

In the footsteps of a Hero

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Hugh Menzies disembarks from the Inland Water Transport ferry on the Irrawaddy River. *Source: Supplied*

HUGH Menzies' quest to find his war hero uncle's final resting place took him on an epic journey from Murray Bridge to the jungle villages of Myanmar.

Duncan Menzies died a brutal and bizarre death in a jungle village in northern Burma. The 24-year-old lieutenant from Adelaide had been trying to find some food for his desperate comrades when Japanese soldiers caught him, shaved off his beard, dressed him in a Japanese uniform and shot him.

More than 70 years later, Duncan's nephew, Hugh Menzies, decided to travel to Myanmar, as Burma is now known. Although he realised his quest was probably doomed to failure, he hoped to find the village where his uncle died, and perhaps even his uncle's grave.

It was a huge undertaking for the 58-year-old who had never travelled independently in Asia. Far from well with severe diabetes, Hugh had seen Myanmar was opening up a little. The military regime staged quasi-democratic elections in 2010 and released hundreds of political prisoners, including Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi. Long-standing international sanctions were lifted.

As an Australian journalist long based in Asia, I had been to Myanmar many times. When I wrote to Hugh about travelling to the remote north of the country to find out more about his uncle's story, he was interested. Eventually he decided to come with me.

So, a few months ago, the man from Murray Bridge set off from Australia and travelled via plane, taxi, ferry and longboat to Katha, an isolated town on the Irrawaddy River in Myanmar.

Hugh grew up with the legend of his uncle's bravery. Lieutenant Duncan Menzies was posthumously awarded the Military Cross for his courage. Fighting behind enemy lines in Japanese-occupied Burma, Menzies spent months hiding in the jungle, living hand to mouth, usually hungry, harassing Japanese troops, attempting to sever the enemy's supply and communication routes. One of the famous "Chindits" in the British Army: the young man from South Australia had joined one of the world's earliest military "special forces".

A Rhodes Scholar (like prime ministers Bob Hawke and Tony Abbott), Menzies was studying law at Oxford University when war rumbled across Europe. Fearing England would be invaded, he was keen to join the army, despite his family's misgivings.

Descended from Scots, Menzies signed on with a Scottish regiment in the British Army: the Black Watch. After fighting in

Tobruk and then travelling to India, in late 1942 he was recruited by the Chindits' Column 5 commander Major Bernard Fergusson. The Scottish major wanted the resolute and physically strong young Menzies to serve as his adjutant in the gruelling campaign that would begin in Burma's jungle in February 1943.

By early April that year, Menzies was bone-weary and near starving. During long weeks in the jungle, he and his comrades had blown up a bridge and a gorge, and fought Japanese troops in several skirmishes.

Enduring lengthy forced marches with little water, they lived on spartan rations from air-drops. Desperately hungry, they had killed and eaten some of their transport mules, and local water buffalos were considered fair game.

Finally ordered to return to India, Fergusson, Menzies and several dozen of their comrades from 5 Column attempted to cross the Shweli River.

The crossing was a disaster: 46 soldiers were either swept away in the torrent, or lost heart and refused to leave the mid-river sandbank. With no radio to call for air-drops, the remaining 74 Chindits were forced to scavenge for food, buying it if possible, commandeering it if necessary.

A few days' march brought the depleted force to a small and unmapped Kachin village east of the Irrawaddy, Zibyugin. Menzies and three others went into the village to try and get information about Japanese troop movements, and if possible, to buy some food. Now fighting the Burmese military to obtain some measure of autonomy, the Kachin people were then traditionally friendly to the British, but the Japanese had troops and spies in many villages. It was a hazardous expedition.

In his memoir, *Beyond the Chindwin*, Fergusson recalls Menzies saying goodbye. He writes how the lieutenant planned

to send a warning if there were Japanese in the village. “Well, I’m off,” he said. “If I get into trouble I’ll fire my rifle. So long.”

A short while later, one of Fergusson’s sentries heard two shots. Soon afterwards, Fergusson heard another three. Finally, after a few hours, two of the patrol’s soldiers returned to the encampment. Japanese troops in the village had spotted the patrol, they reported, so all four soldiers – Menzies, Private Charles Gilmartin and the two others – ran for the jungle, reaching a “chaung” or small stream.

