

# AIR COMMANDO

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# JOURNAL

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Laos: Part 3

Finding  
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Battlefield  
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Accident



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Foreword by Wayne G. Norrad, CMSgt, USAF (Ret)

remark to us - to criticize our camp - and to attempt to discourage the operation. He has held the line - light for so long that he appeared jealous of the Commandos and downright sad that the operation did succeed.

Cochran's briefing of his men was very informal and almost

most of the time depended on a bit of the shop! I



Capt Enloe is pictured slightly left and above Col Phil Cochran on right side of photo.

had covered the operation - no word

will approach our base

# Finding History

How Captain Cortez Enloe's Journal Sheds New Light on the History of the World War II Air Commandos and Operation THURSDAY

By Patrick J. Charles

Determining what constitutes myth versus history is always a concern among historians. Much of it centers on whether there can be such a thing as a truly accurate and objective historical account. Given that all historical information grows out of the respective historian's ideological mind, it is argued that harnessing historical information is not so much about truth-gathering as it is learning about the ideological process

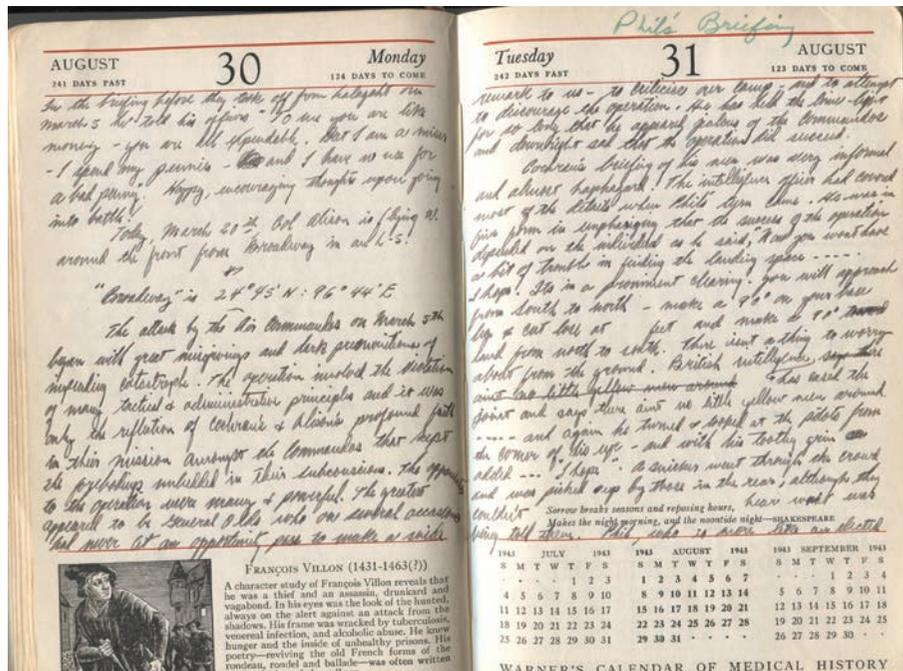
commanded the British Commandos—that the name ‘Air Commandos’ was chosen for the special operations unit. It was at this juncture that Arnold recruited Colonels Philip G. Cochran and John R. Alison, who then developed and honed the concept of air-centric special operations.

As feasible as this story seems on its face, unbeknownst to those that were telling it, uncovered historical evidence

historical narrative of the British initiating the formation of the Air Commandos did not have any substance. Without Wingate's request for aerial supply the air commando concept would have never taken off. For whatever reason—perhaps due to General Arnold's graciousness and diplomatic rapport—both Wingate and Mountbatten came to the conclusion that the Air Commandos were their creation; however, nothing could be further from the truth. It would be one thing for Wingate and Mountbatten to state that the British plan to retake Burma aided in the “formation” of the Air Commandos. But for them to assert that they took part in the “creation” of the Air Commandos is another. The former is substantiated by the historical evidence. The latter is revisionist history at its finest.

