

CHAPTER 5

WW II and the Historical Course of Events

5.1. A Forgotten Front of WW II

Following the fall of Malaya, Singapore, and Burma, significant geopolitical shifts catalysed a crucial alliance between Japanese military leaders and Indian nationalists in East Asia. This alliance bore fruit with the inception of the INA, which collaborated closely with Japan's military government, sharing a common goal; to liberate India from colonial rule. This collaboration culminated in the launch of 'Operation U Go' in 1944, a joint campaign by the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) and the INA in Northeast India. The primary objectives of this operation were twofold; to secure Japan's 'Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere,' particularly Burma, and to incite anti-British sentiments within India, potentially sparking uprisings against colonial rule. Imphal and Kohima emerged as critical battlegrounds, symbolizing the frontier of the Co-Prosperity Sphere in the West. (Figure 5.1) The outcome of these battles held significant implications, as victory for the Japanese could have potentially altered the course of the entire region(Callahan & Marston, 2021).

In March 1943, the Japanese command structure in Burma underwent reorganization, culminating in the establishment of the Burma Area Army, commanded by Lieutenant-General Masakazu Kawabe. Among its subordinate units, responsible for the central sector facing Imphal and Assam, stood the Fifteenth Army, led by Lieutenant-General Renya Mutaguchi(Wells, 2009).

Mutaguchi, a seasoned commander with a track record of successes dating back to the Marco Polo Bridge incident of 1937, harboured a fervent desire to invade India. His motivations for such a bold move remain shrouded in uncertainty. It is conceivable that his ambition was fuelled by a conviction that winning the decisive battle of the war for Japan was his destined purpose(Allen, 1971). Additionally, the audacious first Chindit expedition, a British raid led by Orde Wingate in early 1943, also goaded Mutaguchi into action(Salmi, n.d.). The Allies' selective dissemination of Wingate's successes, while

downplaying their own losses to disease and fatigue, potentially misled Mutaguchi and his staff, causing them to underestimate the challenges ahead.

By the dawn of 1944, the tide of war had turned unfavourably for the Japanese across multiple theatres. They faced setbacks in the central and southwest Pacific, compounded by relentless attacks on their merchant fleet by Allied submarines and aircraft. In Southeast Asia, though they had held their ground over the past year, the Allies were gearing up for offensives from India and China's Yunnan province into Burma(Salmi, n.d.). Of particular concern was the fortified Allied logistic hub at Imphal, situated in Manipur on the Burmese border. Imphal boasted airfields, encampments, and extensive supply stockpiles, intricately linked to an even larger base at Dimapur in the Brahmaputra River valley by a rugged 100-mile road snaking through the dense and treacherous Naga Hills.

5.2. Genesis of Japanese Offensive

In 1942, the Japanese Army achieved a significant victory by driving British and its allies out of Burma. However, the relentless monsoons halted military operations, allowing the British army to seize control of Imphal, strategically positioned in the vital passageway between India and Burma. Lieutenant General Shōjirō Iida, the Japanese commander in Burma, advised against launching a renewed offensive into India due to the challenging terrain and logistical obstacles. Over the next eighteen months, the Allies focused on revitalizing communication routes to Assam in northeast India. With the assistance of Indian laborers, the United States Army constructed airbases in Assam, establishing the Hump route to enable supplies to China and the Ledo Road to create a terrestrial link from Assam to China(Lyman, 2021).

In mid-1943, General Iida was reassigned to Japan, and Lieutenant-General Masakasu Kawabe assumed command of the Burma Area Army, with Lieutenant-General Renya Mutaguchi leading the 15th Imperial Japanese Army responsible for the central sector facing Imphal and Assam. Mutaguchi advocated for an audacious invasion of India, aiming to capture Imphal and advance into the Brahmaputra Valley to sever Allied supply lines and airfields(P. Roberts, 2012). Inspired by previous Japanese military successes and the challenge posed by the British '*Chindit expedition*' led by Orde Wingate, Mutaguchi underestimated the obstacles of '*Operation U Go*', venturing into Indian territory with the

ambitious goal of dislodging the British from the subcontinent as part of the broader Southeast Asian campaign(Crosthwaite, 2016b).

