneath the guns of ‘Y’ turret with Admirals Layton (C-in-C Ceylon)

and Somerville (C-in-C Eastern Fleet). *Ceylon* then performs a gunnery demonstration. Ready use four-inch ammunition is laid out on deck; the ship's four-inch secondary armament is fired, along with two-pounders and Oerlikons. Depth charges explode in the ship's wake. A view forward from the quarterdeck shows 'Y' turret firing by single barrel over the port beam. The film then shows a visit to a Royal Naval Aircraft Ceylonese Training Establishment. Ceylonese maintenance crew are seen working on a Fleet Air Arm Fairey Albacore; there is an armed march past by Ceylonese ratings; other Ceylonese servicemen are seen being taught how to drive lorries (Australian 30cwt Chevrolets). The film then shows British servicemen arming an Albacore with eighteen-inch torpedoes, and Albacores test firing torpedoes against targets at sea.

Many of the films were made for the consumption of people in Britain and the colonies, often with an obvious propaganda edge. *Food from the Empire* (1940) informs the British public about their consumption of colonial raw materials and foodstuffs, and *Belmont School Goes to Nassau* (1941) report on the schoolchildren from Belmont in Hassocks, Sussex who were sent to the Bahamas to continue their schooling, the film showing them meeting the Governor, the Duke of Windsor. A series called 'So this is India' shows British service personnel in foreign settings, with titles such as *Airmen on Leave in Darjeeling* and *Airmen's Day Off Sightseeing in Shwebo, Burma*. Such films are valuable because they offer a record of what these places looked like in the 1940s. The collection contains many episodes of the news magazine India Movietone News. A typical episode covers the Communist Party's inaugural congress in Bombay; the arrival of Polish refugees in Bombay (where upwards of 10,000 of them were billeted); the Governor's Cup meeting in Karachi;

trials of military vehicles fitted with Indian-manufactured components; the opening of the King George V Swimming Baths in Lahore; the campaign in Tunisia in which Indian soldiers were taking part; and the Viceroy's visit to the eastern front (Burma).

The archive also offers important and in many cases unique footage of senior war leaders, commanders, and politicians. This includes the famous, such as President Roosevelt (shown visiting Malta in 1943) and Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten, Commander-in-Chief South East Asia. Mountbatten features more than any other leader in the archive, as his movements were very well documented. Films include numerous visits in Burma and Singapore, and also a visit aboard the American carrier USS *Saratoga* and her destroyer escort USS *Dunlap* at Colombo in 1944 (with the British carrier HMS *Victorious* visible too). The American vessels had been loaned to the British Eastern Fleet for operations from Ceylonese ports against Japanese targets in Sumatra. There are then films featuring relatively well-known, though not quite so famous figures, such as Lieutenant General Sir Oliver Leese (arriving in Colombo as the new Commander-in-Chief Allied Land Forces South East Asia) and Lord Gort (Governor of Gibraltar 1941-42 and Governor of Malta 1942-44).

Other films feature less famous though nevertheless important figures whose careers and commands are often overlooked. This is a great strength of the archive. Such people include General Sir George Giffard, (who created West Africa Command and raised the West African divisions, and later served as Commander-in-Chief of the 11<sup>th</sup> Army Group in South-east Asia); members of the Cabinet touring the Empire, including Clement Attlee's sometime Secretary of State for War, Jack Lawson; the 'white rajah' of Sarawak, Charles Brooke, shown returning to his country after the



end of Japanese occupation; the Duke of Gloucester, shown visiting troops of the Tenth Army in Iraq; Admiral Sir Geoffrey Layton (Commander-in-Chief Ceylon) and Lieutenant General Sir Henry Pownall (Officer Commanding Troops and later Mountbatten's Chief of Staff at South East Asia Command) shown with an elephant escort as they visit the ancient Buddhist temple at Kelaniya; and Lieutenant General Sir Edward Quinan, Commander-in-Chief of the Tenth Army. This unheralded army was created to guard the vital oil reserves of the region and prepare to meet a German invasion via the Caucasus. The film chronicles a tour of the Tenth Army in March 1942 by Quinan's superior, General Sir Claude Auchinleck, Commander-in-Chief Middle East. Auchinleck is seen arriving in Baghdad from Cairo. He is met by Lieutenant General Quinan. They are shown inspecting troops and facilities at RAF Habbaniya a Gurkha Indian Infantry Brigade at Quayara, and in Mosul and Basra. These films are important because they provide rare, sometimes unique footage of important people in the war and colonial politics, and sometimes because they capture important events (such as the film showing Governor Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith meeting with Burmese leaders aboard the cruiser HMS *Cumberland* in June 1945, as the British sought to negotiate their return).