It is the rare occasion that a historian comes across an unknown or undiscovered piece of historical evidence that alters society's view of the past. As it pertains to Arnold's role in creating the Air Commandos, the finding breathes new life and insights into the evidentiary record. And what becomes abundantly clear is just how invested Arnold was in the Air Commandos. It was a unit that Arnold took part in developing, of which he approved the formation, for which he selected the commanders, and with which he hoped to show the world that air power could both operate independently and alter the battle space. Thus when Mountbatten sought to reorganize the Air Commandos for his own strategic purposes it was an action that Arnold sternly objected to as a “step backward,” writing:

*In order to get the maximum value from our Air Commandos, and develop new principles for their participation in air warfare, we must have extreme flexibility. The greatest possible freedom for this development can be secured only by creating a self contained ground and air command which can accomplish the type of mission we visualize....The Cochran force as we outlined in Washington when you were here was nothing more than an idea—an idea which visualized putting down by air considerable ground forces far behind the enemy's lines and at places where he could offer no serious opposition...While I*



**Cortez Enloe's notes on Operation THURSDAY, particularly Cochran's briefing before the mission.** (Photo courtesy of Air Force Academy Library)

of the respective historian. In other words, critics of accurate and objective history frequently claim that what one historian considers the truth is another's falsehood. What drives this criticism is the frequency in which historical narratives can change, but in the case of the Air Commandos and Operation THURSDAY, for over half a century the story has largely been set in stone.

Until just recently the story was the idea for an Air Commando unit was agreed upon at the 1943 Quebec Conference through the request of Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten, following Major General Orde C. Wingate's briefing on Long Range Penetration Groups operating in Burma. It was allegedly General Henry “Hap” Arnold's respect for Mountbatten—particularly how he

revealed the entire narrative to be highly dubious. What historians overlooked was the Air Commando concept had been developed a year earlier by Major General George C. Kenney. It was an idea which Arnold modified and subsequently approved. Arnold followed up this approval by issuing a July 1942 press release, informing the world of a new “Troop Carrier Command” consisting of “an air commando force.” The press release also highlighted how the air-centric special unit would use gliders, air-borne combat troops, and aerial resupply to “strike the enemy where he is least prepared.” It was the very concept of what would later become the working parts and pieces of the 1st Air Commando Group.

This is not to say that the previous

am confident that [the Air Commando] concept has practically unlimited possibilities for development in Burma, enthusiastic support from the theatre is most essential to determine the eventual capabilities of such operations.

As touched upon earlier, for a historian to find unknown or undiscovered evidence that significantly alters the historiography of any event is rare, but for it to happen twice is quite extraordinary. What I am referring to here is the only surviving Air Commando account of the unit and Operation THURSDAY. Written by 1st Air Commando Group flight surgeon Captain Cortez Enloe, the journal offers interesting insights on everything from the leadership styles exhibited by Cochran and Alison, to the character of Wingate, and the launch of Operation THURSDAY.

The reason for the journal's absence from previous historical accounts is two-fold. First, the journal—which is the centerpiece of a larger collection accumulated by Enloe—had been

unavailable to researchers until 1996, when his daughters, Cynthia and Margaret Enloe, donated it to the Air Force Academy Library Special Collections Manuscript Division. Initially, Enloe kept the journal as a personal memento, but as the Burma campaign progressed and he began to reflect on the historical significance of what was taking place. He foresaw the possibility of transforming the journal into a book manuscript. “I don't know what I will do with [the journal] for now [but] I have written over 200 pages of events & anecdote... [These recent events have] made me think that if I should ever write a book about the Air Commandos, I'd call it *They Found Their Souls*,” wrote Enloe in a letter dated 14 Apr 1944.

This tentative title was homage to Cochran's speech just before the execution of Operation THURSDAY, where he stated: “Tonight you're going to find out if you've got a soul. Nothing you've ever done or nothing you are ever going to do counts now.” As the years passed by, the book never came to

fruition. It was not until the 1980s that Enloe seriously explored its possibilities. By then the tentative title of *They Found Their Souls* was replaced by *Far, Far, the Unknown*. In total the book was to consist of thirty-one chapters, but only three were drafted before Enloe passed away.

The second reason the journal may not have been included in previous historical accounts is that its contents were hidden from plain sight. Enloe did not write his notes in a journal clearly marked “Air Commandos,” “Operation THURSDAY” or even “1944.” Instead, they were conspicuously annotated in a 1943 edition of *Warner's Calendar of Medical History*. It is unclear exactly why Enloe chose to write about 1944 historical events—particularly those as important as Operation THURSDAY—in a 1943 medical calendar, but Enloe's correspondence hints that the calendar was the best means available at the time.

