

75th Anniversary of the Battle of Kohima

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“A nation that forgets its past has no future”

These words of Winston Churchill could not be more apt to Commemorate 75th Anniversary of the Battle of Kohima.

Abstract

Perched on top of a mountain ridge, some 5,000 feet up in the remote hilly terrain of northeast India, is located the town of Kohima, in the state of Nagaland. During the Second World War (WW-II), one of the most decisive battles on the Burma front took place here - the one that thwarted the Japanese invasion of India and helped turn the tide of the war in the Far East. Like most battles that took place in the South-East Asian Theatre, the Battle of Kohima remains relatively unknown because the world was too preoccupied with Nazi Germany in Europe. The Allied invasion of Europe also steered the spotlight away from the Battle of Kohima which was still being

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fought when D-Day started. Though off late in April 2013, the Battle of Kohima, along with the Battle of Imphal, was voted as Britain's greatest battles by the British National Army Museum.

The Battle of Kohima

Kohima, a hill town in the middle of the Naga Hills, was the site of one of the most bitterly fought battles of the Second World War (WW-II) from **04 April to 22 June 1944**. The battle ended on 22 June when British and Indian troops from Kohima and Imphal met at Milestone 109, ending the Siege of Imphal. The battle is often referred to as the “Stalingrad of the East”. Kohima was important since it lay astride the only road that led from the major British / Indian supply depot at Dimapur to Imphal. It was approximately 40 miles East of Dimapur, and 80 miles North of Imphal. **The Allied Fourteenth Army**, under command of General William Slim, had been building logistical bases at Dimapur and Imphal for an eventual offensive into Burma. The **Japanese Fifteenth Army**, under command of Lt General Renya Mutagachi, received orders in early 1944 to put a stop to the British preparations in Assam. The fighting in and around Kohima in the spring of 1944 was part of a larger Japanese offensive, known as ‘**U-Go**’, in which three Japanese divisions, the 15th, 31st and 33rd, attempted to destroy the British / Indian forces in Imphal, Naga Hills and Kohima. The Japanese, however, were unaware that the British and Indian troops based in Assam in 1944, unlike their predecessors in 1942, were properly trained for the coming battles.

General Slim understood that a major Japanese offensive was under way. With most of IV Corps tied up in Imphal and the Imphal-Kohima road block, he knew that Kohima would need to be reinforced. British military intelligence did not initially realise the threat to Kohima, and it was assumed that not more than a few battalions would be able to traverse the high ridge system that existed between Chindwin River and Kohima. Before long, however, reports confirmed that an entire Japanese division was on the move to Kohima, in fact British forces learned about Japanese advance only on 18 March 1944 from fleeing refugees. Such was the state of general confusion that British forces were not even aware of the strength of advancing Japanese forces and a garrison commander for Kohima was only appointed on 22 March

- four days after Japanese advance was known. When Colonel Hugh Richards (who had earlier served with the Chindits), the Garrison Commander, arrived at Kohima, no one could brief him on prevailing tactical or operational situation. Far worse, no one could even tell him just how many men he had under his command – while the Japanese were just 60 miles away.