Sports and entertainment films are well represented in the database, reflecting the importance attached to sport for the wellbeing of military forces and as a relief for civilian populations. The films include numerous race meetings (such as the Governor's Cup in Karachi), England versus Scotland or British Army versus Cocos Islanders football matches, Malaya Command's Sports Day in Kuala Lumpur, and Burma Command's Athletics Meeting at Rangoon. The 1944 Armistice Day parade in Colombo featured an air display by twelve RAF Spitfires and sixteen Fleet Air Arm

Corsairs flying in 'vic' formations and attacking targets offshore, a procession, and a football match. Another film charts George Formby's visit to Ceylon in March 1945 in the company of an ENSA (Entertainments National Service Association) party. They are seen arriving at Colombo and disembarking from the aircraft, Wee Georgie Wood, wearing an oversized pith-helmet (he was four feet nine inches tall), is followed by his 'stage mother'. Formby plays a tune on his trademark ukulele. Another film shows an East African entertainment troupe featuring the Kenyan guitarist Funde Konde (*An African Entertainment Unit*, 1944, featuring No. 1 East African Entertainment Unit, which had given 350 performances in one year in Ceylon, Burma, and India).

Many films relate to the war effort of particular colonies, or military and war-related activity that took place within them. Films include *Outpost of Empire* (Southern Rhodesia), *Alert in the East* (Singapore), *War in Malaya*, *War Comes to Kenya*, *Malta George Cross*, *Cyprus Goes to War*, *Newfoundlanders at War*, *Fiji Return*, *Hillmen go to War* (Burma), and *Fortress Ceylon*. Some films offer detailed information about the war effort of particular colonies. *Gibraltar* (1941) is a series of twenty-five short lengths of film shot with a view to making a feature-length film about the Rock at war (a project that didn't come to fruition). Material includes the Governor Lord Gort inspecting a company of Canadian Royal Engineer tunnellers (extensive tunnelling was undertaken in Gibraltar and large military facilities, including a hospital, built underground). The archive also includes a number of films about Malta, including *Malta Convoy Heroes* (1942) and *Malta George Cross*. A colony that is covered in several films is Cyprus. There is footage of a Cyprus Coastal Defence battery practice

firing; of a Forestry Company of the Cyprus Volunteer Force at Troodos; and of 606 Company Cyprus Pioneer Corps (Alien Unit). This 'British foreign legion' comprised non-British/British colonial citizens. Filmed at Famagusta, these men were from Poland, Rumania, Hungary, Russia, Czechoslovakia, Greece, and Bulgaria, and the unit served at Dunkirk, in Crete, Greece, and the Western Desert. Another Cyprus related films shows Territorial Army units practise firing in Limassol and an anti-aircraft battery in action. The film then shows the first air raid on the island by three Italian aircraft.

In South-east Asia and the Far East, there are several films relating to the reoccupation of Hong Kong and Singapore, and significant coverage of British operations in Sumatra and Java after Japan's defeat. Mountbatten's South East Asia Command was responsible for the Dutch territories, as well as French Indo-China, for an extended period after the cessation of hostilities. The collection offers several films relating to the trial and execution of Japanese prisoners of war. One film shows the hanging of three Japanese soldiers at Changi, among them Lieutenant Kaniyuki Nakamura, found guilty of beheading Sepoy Mohammad Shafi. He is shown dropping through the trap door, his body then inspected by a military doctor.

Numerous films document the war service of colonial forces, such as *A Day in the Life of a Sepoy*, *He's in the Navy* (about the Royal Indian Navy), *West Africa Was There*, and *Africa's Fighting Men* (1943). This film, made by the Colonial Film Unit, played to Africans on mobile cinema units. It also toured in Britain as part of the Colonial Exhibition, viewed, for instance, by 5,549 people in Newcastle. The film sought to recognize the African war effort and give British people a better view of

Africans – to show that they were not ‘natives’ in distant jungles. *Basuto Troops on Active Service* (1945) features, among other things, the work of African soldiers trained as fire fighters in Southern Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. Some films show colonial people in Britain. *African Girl Crowned May Queen at Stanion, Northamptonshire* featured an African girl at a rural English school, her father serving in the Merchant Navy. The film’s message was about the inclusion of Africans in British society. Numerous other films also feature colonial people in Britain; there are Indian personnel of the Auxiliary Military Pioneer Corps clearing bomb damage at Sloane Square underground station in London (members of this unit were recruited largely from the ‘lascar’ population in British ports and docks), and *Heroes of the 4<sup>th</sup> Indian Division Visit the East End of London* (1943; The division had fought with distinction in East Africa and the Western Desert).