As far as the journal's contents, its historical significance lay in what it tells us about the Air Commandos. While the



**Quebec Conference 1943—sitting left to right is Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall, Army Air Corps Chief General Henry H. Arnold, Brigadier General J.R. Deane, Admiral Ernest J. King, and Chief of Staff Admiral William D. Leahy.** (Photo courtesy of Air Force Academy Library)



**Captain Cortez Enloe at Broadway** (Photo courtesy of Air Force Academy Library)

traditional historical narrative paints a cheerful story of Cochran and Alison as faultless leaders, Wingate as an admired strategist, and Operation THURSDAY as a virtually unimpeded success, Enloe's journal reminds us that such storybook narratives are often nothing more than revisionist history. As anyone privy to the behind-the-scenes of a joint military operation will attest, there are multiple layers of conflict taking place, not only between the different participating units, but also within each unit. It is not until after the execution of the operation—once passions and disputes have had time to settle—that the storybook narrative begins to supplant the historical reality.

Given that Enloe's journal includes over two hundred pages of commentary and notes, in this venue it is impossible to cover each instance where the journal provides new insight into the history of the Air Commandos. Instead, this article will examine three topics. Perhaps one of the more interesting topics within Enloe's journal is the leadership of Colonel Cochran. For over the last fifty years, Cochran's leadership has been only celebrated in the pantheon of Air Commando history. Finding any criticism of Cochran is like looking for a needle in a haystack, but what Enloe's journal does is it reminds us that the 1st Air Commando Group commander was not flawless.

To the Air Commando traditionalist, Enloe's criticisms of Cochran may be dismissed as nothing more than a subordinate's personal conjecture. However, to dismiss Enloe outright would be a grave historical error. For one, Enloe's criticisms were written contemporaneously with events as they unfolded, meaning to the professional historian they are the best source documents available. But, most importantly, Enloe's criticisms matter because not only was he a fellow Air Commando officer, he was a personal friend of Cochran—a friendship that lasted until death.

One criticism levied was Cochran's questionable demeanor at times. As a British military report dated 4 Oct 1944 captured, whenever the Air Commandos outperformed their RAF counterparts Cochran "did not help matters by expressing his poor opinion of the RAF at favourable opportunities." Enloe's journal provides a similar assessment: "[Cochran] is quite sophomoric in his actions and attitude. None of the men doubt his flying ability, but many—including Al [Wedemeyer] are disturbed by his lack of leadership and sense of responsibility." According to Enloe, there were times where Cochran referred to "every other General" in theater as a "nincompoo." Then there was Cochran's first meeting with Wingate. With the latter operating under the assumption that the Air Commandos were, in fact, his personal air unit, Wingate stated to Cochran, "Now Colonel we will let you know when we want you and you can support where we want." Instead of providing a tactful or diplomatic response, Cochran stated: "No, General, you tell us what you want and if I think it is satisfactory you will have the support. I am commanding the air. You command only the ground."

Enloe attributed Cochran's lack of leadership to his pilot background:

*It is the eternal curse of the pilot that he is profoundly egocentric and what is true to a greater or lesser degree of all pilots is actuated in the pursuit pilot. This makes them generally poor leaders in everything but actual guidance during flight. Cochran is a classic example of the egocentric who can view the world only as it affects himself—i.e. from the world inward not as the leader must—from himself outward.*

As harsh as Enloe's criticism may seem it has teeth when one takes into account Cochran's psyche. First, Cochran was in rather poor health at the time he led the Air Commandos. In August of 1943, at the time of recruitment by Arnold, it was determined that Cochran was no longer fit to fly. It was a medical diagnosis that Cochran purposely hid from Arnold and others. Originally, Cochran had only been diagnosed with "flying fatigue," but, according to Enloe, it later developed into a fear of flying. Cochran did not help his medical state whenever he worked himself to exhaustion. According to Enloe, Cochran was constantly moving to prevent physical fatigue from setting in. Thus, in essence, Cochran's questionable demeanor was in many ways an extension of his poor medical state.