5.3. Planning process

In June 1943, a planning conference convened in Rangoon to discuss strategic initiatives, focusing on Lieutenant General Renya Mutaguchi's ambitious plan, which immediately met with resistance from the more conservative Burma Area Army staff, advocating for a defensive posture with slight advances along the Indian frontier. Despite initial objections, Mutaguchi's plan was deliberated upon, with influential figures such as Lieutenant General Eitaro Naka (Chief of Staff, Burma Area Army), Major General Masazumi Inada (Vice Chief of Staff, Southern Expeditionary Army Group), and Lieutenant General Gonpachi Kondo (Imperial General Headquarters) highlighting tactical and logistical challenges. However, Lieutenant General Masakazu Kawabe, the commanding officer, refrained from explicitly vetoing Mutaguchi's proposal(Bond, 2012; Drea, 2003).

Subsequent exercises held at the HQ of the 15th Army in Maymyo and the Southern Expeditionary Army Group in Singapore witnessed Lieutenant General Naka seemingly endorsing Mutaguchi's strategies. Following a subsequent map exercise in Singapore on December 23rd, 1943, Field Marshal Hisaichi Terauchi, Commander in Chief of the Southern Expeditionary Army Group, officially approved Mutaguchi's plan. Inada's successor, Lieutenant General Kitsuju Ayabe, obtained final authorization from Imperial Army HQ, ultimately securing Prime Minister Hideki Tōjō's approval(Wells, 2009).

Once the decision was made, neither Lieutenant General Kawabe nor Field Marshal Terauchi exerted much influence over Mutaguchi's subsequent actions. The offensive, designated '*Operation U Go*', proceeded without significant opportunity for intervention or control once initiated.

5.4. The INA Factor

Subhas Chandra Bose, a charismatic Indian nationalist, wielded significant influence over Mutaguchi and Tojo, subtly shaping their strategic outlook. Bose's steadfast dedication to freeing India from British rule deeply resonated with like-minded individuals who shared his vision of a liberated Asia. As the commander in chief of the INA, Bose mobilized

former prisoners of war from the British Indian Army and Indian expatriates in Southeast Asia to join his cause. His fervent desire for the INA to actively engage in India's liberation was infectious, emphasizing that a decisive victory could bring about the collapse of British colonial authority. This perspective strongly appealed to Japanese leaders, who recognized the strategic advantage of having a friendly government control their western boundary. It also aligned with Japan's broader geopolitical agenda of promoting Asian self-governance and countering Western colonial dominance. Bose's persuasive ability lay in articulating a narrative of liberation and empowerment. His vision of a free India, achieved through collective struggle and sacrifice, inspired not only his followers but also key figures within the Japanese military hierarchy (Cohen, 1963).

By framing India's liberation as pivotal to the broader struggle against colonial oppression, Bose effectively galvanized support for launching an offensive in the Indian subcontinent. His strategic alignment with Japan's geopolitical objectives, combined with his compelling vision for a liberated Asia, made him a persuasive force in the campaign to remove British colonial rule from India. Bose's influence subtly guided Mutaguchi and Tojo towards considering the feasibility and strategic implications of an offensive in the Indian subcontinent, ultimately shaping their decisions and actions in pursuit of this shared goals (Bose Abbas Sk & Kumar Chaturvedi, n.d.).

5.5. Strategic Interplay of 'Operation Ha Go' and 'Operation U Go'

Lieutenant General Renya Mutaguchi comprehended the urgency of swift action in crossing the Chindwin River and strategically engaging the British forces. Acknowledging the imminent onset of the monsoon season, which threatened to disrupt vital supply lines, he recognized the necessity of completing operations within the stipulated fifty-day timeframe set by Imperial headquarters (Connors & Major, 2012; Lundin, 2001).