The medical treatment and casualty evacuation films are particularly arresting. There is footage from an 82<sup>nd</sup> West African Division dressing station at Tamandu which shows an operation in the field and casualty evacuation by river and air. Another film shows a blood transfusion in the field to men of the Lushai Brigade at Zampi in the Chin Hills, performed by men of the Indian Army Medical Corps. Another film shows blood transfusions to West African soldiers on Ramree Island. The collection also highlights the role of allies in theatres of British imperial activity. *Dutch Aircraft in Malaya* (1941) reminds us of the fact that from the very start of the war Dutch naval and air assets served with distinction as part of British commands in Malaya and Ceylon. Another film shows American servicemen handing over Dodge vehicles to Soviet troops at Andimeshk in Iran in 1942, part of the Anglo-American supply line that funnelled Lend-Lease aid to the Russian ally via Iran’s roads and waterways

following the Anglo-Soviet invasion of that country in August 1941. Another film shows American Dakota transport aircraft being loaded with freight in northern India to be flown over ‘the Hump’ – the Himalayan mountain range – to the aid of the Chinese. There is then a film showing members of a Chinese military mission being hosted by the Governor of Malta, as the delegation stopped off en route to Britain in 1943. Another film shows Polish troops in Iran and Iraq, where General Anders’ Army of the East was formed from Poles released from Soviet labour camps, trained, armed, and commanded by the British.

There is plenty of coverage of the war in Africa, notably of the Abyssinian campaign and the struggle in the Western Desert. One film shows the Prime Minister of Southern Rhodesia, Sir Godfrey Huggins, visiting Egypt in 1943 - where he inspects 237 Rhodesia Squadron RAF at El Daba and meets Britain’s Resident Minister to the Middle East, the Australian Sir Richard Casey. There is footage of General Dan Peinaar and South African troops in Abyssinia in 1941 and of Peinaar later in the war at the headquarters of the 1<sup>st</sup> South African Division at Gazala in Libya. *Africa’s Fighting Men* (1943) shows African troops training in the Gold Coast and Sierra Leone, and members of the Royal West African Frontier Force on manoeuvres in Ceylon prior to deployment in Burma. Another film shows the visit to Ceylon in June 1945 of sixteen ‘chiefs’ from East Africa, including the Sultan of Zanzibar. Here they visited the men of the 11<sup>th</sup> East African Division, a visit typical of the efforts made to keep colonial troops in touch with their home societies and traditional authority.

Important images documenting military activity in remote outposts of the British Empire are one of the real treasures of this archive. They illustrate how wide ranging

the war's impact was, and how incomplete standard histories of the war can be. The Andaman Islands, Addu Atoll, Ramree Island, and the Cocos Islands are little known, but were all deeply marked by the war, either as strategic bases or the scenes of fighting and occupation. *Building a Strategic RAF Jungle Airfield in the Cocos Islands* (1945) provides an excellent view of the extensive military infrastructure put in place in these remote islands in order to bring Japanese-occupied territory within better range of RAF bombers. The squadrons stationed there played an important role in flying mercy missions once the war had ended. The film illustrates the value of so many of these films in that it provides detail on types of equipment and kit, and the precise nature of the military units deployed. *Island Bases in the Indian Ocean* (1945) provides an important visual tour of military facilities at Mahé in the Seychelles, Addu Atoll, and Diego Garcia, from where flying-boats patrolled the Indian Ocean's vital sea lanes. Another film records the reoccupation of the Andaman Islands, where the inhabitants had endured over three years of brutal Japanese occupation. There are quite a few films recorded on Ramree Island, where a six week battle raged in early 1945. The island's capture was important as the British sought to establish sea and air supply lines for the advance to reconquer Burma, and began with an amphibious assault (Operation Matador).

## **Conclusion**

In the Eastern theatre, Mountbatten's South East Asia Command based in Kandy had a 'Hollywood Boulevard', as film became important in documenting the effort of Allied servicemen and in building and sustaining their morale. This accounts for the predominance of South East Asia Command films in the archive. What is so very fascinating about the films and rushes that this project has revealed is the manner in

which they add exceptional colour, life, and detail to our knowledge of a vanished colonial world, and the phenomenon that was the British Empire at war. Those trying to recreate the lost world of wartime Cairo or Delhi, or of life for British and imperial service personnel close to the action or enjoying some R&R in a Ceylonese hill station, will recognize the invaluable nature of these moving images. Furthermore, it is a treat to be able to fit some of them into context – context that is brilliantly captured in the essays written by Tom Rice and Richard Osbourne that accompany many of the online entries for the films. The archive, as has been shown, underlines key themes regarding the colonial war effort - the role, for example, of air power in supplying China and evacuating battlefield casualties in Burma, and the role played by African troops on the front line. What is best about this archive, however, is the fact that – whatever our hindsight, scholarly views, about the colonial world and its manifold injustices – here we have the delight and intrigue of moving images of people who are no more, who inhabited a world of war and colonialism that also is no more. It opens windows onto the past, and brings the past to life.