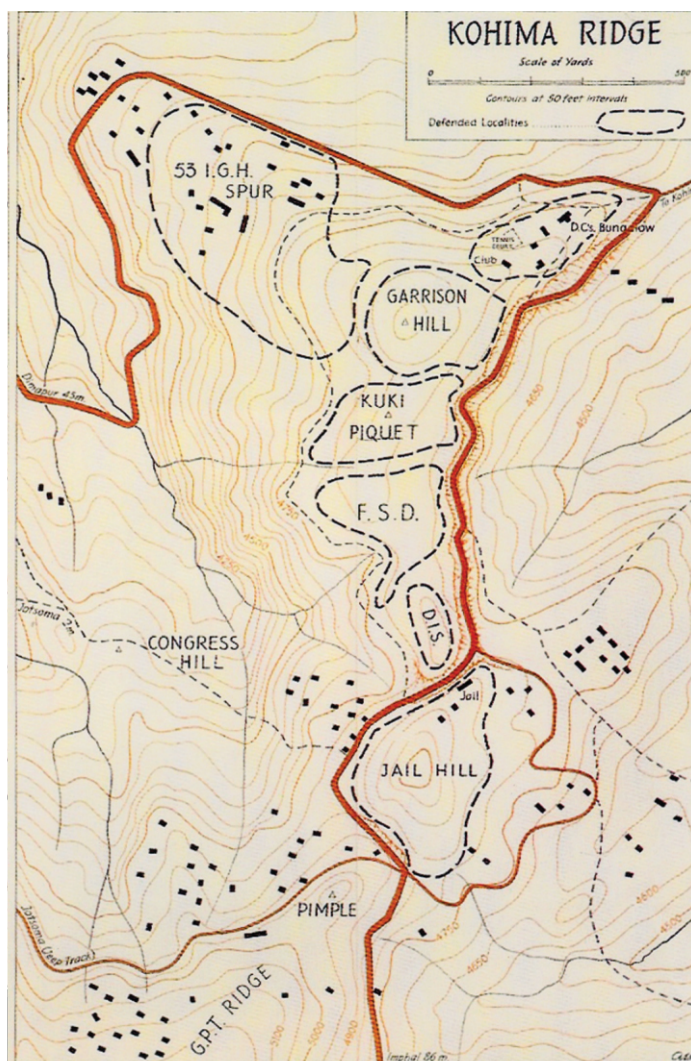
Realising the state of affairs, Slim moved the 7th Indian Division by air to reinforce both Imphal and Kohima. This formation had just completed an excellent defence and counter-offensive campaign in the Arakan region of Burma against the Japanese Operation 'Ha-Go'. Slim also activated XXXIII Corps; the 2nd British Division, 268 Indian Brigade and the 23 Infantry Brigade (Chindits) were all earmarked to relieve the garrison at Kohima and open the road to Imphal. However, getting together all units of the 2nd British Division took time as they were dispersed all over India.

In mid-March, the only troops stationed in Kohima area were a few units of Assam Rifles, 1st Assam Regiment and Line of Communication troops. The 1st Assam Regiment formed a defensive zone, some 35 miles to the east of Kohima, at Jessami and Kharasom. They came in contact with Japanese forces at Jessami on 28 March 1944 and were forced to withdraw to Kohima by 01 April 1944, after heavy fighting (though were ordered to fight to last man but this order was later withdrawn). While Kharasom never received the withdrawal order, some made it to Kohima, many did not including the commander, Captain Young. With Jessami and Kharasom taken, the road to Kohima was open to the Japanese.

The battle-hardened and well-trained 161st Indian Brigade, 5th Indian Division was flown into Dimapur area in late March. The brigade moved towards Kohima and by early April was creating defensive positions in and around the village. Defending the area presented significant problems; the key feature, Garrison Hill and a long wooded spur on a high ridge west of the village (Kohima Ridge) were the scene of perhaps the bitterest fighting of the whole Burma campaign. The small area of terrain provided by this ridge and the surrounding area permitted deployment of only one battalion, the 4th Royal West Kent Regiment. The rest of the 161st

“Young and inexperienced sepoy were fighting like veterans; red-hot machine gun barrels would be ripped off, regardless of burns suffered in the process; Japanese grenades and cracker-bombs were picked up and thrown clear of the trenches with all the calmness in the world and there did not seem to be a man in the garrison afraid to carry out any task given to him”

Captain Peter Steyn, Assam Regiment.



Indian Brigade – the 1/1st Punjab Regiment, the 4/7th Rajput Regiment and the brigade's artillery were placed two miles west of Kohima, in Jotsoma. It was this artillery that played a vital role in supporting the Kohima Garrison. The Japanese 31st Division's plan was to split into three columns that would cut the Kohima - Imphal Road and envelop the village from three different angles. The Japanese operation, 'U-Go', began in mid-March 1944; and by 22 March elements of the British IV Corps (17th, 20th and 23rd Indian Divisions), based in and around Imphal, were engaging the first of the Japanese troops. Japanese started their attack on Kohima at 0400 hours on 04 April 1944. At that time Kohima had about 1500 men against 12000 Japanese troops. They attacked outlying defensive positions along Kohima Ridge, nicknamed Jail Hill, Detail Issue Hill (DIS), Field Supply Depot (FSD), Kuki Piquet, Garrison Hill and the most famous Tennis Court and Deputy Commissioner's (DC's) bungalow; where the bitterest fighting took place. The Japanese took Jail Hill and FSD but suffered very heavy casualties over the course of the battle. Troops from Jotsoma were sent forward to reinforce areas covered by the 4th Royal West Kent.