In a bid to divert Allied attention, Mutaguchi orchestrated a tactical diversion by dispatching the 55th Division of the 28th Army to execute 'Operation Ha Go' along Burma's western coast in early February 1944. This manoeuvre aimed to draw Allied reinforcements away from Assam while creating the illusion of an impending Japanese offensive towards Bengal via Chittagong. However, despite Japanese confidence drawn from previous successes in Malaya and Burma, 'Operation Ha Go' faltered in the face of resolute Allied defenses and effective air support. The failure left the units of the 55th

Division stranded without crucial supplies, contrary to Japanese expectations of an Allied retreat or surrender. Some Japanese commanders had foreseen the potential setbacks of 'Operation Ha Go' and voiced apprehensions, cautioning against similar vulnerabilities in 'Operation U Go'. Yet, their concerns were disregarded by the authoritative Mutaguchi (C. B.-J. of M. History & 2023, n.d.).

Concurrently, Mutaguchi's 15th Army devised the primary offensive into Manipur, slated for the first week of March. This assault aimed to capture Imphal and Kohima, disrupting British forces and pre-empting any potential counteroffensive into Burma. The coordinated plan involved multiple divisions launching attacks from various directions, aiming to achieve strategic superiority on the battlefield.

Deploying three divisions in early March, the 15th and 33rd Divisions were assigned to engage the British and Indian 4 Corps stationed at Imphal, while the 31st Division was tasked with infiltrating the Naga Hills to sever British communication lines at Kohima. (Figure 5.2) The dispersed nature of British and Indian defensive positions across challenging terrain posed obstacles to rapid reinforcement efforts, presenting opportunities for Japanese exploitation. Mutaguchi viewed the small garrison at Kohima as a negligible obstacle, envisioning swift neutralization to secure his flanks and rear (C. Kolakowski, 2022b). The anticipated control over Kohima would facilitate a decisive strike against the 14th Army's critical supply base at Dimapur (Y. Kangjam, Connectivity, et al., n.d.). The deployment of troops by the Imperial Japanese Army along various axes was as follows (H. Katoch, 2018): -

1. The 33rd Infantry Division, led by Lieutenant-General Motoso Yanagida, was to target the 17th Indian Infantry Division at Tiddim before advancing on Imphal from the south.
2. Yamamoto Force, comprising units from the 33rd and 15th Divisions under Major-General Tsunoru Yamamoto, supported by tanks and heavy artillery, was to engage the 20th Indian Infantry Division at Tamu before moving on Imphal from the east.
3. The 15th Infantry Division, commanded by Lieutenant-General Masafumi Yamauchi, was to encircle Imphal from the north.

4. Additionally, the 31st Infantry Division, under Lieutenant-General Kōtoku Satō, was tasked to isolate Imphal by capturing Kohima and then proceed to seize Dimapur, a vital Allied supply base.

Subhas Chandra Bose's insistence led to the integration of two INA brigades into the Japanese offensive strategy against Imphal, directed from the south and east, despite initial reservations among Japanese strategists. However, concerns arose within the Burma Area Army regarding the perceived risks inherent in the plan, particularly regarding the extensive separation of attacking forces and potential logistical impediments. Nevertheless, dissenting voices were quelled as Mutaguchi remained steadfast in pursuing his ambitious course of action.

5.6. Allied Operational plan

Following Burma's significant setback in early 1944, the Allied forces deployed in Assam and Arakan experienced a critical juncture under the leadership of General William Slim, who commanded the British 14th Army. Recognizing the imperative for strategic reassessment, Slim prioritized the implementation of comprehensive measures to rejuvenate the health, training, and morale of both British and Indian units under his command. His resolute efforts yielded tangible progress, including the revitalization of communication networks, the reinforcement of rear-area administration, and, provisioning of essential supplies such as fresh rations and medicines. The Allies engaged in rigorous training and strategic deliberations to effectively counter typical Japanese tactics, devising innovative strategies to thwart enemy advances. A significant development was the increased utilization of aerial supply drops to sustain besieged units, a tactic that not only confounded Japanese expectations but also consistently undermined their capacity to mount successful offensives. This approach proved pivotal in disrupting enemy operations and enhancing the Allies' defensive capabilities(Callahan & Marston, 2021; Hicks, 2022).