Cochran's inability to fly must have also instilled conflicting emotions as to affect his demeanor. Previously a fighter pilot with 58th Fighter Squadron, Cochran wanted nothing more than to be flying the mission alongside the Air Commandos, but he knew that he was no longer physically capable of doing so. One must also consider Cochran's burden as the commander. Despite both Cochran and Alison wanting to take part in the glider invasion of Burma, one of the two would have to stay back. It was a somewhat humorous situation that Enloe recorded:

*Cochran and Alison both want to go into Burma on the nite [sic] of the invasion. I am opposed and although they see the wisdom of not going they won't say they will bow to their responsibility and stay home. [Cochran then stated,] "Christ Doc. When old man Arnold sent us here he knew he was just*

*sending a couple of crazy kids. You have to be a little cracked to do this job and I'm just nuts enough to want to fly that first glider in. Hell, I'm no brass but they ruined a damn good flight leader then they gave me these chicken wings."*

Here we learn just how close Enloe was to Cochran. Despite levying a number of criticisms—criticisms that were never intended to see the light of day—Enloe truly cared about Cochran's welfare and the operational success of the Air Commandos. This is made abundantly clear throughout the journal, but it was not until after the success of Operation THURSDAY that Enloe felt Cochran had fully developed into a leader. "[Cochran] is finally growing up to his ability," wrote Enloe on 12 Mar 1944. Still, Enloe could see that Cochran was growing frustrated with the responsibilities of being a commander. According to Enloe, at one point Cochran complained: "This job is killing me. There ain't no future in it. Look at me. The kids are up flying their hearts out... And what the hell am I doing... giving plots. Only thing I'm flying is a telephone!"

Taken altogether, Enloe's observations provide interesting insight into what it must have been like to serve under Cochran. Again, it is worth noting that they are observations that would have likely never seen the light of day, even if Enloe had finished his manuscript on the history of the Air Commandos. To those individuals that experienced Operation THURSDAY, the only story they would tell was one of unit persistence, operational success, and military kinship. Meanwhile, those moments of disagreement and conflict were set aside as either insignificant or having never taken place.

This rule of thumb can be seen upon exploring the working relationship between the Troop Carrier Command Commander, Brigadier General William D. Old, and Colonel Cochran and the Air Commandos. Early historical accounts conveyed that there was a significant amount of friction between Old, Cochran, and the Air Commandos. Not only was Old in disagreement with the theoretical premise behind Operation THURSDAY, he even resented the special operations air unit's operational independence. It was also Old that prompted Cochran to issue the famous 'tongue and cheek' shave memo upon complaining about the Air Commandos "unkept" appearance. Then there was Old's curious omission of Cochran, Alison, and the Air Commandos in his Operation THURSDAY report. In fact, the report was in many ways a slight against Cochran and the Air Commandos, given that Old wrote, "It is interesting... that the entire operation was carried out from the planning stages through execution with no one individual actually directing the operation."

But neither Cochran nor Alison ever acknowledged that there was a problem with Old. In fact, during an April 1979 historical interview, when Alison was asked about the tumultuous relationship, he immediately dismissed it as "no real problem" and claimed that Old always supported the Air Commandos "despite what you might hear." As well intentioned and noble Alison's revising the historical narrative may be it contradicts the evidentiary record, particularly what Enloe captured in his journal. According to Enloe, it was in the very midst of the glider invasion of Broadway, at the

point when Alison had cut off all communication and it was unknown whether the landing force was under attack by the Japanese, that Old took the opportunity to berate Cochran for what at the time seemed an operational failure:

*[S]hortly after two, Alison called Phil saying, "Don't send anymore tonight." It was apparent that the operation was not going perfectly... Everyone was perplexed and no one could understand the reason for the sudden cryptic message from inside Burma. Phil reacted quickly: "If little John says no more planes then that is good enough for me. Stop all air operations and call everyone back until we find out what's up." It appeared as if the [sic] had fallen when Wingate received a message from his ground Commander, Brigadier Calvert reading in code 'Soya Link' meaning 'bother on the ground.' Then Broadway radio shutdown. It was like a nightmare...*

*Phil looked haggard as he stood in the doorway of the lighted command tent. He was tired, dead tired as only a man who has directed every energy of his being toward one goal can be. This was [supposed to be] the greatest night of his life, yet he had lost the false sense of frivolity with... his more serious thoughts. He was serious as he remarked: "Looks like they have got us Doc. God damn it, why can't I be there in the fight?" And then the real Phil came back for a second as with the slightest suppression of a smile he said: "We ain't lost yet or have we?"...*

*Phil had started for bed when he encountered General Old. For Phil it was an unfortunate encounter for Old had all along been piqued at being left out of the picture when he had dominated the American scene for publicity for so long. He must have felt some chagrin as having his first pilot be relegated to flying co-pilot to our own second pilots who took over troop carrier ships for the invasion and in our troubles he found his opportunity. Like hitting a man while he is down, Old made capital of the allied difficulties that night.*