“There (Menzies) faced the village ...” Fergusson wrote, “and threw himself on to the ground in a firing position. “You run on back,” he said. “I’ll cover you and join you.” Gilmartin joined Menzies on the ground while the other two fled. Fergusson never saw them alive again. He waited for them to get back until dawn the following morning, before marching miserably away without them.

In his memoir, Fergusson remembered his adjutant’s courage, describing the lieutenant as unfailingly staunch and resolute. “Physically immensely strong, he appeared to be weathering the hardships better than most people,” Fergusson wrote, “but his great virtue was his absolute failure to be cast down.” Fergusson dedicated *Beyond the Chindwin* to Menzies, and much later named his son George Duncan

A separate detachment of British troops, from the Second Burma Rifles, attacked Zibyugin that day. They found Menzies tied to a tree, dying, and Gilmartin already dead. Menzies managed to report on Japanese troop movements, and explain where the remnants of 5 Column had been camping. He handed his watch to the Second Burma Rifles’ commander Lieutenant-Colonel Lyndon Wheeler, to be sent to his parents. Wheeler gave him a shot of morphine, and a minute later Wheeler, too, was shot dead – by a Japanese sniper. Menzies’

body was never recovered.

STANDING on the deck of the large and shabby Myanmar-government owned Inland Water Transport ferry, Hugh looks out across the vast expanse of the Irrawaddy. Spending 36 hours chugging up-river from Mandalay to Katha, the ferry lumbers slowly past villagers sluicing themselves clean in the shallows, the golden spires of Buddhist pagodas and thick jungle.

Huge arterial rivers run through much of Myanmar; watery highways used for transport and trade. The Irrawaddy is 2170km long, and ferries and cargo ships routinely motor up and down, often falling foul of sandbanks in the dry season. The rivers' importance is immediately noticeable in the prices of ordinary items like soap and candles, which increase steeply at any distance from the piers. The Chindwin, the Shweli, the Irrawaddy, these wide and often treacherous rivers wound through his uncle's war. Duncan Menzies lost comrades to the rushing waters, and risked his life in dark and dangerous crossings.

Hugh Menzies can now see the sheer size of the Irrawaddy, and guess at the hardships his uncle endured. "We've known about him all our lives, and Dad gave us the dossier," Hugh says, looking at a photocopied map of 5 Column's route, which provides an indication of where Menzies died. "I have no expectation of finding Zibyugin. But perhaps one of the towns on the map ..."

Never married, Hugh is a telecommunications technician who has worked for Telstra and its predecessors for 40 years. Now employed as a contractor, he has to keep an eye on his health. As a chronic diabetic, he has to inject insulin three times a day, as well as getting insulin from a permanent infuser with a needle threaded under his skin.

In the small river town of Katha, the guesthouse is basic. Passports are handed over and the next morning a military intelligence officer arrives to find out what the Westerners plan to do: he hears the plan is to cross the river, and travel on to the villages of Kontha, Kantha and up past Ngosin to find the unmarked village of Zibyugin.

“No; cannot,” the military officer says, shaking his head, adding the Kachin insurgents had made those villages too dangerous for foreigners. True, the Kachin were battling Myanmar’s authorities: there had been bombings and shooting and raids in various districts to the north. But there hadn’t been reports of clashes anywhere too close to Katha, at least not this year.

Myanmar’s authorities, and the “Tatmadaw” or military, are still notoriously skittish about foreigners travelling anywhere off the beaten track. Accustomed to unquestioning obedience, the officer finally agreed to allow us to cross the river and travel to Kontha, a village on the eastern shore of the Irrawaddy and, we thought, somewhere not too far from Zibyugin.

Before Duncan Menzies left India to fight behind Japanese lines in Burma, he left a letter for his parents: to be delivered if he failed to come out of the jungle alive. Fergusson had told Menzies he guessed there was a 50/50 chance they would survive. Known as “Campbell” to his family, Menzies was clear-eyed about the dangers. “If you receive this letter at all it will mean I have been killed or am missing in Burma,” he wrote in that letter, later adding: “Don’t be sad that I’m gone. I know you cherished me and had great hopes for me but it is better to live well than live long. War is a time of broken hearts and defeated hopes and none of us can claim to be exempted from them.”