Amidst the fog of war and uncertainty surrounding Japanese intentions, Generals Slim and Scoones exhibited masterful strategic acumen. Rather than succumbing to the chaos of the moment, they demonstrated remarkable restraint and foresight. Confronted with the unexpected onslaught of Japanese assaults, they refrained from impulsive reactions, wisely avoiding direct confrontation along vulnerable river lines. Instead, General Slim orchestrated a meticulously planned withdrawal to the formidable fortress of Imphal,

strategically leveraging the known logistical weaknesses of the Japanese. This calculated maneuver not only ensured the attrition of enemy forces enroute but also systematically exploited Japanese supply constraints. By adopting this defensive posture, they effectively crippled the Japanese capacity to sustain troop deployments, thereby gaining a critical advantage in the theatre of war(Monograph & Shawn Steele, 2012).

5.7. Battle of Imphal

The Battle of Imphal, locally known as Japan Laan, stands as a crucial chapter in the annals of WW II, unfolding from March to July 1944 in the vicinity of Imphal, the capital of Manipur state in northeast India. This crucial engagement saw Japanese forces launch a determined offensive with the aim of annihilating Allied troops and invading India, only to be fiercely repelled into Burma, suffering significant casualties in the process. Alongside the simultaneous Battle of Kohima, the conflict marked a decisive turning point in the Burma campaign, altering the course of the war in the region. The Japanese defeat at Imphal was characterized by heavy casualties inflicted by factors such as starvation, disease, and exhaustion, underscoring the ferocity and scale of the conflict. As the theatre of war unfolded, Imphal emerged as a strategic linchpin for the Allies, serving as a vital logistic base with crucial airfields, camps, and supply depots. Linked to the larger base at Dimapur by a challenging 100-mile road traversing the rugged Naga Hills, Imphal became the focal point of Allied strategic planning, symbolizing the determination to resist Japanese aggression and secure victory in the region.

General Mutaguchi's strategic vision focused on leveraging the seizure of Imphal to disrupt Allied communication arteries and push towards the Brahmaputra Valley. Despite objections from the Burma Area Army and the Southern Expeditionary Army Group, General Mutaguchi's unwavering determination secured approval from Prime Minister Hideki Tojo and the Imperial General Headquarters for '*Operation U-Go*'. Nonetheless, scepticism lingered among his divisional commanders, particularly concerning logistical challenges and their assumptions about the inferiority of British and Indian troops. General Mutaguchi's dismissal of Allied capabilities, grounded in past encounters, proved to be misguided, as the Allies had demonstrated resilience and superior training. Furthermore, shortcomings in the plan, such as underestimating Allied armour deployment and neglecting vital artillery assets, were exposed as the campaign unfolded(Custer, 2021; Grehan & Mace, 2015).

5.8. Allied defensive plans

Imphal, under the command of Lieutenant General Geoffrey Scoones of IV Corps, held paramount strategic importance within the Fourteenth Army, under the leadership of Lieutenant General William Slim. In anticipation of an impending Allied offensive, IV Corps contingents were strategically stationed in proximity to the Chindwin River, albeit exposing them to potential isolation. The defensive arrangement encompassed the deployment of the following units(Jordan, 2015):

1. The 20th Indian Infantry Division, led by Major-General Douglas Gracey, stationed at Tamu, 110 kilometres southeast of Imphal, was untested but well-trained.
2. Major-General 'Punch' Cowan's 17th Indian Infantry Division held Tiddim, 243 kilometers south of Imphal, along a precarious communication line. Despite having only two brigades, the division had sporadic combat experience since December 1941.
3. Major-General Ouvry Roberts' 23rd Indian Infantry Division, serving around Imphal for two years, was in reserve but severely depleted due to diseases like malaria and typhus.
4. Brigadier Maxwell Hope-Thompson's 50th Indian Parachute Brigade conducted advanced jungle training north of Imphal.
5. Brigadier R. L. Scoones' 254th Indian Tank Brigade was stationed in and around Imphal.