The 4th Royal West Kent Regiment recognising their numerical inferiority, withdrew from the more isolated positions on the ridge after the first major assault. The Japanese had made significant inroads into the ridge and were preparing their own positions for defence. By 07 April 1944, reinforcements from the 4/7th Rajput Regiment arrived from Jotsoma, providing a boost for morale. The Japanese launched a series of attacks into the north-east region of the defences on 08 April and by the 09 April, the British and Indian forces there had been pushed back to the Tennis Court. At this juncture, the Japanese cut the tracks between Jotsoma and Kohima and the road between Jotsoma and Dimapur. The Japanese forced the garrison at Kohima to withdraw further into their lines on 10 and 11 April with attacks on DIS and FSD.

On 13 April 1944, the Japanese pressed their advantage against the British and Indian positions on the ridge. The troops defending near the DC's bungalow and the Tennis Court came under increasingly heavy artillery and mortar fire, and had to repel frequent infantry assaults. This area was the scene of some of the hardest, closest and grimmest fighting, with grenades being hurled across the Tennis Court at point-blank range. The extract from the

War Diary of the 4th Royal West Kent Regiment describes the scene as below:-

<p>13/14 April Kohima</p>	<p>Night 13/14 Apr also saw bitter fighting. At the FSD the Rajputs were forced from their trenches by the direct hits from the 75 mm guns opposite, so that A Coy at Kuki p. had to send one pl forward to save the front position. Assam Regt pl took their position at Kuki. The Japs made a very heavy rush attack at B Coy from the DC Bungalow, and succeeded in penetrating into a shed on a small but important hillock when a Bren jammed. The Pl Cdr, Lt King, restored the situation by driving them out with grenades, but not before the Bren gunner himself picked up a shovel and cracked at his assailants with it.</p>
<p>14 April Kohima</p>	<p>Early morning brought a further attack on B Coy, supported by grenade discharge bombs, but it was repulsed with many casualties to the enemy. Air supply drop of water very successful. Enemy mortar activities continued throughout the day, interspersed with smoke bombs which was taken to mean that his stock of captured ammunition was running low. This assumption was correct.</p>
	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Index of Abbreviations</u></p> <p>Bren - Brengun Cdr - Commander Coy - Company. Japs - Japanese Lt - Lieutenant p - Piquet. Pl - Platoon.</p>

In the end, the attacks were beaten off with the help of remarkably accurate fire from the Royal Artillery positioned at Jotsoma ridge. This fact did not escape the Japanese commanders, and they turned much of their attention against the positions of the 161st Indian Brigade at Jotsoma. The British and Indian troops were able to successfully repel these attacks.

14 April 1944 was to mark a turning point in the siege. While the Japanese continued to shell and fire upon the Kohima and Jotsoma garrisons, they did not launch any infantry attacks. The 2nd British Division, newly arrived (by air and land after 1500-mile transportation) and the 161st Indian Brigade had broken the Japanese roadblock on the Dimapur–Kohima road. The garrison in Kohima received word of this on the 15 April and their morale soared. They were bolstered by the knowledge that the lifting of the siege was inevitable and fast approaching.

Knowing that reinforcements were on the way, the Japanese launched a last deadly and desperate attack against the positions at FSD on 16/17 April evening. Each side took the positions more than once, only to be thrown out by their opponents. The heavy fighting and the casualties sustained forced the British and Indian troops to withdraw from FSD to the Garrison Hill positions. This action left the defenders hemmed in from the south, north and east. At 0800 hours on 18 April, a major artillery assault targeted Japanese positions as men from the 1/1st Punjab Regiment marched on Kohima. These reinforcements meant that the Japanese could not take Kohima and the relief was completed when the Royal Berkshire Regiment arrived on 20 April 1944.