Menzies’ sister, Jean Speirs, is now 93 and living in Bendigo. She was very fond of her tall, athletic and ferociously intelligent brother, who studied law at Adelaide University and played lacrosse and tennis. “I was only a couple of years younger than

him,” she says, “and not nearly as bright. Nevertheless, we were very good mates when we were young. There was great camaraderie.” Speirs was nursing with the army in Queensland when she heard the details of her brother’s death. “I always wanted to go to Zibyugin,” she says.

“We were told he and Private Gilmartin were buried there. I think Bernard Fergusson went back, but he told us you couldn’t trace it.” And then, for decades, the military regime blocked visits to much of Myanmar. “We were hoping to go over there, to Burma. My father wanted me to go. I got too old,” Speirs says sadly.

Perched on a plastic seat in the small hired boat heading across the Irrawaddy to Kontha, her nephew, Hugh, is ready to start investigating. Hugh lives near one of Australia’s biggest rivers yet he was impressed with the sheer size of the Irrawaddy, which at Katha ran in two huge flows, each maybe four times wider than the Murray. “To see the significance of the ships travelling up and down the Irrawaddy, for someone coming from Australia, where the largest ships on the river are paddle-boats: it’s something,” Hugh says.

Fish traps blocked that particular branch of the river winding past Kontha, so the boat stopped several kilometres from the village. Three cheerful motorscooter riders arrived to double us along the sandy path. Perched on the back of the scooter, zipping along the Irrawaddy, slouch hat firmly on his head, Hugh turns and grins.

On the way to Kontha, we stop for some lunch noodles at a tiny outdoor café, immediately attracting a small crowd of onlookers. The quest for Zibyugin is thoroughly aired. A couple of the villagers say they know the village; it is over to the west, they say. One woman says the village is about 10km from the river town of Shwegu, but hard to get to from Kontha. The Roman alphabet isn’t used in Myanmar, and these villagers

spell the place as “Ziphugone”. Kontha, when we finally get there, is a typical Myanmar river village, some way from the river.

But it’s the dry season, and the Irrawaddy swells to a frightening size in the rainy season, swamping large tracts of land and often flooding villages.

No one seems to know anything much about Zibyugin, but after decades of oppressive military rule, Myanmar’s villagers rarely travel far from home.

Travelling on from Kontha was out of the question, we were told by our guide. Myanmar was now allegedly free and the generals were no longer in charge, but he refused to take us onwards. “As you know, we change only the dress, not the man,” he says, referring to all the former generals who remain in charge in Myanmar.

The following day, near the guesthouse back in Katha, a middle-aged villager from across the river arrives to meet us. He comes from the village next to Ziphugone, he says, but the devastating floods of 1987 had swamped Ziphugone. The Irrawaddy changed course and the villagers moved 10km inland. The old Ziphugone slumbers on under the broad and muddy Irrawaddy.

Initially intrigued, we soon realise the former Ziphugone could not possibly be Zibyugin. Although there is no clear idea of Zibyugin’s exact location, from the hand-drawn maps in Fergusson’s memoir it seems clear it was never located anywhere near the banks of the Irrawaddy, no matter how much the river has moved.

Zibyugin remains lost, tantalisingly close, on the far side of the Irrawaddy, perhaps only an hour or two’s bike ride from Katha. Menzies’ grave has yet to be found. Long admired by some

WWII researchers and authors, the lieutenant's bravery lives on.

Steve Fogden, who has written a comprehensive website about the Chindits (chinditslongcloth1943.com), says Menzies always led from the front: "He possessed an air of confidence which people found easy to trust. Although secure in his own abilities, he was not full of self-importance and had a far-reaching and positive effect on all he touched. Recognising these traits, his commander Bernard Fergusson relied heavily on the young lieutenant for advice and support."

Perhaps, one day, Zibyugin will be found by someone from the Menzies family. Hugh is not unduly upset by our failure to actually set foot in the village. He has seen the Irrawaddy up close, met the people of Myanmar, and come to understand some of the difficulties they deal with every day.

"I had heard right from the beginning the town wasn't on the maps," he says philosophically. "It's disappointing, but it's only a couple of years since the military regime has opened up, and the information we can get from the locals is heavily coloured by the influence of the Tatmadaw. I've seen the significance of the Irrawaddy, the complexity of crossing the river and accessing the area, because of the Tatmadaw and the insurgents. But Zibyugin is still a mystery."