These Indian divisions comprised both British and Indian soldiers, with each brigade typically consisting of British, Gurkha, and Indian battalions. Most divisions had two British field artillery regiments, supplemented by one Indian mountain artillery regiment.

5.9. Opening phases of the battle

When intelligence hinted at an imminent Japanese offensive, Slim and Scoones devised a strategic retreat plan, aiming to draw the enemy into the Imphal plain. Their intent was to compel the Japanese to engage at the terminus of arduous supply lines, thereby capitalizing on the inherent difficulties faced by the invaders. However, their meticulous calculations faltered as they misjudged both the timing and the extent of the Japanese onslaught. As the

Japanese forces commenced their crossing of the Chindwin River on March 8th, Scoones, recognizing the perilous situation, issued directives for the forward divisions to commence withdrawal towards Imphal. This decision was founded upon a strategic rationale; rather than confront the Japanese head-on, risking direct engagement and potential decimation, it was deemed wiser to adopt a strategy of attrition. By continually retreating, the Allied forces could inflict casualties on the enemy while simultaneously elongating their logistical supply lines, thereby exacerbating the challenges faced by the Japanese in sustaining their advance(Callahan & Marston, 2021; Jeffreys, 2013).

In essence, Scoones' decision to delay withdrawal until March 13th was a calculated manoeuvre aimed at exploiting the geography and terrain to the Allies' advantage. By continually retreating and strategically extending their lines of communication, the Allied forces sought to wear down the Japanese, capitalizing on the difficulties inherent in sustaining a prolonged offensive campaign in challenging terrain(..., 1987; Salmi, n.d.).

5.9.1. Tamu–Shenam.

The 20th Indian Division was guarding a key supply hub at Tamu and Moreh, near the Chindwin River and on 20 March, six Lee medium tanks of the 3rd Carabiniers clashed head-on with six Type 95 Ha-Go tanks leading Yamamoto's southern advance. Despite numerical inferiority, the heavier Lee tanks decisively obliterated their Japanese counterparts(Allen & Steeds, 1994). In the face of evolving operational imperatives, Acting Major-General Douglas Gracey initially resisted the notion of retreat. However, recognizing the exigency of the situation, he yielded to strategic realities. On March 25th, orders arrived mandating the detachment of a portion of his division to reinforce IV Corps' reserves. Acknowledging the untenability of holding Tamu and Moreh with diminished strength, the division executed a tactical withdrawal to the Shenam Saddle. This geographical feature, characterized by a series of hills along the Imphal-Tamu Road, offered a formidable defensive position.

During the withdrawal, the division implemented scorched-earth tactics, setting ablaze the supply depot at Moreh and slaughtering approximately 200 cattle to deprive the advancing Japanese forces of valuable resources. Fortunately, the retreat proceeded with minimal resistance.

5.9.2. Tiddim–Bishenpur.

The 17th Indian Division found itself encircled by the Japanese 33rd Division in the southern theatre. Early reconnaissance reports from division patrols and ‘V Force’ units, composed of local levies and guerrillas, alerted Cowan to an impending Japanese rearward advance as early as March 8th. Responding swiftly, Cowan reorganized his forces to fortify the division's rear.

On March 13th, the Japanese 215th Regiment struck a supply depot at milestone 109, located twenty miles behind Cowan's forward outposts, while the 214th Regiment seized Tongzang and Tuitum Saddle ridge a few miles behind the main position of the 17th Indian Division. Recognizing the imminent threat, the Indian division commenced withdrawal on March 14th. At Tuitum Saddle, the 48th Indian Infantry Brigade fiercely engaged the unprepared Japanese 214th Regiment on March 15th, inflicting significant casualties and repelling them from the road. Meanwhile, further north, the Japanese briefly captured the milestone 109 depot on March 18th, only for Indian forces to reclaim it later. Cowan took proactive measures to safeguard critical infrastructure, notably securing the Manipur River bridge, ensuring the division's rearguard crossed safely on 26th March, while demolishing the bridge behind them.