The Japanese restarted their attempt to capture Kohima on 22/23 April 1944. However, this attack at night backfired. The attack started with a major Japanese mortar attack on Kohima. Men in weapons pits were safe but an ammunition dump was hit. The explosion set fire to nearby trees and as the Japanese infantry attacked up Kohima Hill, they were clearly silhouetted against the night sky. Men from the Royal Berkshire's and the Durham Light Infantry raked the advancing Japanese with accurate small arms fire, and the attempted Japanese attack was a dismal failure. On the morning of 23rd April, British forces counter-attacked and removed the Japanese from Kohima Hill. The commander of the Japanese forces there, Sato, told his Intelligence Officer, Colonel

Yamaki, *"We're losing so many troops this way that before long we'll be too thin on the ground to achieve anything"*. Sato faced another major problem - a chronic shortage of food. Only 1,000 out of the 5,000 oxen had reached Sato's headquarters. The local population had done what they could to remove any food that might have been available locally. The defenders of the Kohima area, the 161st Indian Brigade, Assam Rifles and 1st Assam Regiment contained the Japanese advance in the region and forced them into a battle of attrition. The battle included fierce hand-to-hand combat, especially in the garden of the DC's bungalow and around the Tennis Court. The defenders were cut off from Dimapur and had to rely upon daily air re-supply. Despite these obstacles, they withstood 13 days of siege and heavy fighting without backing down.

The battle for Kohima can be divided into two phases: the siege, which lasted for 13 days and the clearance of the Japanese 31st Division from the area, followed by the opening of the Kohima-Imphal road, from mid-April until 22 June 1944. This second stage occurred over the course of two months and caused more casualties for both armies. This battle was ultimately to prove to be the turning point of the Burma Campaign. Earl Mountbatten described it as, "probably one of the greatest battles in history....in effect the Battle of Burma...naked unparalleled heroism....the British / Indian Thermopylae".

In a message for issue 'to all ranks on the Manipur road', Earl Mountbatten wrote, after the battle of Kohima, that "only those who have seen the geographical nature of the country under these conditions will be able to appreciate your achievements". This sums up a great truth about the battle of Kohima and emphasises the magnitude of the victory brought at great cost by the combined British and Indian force of the 2nd British Division, the 161st Indian Brigade (which included the 4th Royal West Kents), and the 33rd Indian Brigade. Though its importance was not fully realised at that time, Kohima was a turning point in the war against Japan.

The Commemoration 75th Anniversary of the Battle of Kohima

The Commemoration Ceremony, on 04 April 2019, was organised at the Regional Centre of Excellence for Music & Performing Arts (RCEMPA), Jotsoma, Kohima. The theme of commemoration was

“Remembrance, Reconciliation and Rebirth”. The commemorations were intended to honour the memory of all the soldiers who fought and died in the conflict irrespective of nationality. The Commemoration Ceremony was inaugurated by Shri Neiphiu Rio, Chief Minister of Nagaland; in presence of HE Sir Dominic Asquith, KCMG, High Commissioner of UK; HE Mr Kenji Hiramatsu, Ambassador of Japan; Lt General Rajiv Sirohi, AVSM, VSM, GOC 3 Corps; Richard Dey, a 92-year-old British World War II veteran who fought at Kohima; Ms Salvia May, CEO, Kohima Education Trust, UK; Mrs Akiko MacDonald (daughter of Lt Taiji Urayama, served in 15th Imperial Japanese Army) Chairperson, Burma Campaign Society; Mrs Celia Grover (daughter in law of Major General M L Grover, GOC 2 British Division, commander of British forces in the Battle of Kohima) and large number of Indian veterans. The United Service Institution (USI) was represented by Major General PK Goswami, VSM (Retd). The USI and the British High Commission produced a commemorative brochure, which was distributed to all participants.

Nagaland Chief Secretary, Shri Temjen Toy, welcomed all and remarked that he was delighted that 75 years later, all principal players of the Second World War – Japan, Britain, India and Nagas – congregated on the soil of Kohima where the bloody battle was fought.

“Let bygones be bygones. Today is a time for forgiveness, remembrance, reconciliation and rebirth. I pray for all the people here to forgive, forget and look forward for brighter days to come. Let peace prevail”, Medo Keretsü, Head Gaon Burha (GB) of Kohima Village Council said while pronouncing traditional blessing at the programme on this occasion.

In a moving message on the occasion, Japanese Ambassador to India, HE Mr Kenji Hiramatsu said, “We all should never forget that the peace we enjoy today has been built over tremendous sacrifices of the past. Squarely facing the history of the past, Japan renews its commitment to never repeat the devastation of World War-II. We look back in order to look towards the future”. He reasserted that genuine reconciliation was only possible through dedicated efforts and also acknowledged those who had dedicated themselves to the tireless efforts for reconciliation over the long years.