*Employing his rank to get Cochran's attention, he harangued Phil for nearly a half an hour on his "failure." He said the Commandos were an unkept, undisciplined rabble that had no idea what they were doing. He said he knew double tows wouldn't work and he hoped that now Phil wouldn't be so hard headed about it. It was a strange display for an officer, much [more] a general, to gloat over what then seemed [like] the failure of his own army & unfair as a man to take the opportunity when he cares of the man, who had tried so hard, [then] to berate him and cry, almost jubilantly: "I told you so!"*



**Captain Cortez Enloe at Broadway** (Photo courtesy of Air Force Academy Library)

Later in the journal, at a point where Enloe again reflected on Operation THURSDAY, he wrote how a number of individuals had “great misgivings and dark premonitions” concerning the Air Commando theory of operations. However, no one was more adamantly against the theory than General Old. According to Enloe, Old made every opportunity to “criticize our camp and to attempt to discourage the operation.” While certainly one may question Enloe’s retelling of the Old, Cochran, and Air Commando dynamic, he was not the only person to make note of Old’s poor behavior on the night of Operation THURSDAY. In a 10 Mar 1944 3rd Tactical Air Force report, Air Marshal Jackie Baldwin also captured the historical event, writing, “There was an occasion on the first night when a certain amount of friction developed between OLD and COCHRAN[], when things were going badly, and an impasse was only averted through the very tactical handling of the situation...”



**Captain Cortez Enloe** (Photo courtesy of Air Force Academy Library)

Here again, through Enloe’s journal, we find new information on the history of the Air Commandos and Operation THURSDAY. What the entries pertaining to General Old highlight is how the past is often revised by those who lived it. In the case of Cochran and Alison, their revising of historical events could be the result of any number of factors. Perhaps one explanation is that Cochran and Alison were forced to rely on their memories, which generally fade over time and can be modified upon learning of other historical accounts. It complicates matters that most of the Air Commando records were lost in a plane crash; but even if those records had survived, neither Cochran nor Alison was much of an administrator. In fact, General Arnold had expressly told

Cochran and Alison: “To the hell with the paperwork, go out and fight.” According to Enloe, it was an order that Cochran and Alison took to heart.

But the most likely explanation as to why Cochran and Alison revised the historical narrative is the ethos of the Air Commandos today—the motto “Quiet Professionals.” Indeed, although Cochran and Alison at times embellished their own contributions to the Air Commando theory of operations, a theory that was primarily conceived by Kenney and Arnold, the two leaders never took all the credit. Praise was lavishly bestowed on many. Moreover, Cochran and Alison refused to negatively criticize those that took part in the Burma campaign, particularly anyone that paid the ultimate sacrifice.

This was especially the case with the highly controversial Wingate. Neither Cochran nor Alison ever openly criticized their British counterpart. In fact, immediately following Wingate’s death by plane crash on 24 Mar 1944, Alison gave Wingate much of the credit for the success of Operation THURSDAY. Alison even described Wingate in such glowing terms as a “great man,” “man of vision,” “genius,” and “great leader.”

Of course, following Wingate’s death, Alison was not the only contemporary to describe Wingate in such a favorable light. In eulogy to Wingate, a number of prominent individuals, to include King George VI, General Arnold, and General Joseph Stillwell delivered similar remarks. But the truth of the matter is that Wingate was often difficult to work with, foolhardy, egocentric, and paranoid.

In all fairness, this historically critical perception of Wingate did not come to the public’s attention until 1951, when Volume III of the British government’s *Official History Against Japan* was published. It was strengthened five years later when Field Marshall Viscount Slim published *Defeat into Victory*. However, many that served with Wingate took issue with altering his legacy. Members of Wingate’s family even went so far as to prevent access to the general’s papers and correspondence in order to minimize any further criticism. Thus, from the perspective of Wingate’s sympathizers and supporters, such critical assessments were nothing more than, in David Rooney’s words, an inaccurate and “dismissive description of Wingate and what...the Chindits had achieved.”

Both Cochran and Alison fell squarely within this camp. Alison even expressed his sympathy for Wingate’s legacy in a 1979 interview, stating: “The official British history downgrades Wingate and really undeservedly so. I know Wingate’s associates, the people who fought with him, thought a great injustice had been done to a great man, historically. He was accused of a lot of things. Actually, Wingate was a great soldier.”