Despite heavy casualties on both sides, Yanagida, commander of the Japanese 33rd Division, hesitated to pursue aggressively, influenced by a misinterpreted radio transmission suggesting the destruction of one of his regiments at Tongzang. Consequently, the Japanese advance was tempered, despite admonishments from higher command. However, Scoones, under pressure, deployed the bulk of his sole reserve, the 23rd Indian Infantry Division, to aid the 17th Division. Supported by Allied parachute drops, both divisions successfully navigated their way back to the Imphal plain, reaching their destination on 4th April.

5.9.3. Sangshak–Litan.

While Imphal faced vulnerability from the advancing Japanese 15th Division, the defense of its northern approaches fell solely to the Indian 50th Parachute Brigade. This force suffered heavy losses in the Battle of Sangshak against a regiment from the Japanese 31st Division enroute to Kohima. On March 28th, the Japanese 60th Regiment severed the main

road north of Imphal, while the 51st Regiment pressed toward Imphal from the northeast, advancing down the Iril River valley and a track from Litan, situated 23 miles northeast of Imphal. However, the earlier diversionary assault by the Japanese 55th Division in Arakan met with failure. Admiral Louis Mountbatten, commander in chief of the Allied South East Asia Command, swiftly secured aircraft typically allocated to the 'Hump' operation. Leveraging this logistical advantage, Slim orchestrated the rapid airlift of the battle-tested 5th Indian Infantry Division, along with its artillery and primary transport assets, from Arakan to the Central Front. Remarkably, this relocation was accomplished within a mere eleven days. While one brigade and a mountain artillery regiment were dispatched to Dimapur in the Brahmaputra valley, the remaining forces, including two brigades, field artillery, and the divisional headquarters, were airlifted to Imphal.

By 3rd April, the vanguard elements of the 5th Indian Infantry Division were engaged in combat north and east of Imphal, bolstering the defenses and reinforcing Allied positions in the crucial theatre of operations.

5.9.4. Chin Hills.

On the Japanese left flank, the INA's Subhas Brigade, under the leadership of Shah Nawaz Khan, reached the outskirts of the Chin Hills near Tiddim and Fort White by the end of March. Deploying strategically, the 2nd Battalion dispatched companies to relieve Japanese positions at Falam and Hakha. From these locations, Khan's forces conducted patrols and set ambushes against Chin guerrillas led by British officer Lieutenant-Colonel Oates, resulting in the capture of several prisoners.

In mid-May, a detachment under Khan's adjutant, Mahboob 'Boobie' Ahmed, successfully assaulted and seized the hilltop fortress of Klang Klang. Meanwhile, the 3rd Battalion moved towards the Fort White-Tongzang area, anticipating the potential destruction of Major General Frank Messervy's 7th Indian Infantry Division in the Arakan, with hopes of recruiting volunteers once conditions permitted. During the offensive towards Imphal, the Bahadur Group of the INA purportedly exerted influence on British Indian soldiers, enticing them to desert their ranks. This phenomenon added a layer of complexity to the conflict, as it created discord within the British Indian forces and posed challenges to the Allied command structure (Fay, 1995).

5.9.5. Key Encounters in and around Imphal.

Commencing in early April, the Japanese launched multi-directional assaults on the Imphal Plain, striking from various fronts with coordinated precision:

1. **Bishenpur.** The Japanese 33rd Division launched an assault from the south, targeting Bishenpur and severing a secondary track from Silchar into the plain. A daring commando raid rendered a suspension bridge inoperable, effectively blocking the Silchar route(Allen & Steeds, 1994). At the time, the 17th and 23rd Indian Divisions were regrouping after their strategic withdrawal, leaving Bishenpur defended solely by the 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade, detached from the 20th Division. Japanese forces advanced through the western hills, nearly encircling the British forces in the village. However, they faced fierce resistance and sustained heavy casualties under relentless British artillery fire. Their progress was impeded by logistical constraints, halting their advance merely 10 miles from Imphal.