Paying rich tribute to the soldiers who had laid down their lives, British High Commissioner to India, HE Sir Dominic Anthony Gerard Asquith, KCMG said that their courage and sacrifice helped change the course of history. He said, “Today India, Japan and the UK stand together as three great democracies. We work with each other for peace and prosperity globally, and are committed to facing today’s challenges in partnership”. He reiterated that this occasion is to remember the sacrifice of soldiers and the Naga non-combatants who died valiantly supporting the successful defence of the Kohima Ridge against a numerically superior force.

Nagaland Chief Minister Shri Neiphiu Rio said that the Battle of Kohima was one of the most critical battles of WW-II which proved decisive. He paid rich tribute to all the fallen soldiers who “answered the call of duty and sacrificed their today for our tomorrow”. While remembering all the brave soldiers Chief Minister informed the gathering that Nagaland was going to organise a yearlong commemoration programme of the Battle of Kohima with the theme “Remembrance, Reconciliation and Rebirth”. He appealed for reconciliation with history and to look forward to a future based on the firm foundation of peace and brotherhood. Chief Minister also acknowledged the efforts of Kohima Education Trust, setup by British Veterans of the Battle of Kohima, for preserving the legacy in true spirit of remembrance, reconciliation and rebirth. He also said that Nagaland was working with Japan not only on technologically challenging projects, but also partnering with Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) for various development projects. At the end, he remarked, “Your war ended here in our land whilst ours began”, while pointing to many years of hardship and suffering. He sought everyone’s support for the ceasefire as the peace talks had begun. He also sought everyone’s support in quest of realising genuine peace for a “shared and harmonious future”.

Lieutenant General Rajeev Sirohi, GOC 3 Corps; Mrs Akiko Macdonald, Chairperson, Burma Campaign Society; and Ms Sylvia May, CEO, Kohima Educational Trust (KET) also spoke on the occasion.

Richard Dey, a 92-year-old World War II veteran, returned to the scene of what some consider the bloodiest and fiercest battle of the Second World War, the Battle of Kohima, after seven

decades. He was part of the Royal Welch Fusiliers assigned to the Second Division. Dey said that back then, “We were part of the relief force from the Second Division which came to assist the men under siege”. He now lives in London and remembers the bloody battle between the Allies and the Japanese Army on the Naga Hills, but doesn’t want to talk about it.

Kohima War Cemetery

The Kohima War Cemetery was established in **1946**, in the erstwhile area of Kohima Ridge, and inaugurated by **Field Marshal Sir William Slim, Commander 14th Army**. The war cemetery is divided into seven steps. This is the final resting place of **1421**, (including 330 members of the Indian units), commonwealth servicemen of WW - II, most of whom fell during the siege of Kohima and the fighting which followed its relief. Erstwhile, this location housed DC Bungalow and Tennis Court and it was here that the famous Battle of Tennis Court was fought which is also known as one of the bloodiest battles in the history of warfare.

Wreath laying at **Kohima Cemetery** was organised by Inspector General Assam Rifles (IGAR) (North) on 05 April 2019. Vice Admiral Sir Timothy Laurence, KCVO, CB, ADC (P), Vice Chairman, Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC); HE Sir Dominic Asquith, KCMG, High Commissioner of UK; HE Mr Kenji Hiramatsu, Ambassador of Japan; Mr Richard Day, British Veteran of the Battle of Kohima; Ms Sylvia May, CEO, Kohima Education Trust, UK; Mrs Akiko MacDonald, Chairperson, Burma Campaign Society; Mrs Celia Grover (daughter in law of Major General M L Grover, GOC 2 British Division, commander of British forces in the Battle of Kohima) and large number of Indian serving soldiers and veterans attended the event.

“It was a very lump in the throat kind of a morning”, Richard Dey said when he laid a wreath at the Kohima War Cemetery. “Have you seen animals being run over? The sight of humans dying in war is no better. We soldiers don’t like to recount it”. “I wonder how we did it,” he added, of the battle. “How did we climb these hills even as we were being shot at all the time?” Dey is grateful to the Nagas, some of whom helped the Allied forces. “Had it not been for them picking up the rifles, I would not have been here”.



2nd British Division Memorial

**HE Sir Dominic Asquith, Lt Col Nick Wood,
HE Kenji Hiramatsu, Maj Gen PK Goswami, VSM (Retd)**



**Maj Gen PK Goswami, VSM (Retd), Mrs Akiko MacDonald
and Vice Admiral Sir Timothy Laurence**

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