Here much like the scenario involving the memory of General Old, Alison’s remembrance of Wingate reeks of revisionism. A close examination of the historical evidence reveals that Wingate, in fact, was narcissistic at times and often took credit for military ideas and successes not of his own doing. Moreover, Wingate was not immune from trying to get the upper hand at the expense of others. As Enloe recounted in an 4 Apr 1944 entry:

Cochran likes Wingate, thinks he is a great man because he is a fighter. W[ingate] could double dial if need be. He is sharp and relentless. We had trouble with him only on a couple of occasions when he tried to gain an advantage at our expense. Cochran accused him of it an[d] all Wingate said: "Yes, I did. I'm sorry, Colonel." It left Phil sort of helpless, but he said: "Well, General, if you want to play that way with us, John and I are artists at it." That was the last time.

This is not the only instance where Enloe provides insight into Wingate's character; there are a number of entries where Enloe is rather critical of Wingate. For example, consistent with those historical assessments that have classified Wingate as having a "God complex", in a 21 Feb 1944 entry, Enloe wrote:

*Wingate is an executive with a messiah complex. I am sure he has a great sense of destiny in what he is doing. I wouldn't be surprised to learn that he believes Providence sent him here just for this. He was very sure of himself before us... In his speech, he referred to God, good luck, and other expressions of chance several times and although there is, to be sure, a terrible risk in all of this—I am inclined to think he believes God is with him. Then too—he is a man with something to sell.*

Then there is Enloe's account of how Wingate presented himself to others. According to Enloe, Wingate was often "consciously dramatic" when speaking, to the point that his officers could not "make heads nor tails" of the speech and doubted whether Wingate "himself knows what is he attempting to convey." To Enloe, Wingate was "essentially an egotist" that was willing to "use every trick to gain his own way even when it must be obvious to him that his way is not the most effective contribution to the cause he represents." But despite Wingate's faults, Enloe did respect the British general, particularly his knack for convincing others to support his plans. "The men above Wingate have more often than not counseled against his undertakings on the grounds they were too costly for the contribution they would make to the overall strategy," wrote Enloe, yet somehow Wingate could sway the opinions of "one or two important individuals to alter their plans."

What also impressed Enloe was Wingate's "mystic devotion" to the mission. At the same time, however, Enloe witnessed how this very devotion could make Wingate a "dangerous cruel man." Despite having his troops' undivided loyalty, Wingate openly declared that they were expendable. According to Enloe, in a speech right before executing Operation THURSDAY, Wingate stated as much: "To me you are like money—you are all expendable." In response to this, Enloe sarcastically wrote in his journal, "Happy, encouraging thoughts upon going into battle!"

Taken altogether, one might be inclined to dismiss Enloe's opinions of Wingate as just that—opinions. They may also be dismissed on the ground that Enloe was never part of Wingate's circle. He was an officer and flight surgeon for the Air Commandos, not the Chindits. Therefore, it may be argued that unlike Enloe's close association with Cochran and Alison, Enloe was merely observing Wingate as an outsider, nothing more. However, to completely dismiss Enloe's commentary on these grounds would be erroneous. First and foremost, Enloe's



**Alison, Wingate, and Cochran, notice Cortez Enloe is pictured with them on the far right.** (Photo courtesy of Air Force Academy Library)

commentary was written contemporaneously with the events, and therefore must be given proper consideration by historians. More importantly, Enloe's commentary is consistent with other contemporary accounts detailing Wingate's behavior. As British General Sir Henry Pownall wrote in an October 17, 1943 diary entry:

*[Wingate] is a genius in that he is quite a bit mad...In many ways Wingate is very good and can be made useful provided his is kept in order. But he is resentful of anything that is normal, deliberately runs counter to authority, demands first priority for his affairs and if he thinks he isn't getting it...threatens to wire direct to the Prime Minister.*

In summary, as this article has outlined, there is much to discover about the Air Commandos through Enloe's journal. Whether it is Cochran's leadership style or the behind the scenes of Operation THURSDAY, Enloe breathes new life into Air Commando historiography. Certainly, historians should be cautious when reading the journal—particularly those portions discussing the Air Commandos' background history. This is because Enloe was not assigned to the Air Commandos until 15 Oct 1943, nearly a month after the unit was formed. Regardless, it will no longer do for historians to omit Enloe's notes and observations from the narrative.



*About the Author: Patrick J. Charles is the historian for the 24th Special Operations Wing at Hurlburt Field, Florida. This article was made possible through the generosity of the Friends of the Air Force Academy Library and the Clark-Yudkin Fellowship.*