Simultaneously, other Japanese units moving directly up the Tiddim-Imphal road were halted at Potsangbam, just 2 miles south of Bishenpur, as troops from the 17th Indian Division reengaged the enemy(W. S.-(No Title), n.d.). Yanagida, the division's commander, incurred Mutaguchi's displeasure due to his cautious approach and was relieved of command by the month's end.

2. **Shenam–Palel.** Yamamoto Force launched an assault on the strategically crucial Shenam Saddle, defended by the main body of the Indian 20th Division, situated on the primary road from Tamu to Imphal. This road was vital for the Japanese as it was their sole metal route and essential for facilitating the movement of tanks and heavy artillery to engage the main defenses surrounding Imphal. Located only a few miles north of the saddle was Palel Airfield, one of the two all-weather airfields crucial for the defenders. The Japanese attack on April 4th proved disjointed; infantry units were ill-prepared, and twelve Japanese tanks were exposed and vulnerable to British anti-tank guns on the road. From April 8th to 22nd, intense fighting ensued for control of five peaks commanding the road east of the Saddle. While the Japanese managed to capture some of these peaks initially,

Indian and British counter-attacks succeeded in reclaiming portions of the territory lost. Casualties mounted heavily on both sides during these engagements.

Failing to achieve a breakthrough via the road, Yamamoto diverted troops through rough terrain north of the Saddle to mount a raid on Palel airfield. The INA's Gandhi Brigade, or 2nd Guerrilla Regiment, composed of two battalions under the command of Inayat Kiyani, participated in this operation. On April 28th, they launched an attack on Palel, attempting to coerce Indian defenders into surrendering. However, the defenders rallied after initial hesitation. Meanwhile, another INA detachment conducted demolitions around Palel but withdrew after failing to rendezvous with Japanese units. The Gandhi Brigade faced logistical challenges, having brought forward only one day's worth of supplies, and suffered 250 casualties from shellfire after withdrawing from Palel.

3. **Kanglatongbi–Nungshigum.** The Japanese 15th Division executed a strategic encirclement of Imphal from the north. The 60th Regiment successfully seized a British supply depot at Kanglatongbi along the main Imphal-Dimapur road, only to find it emptied of crucial provisions and ammunition.

In a decisive move, a battalion of the Japanese 51st Regiment, under the command of Colonel Kimio Omoto, secured the strategic Nungshigum Ridge, commanding a vantage point overlooking Imphal's primary airstrip. Recognizing the imminent threat to IV Corps, the 5th Indian Division launched a counter-attack on April 13th. Supported by coordinated air strikes, intense artillery barrages, and the M3 Lee tanks of B Squadron, 3rd Carabiniers, the assault caught the Japanese off guard. The Japanese had underestimated the tanks' ability to navigate steep slopes, as Lee tanks had never been deployed in such terrain previously (*FIGHTING FIFTH: History of the 5th Indian Division*, 2023). With limited effective anti-tank weaponry, the Japanese regiment suffered heavy casualties and was eventually forced to retreat from the ridge. However, the attackers also incurred significant losses, with every officer of the Carabiniers and the attacking infantry, specifically the 1st Battalion of the 17th Dogra Regiment, either killed or wounded in the fierce engagement.

5.10. Allied Counter-Attacks

5.10.1. Northern Front.

By May 1st, all Japanese offensive operations came to a halt. Generals Slim and Scoones initiated a counter-offensive against the weakened Japanese 15th Division, recognizing that breaking this division's hold would effectively lift the siege of Imphal, pending the recapture of Kohima. Progress was impeded by the onset of the monsoon season, which rendered movement exceedingly difficult. Furthermore, IV Corps faced logistical challenges, with shortages impacting artillery ammunition supplies, necessitating conservation efforts.

The 5th Indian Division, reinforced by the 89th Indian Infantry Brigade flown in to replace units dispatched to Kohima, alongside the 23rd and later the 20th Indian Divisions, launched efforts to seize steep Japanese-held ridges like the Mapao Spur. However, these positions proved nearly impregnable. Allied artillery struggled to target Japanese forces on reverse slopes, and infantry assaults often resulted in being repelled by mortar fire and grenades from entrenched positions. IV Corps reorganized, with the 23rd Indian Division assuming defense of the Shenam Saddle. From late May onwards, the 5th Indian Division focused on advancing north from Sengmai along the main road towards Kanglatongi, while the 20th Indian Division pushed along tracks and the Iril River towards Litan and Ukhrul, threatening the Japanese 15th Division's supply lines.

Facing dire shortages and starvation, the Japanese forces were at their breaking point. Lieutenant General Sato, commander of the Japanese 31st Division, ordered a retreat by the end of May to secure food supplies (Rooney, 2013). This decision allowed the Indian XXXIII Corps to drive the Japanese from Kohima and advance southward. Meanwhile, the Japanese 15th Division, grappling with starvation and illness, was compelled to abandon defensive positions to scavenge for provisions. Despite leadership changes, including the replacement of General Yamauchi with Lieutenant General Uichi Shibata, the situation remained dire. Eventually, after clearing delaying actions by Japanese rearguards, IV Corps and XXXIII Corps converged at Milestone 109 on June 22nd, effectively lifting the siege of Imphal.

5.10.2. Southern Front.

South of Imphal, the 17th Indian Division confronted the Japanese 33rd Division. In May, Japanese air attacks on Bishenpur and heavy fighting near Potsangbam resulted in significant losses for the British, including 12 tanks(W. S.-(No Title), n.d.).

Major General Cowan devised a plan to break the deadlock by launching the 48th Indian Infantry Brigade on a flanking maneuver into the Japanese division's rear while the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade engaged them from the front. However, simultaneous Japanese attempts to infiltrate the Indian division's front complicated matters. While the Gurkhas of the 48th Indian Brigade successfully cut off the Japanese rear, the 63rd Indian Brigade failed to provide support, leading to heavy losses. Additionally, Tanaka's troops captured hills near the 17th Division's headquarters. As a result of these incursions, isolated Japanese units suffered heavy casualties. Under the command of Lieutenant General Nobuo Tanaka, the 33rd Division launched repeated attacks but sustained significant losses. Reinforced in June, they made further attempts but were ultimately unable to sustain the offensive. The Yamamoto Force, also depleted, conducted modest raids on Palel Airfield before withdrawing in early July. (Figure 5.3)

5.11. Kohima's Strategic Landscape

Kohima, nestled 5000 feet above sea level in the rugged Naga Hills of northeast India, emerged as a key strategic outpost during the tumultuous days of WW II, serving as a crucial link between Dimapur and Imphal. The town's significance was underscored by its location atop a pass that presented the most viable route for advancing Japanese forces towards the Brahmaputra plains in India. From a military standpoint, Kohima's terrain proved to be a formidable barrier, posing challenges for both defenders and attackers alike. The landscape, characterized by steep hills cloaked in dense bamboo jungle, presented a natural fortress difficult to breach. Existing tracks wound perilously through ravines, with soldiers forced to negotiate vertiginous inclines using toggle ropes, all while contending with the relentless assault of leeches amidst the lush foliage.

Notably, Kohima's topography, with its treacherous terrain and unpredictable monsoon weather, severely hampered troop movement, slowing the progress of soldiers to a crawl.

The limited vehicular access further compounded logistical challenges, necessitating reliance on jeeps for transportation amidst the rugged wilderness.

Kohima Ridge, stretching north to south, emerged as a key focal point of defense, flanked by Naga Village to the north, the General-Purpose Transport Ridge (GPT) (present-day official residence of the state CM), and Aradura Spur to the south and west, respectively. The imposing Jail Hill commanded a strategic vantage point overlooking the ridge, while Mount Puliebadze loomed ominously, further reinforcing the defender's stronghold.

As the Japanese advanced along the Kohima-Imphal Road, their progress was accurately tracked, with key landmarks assigned codenames reflective of their strategic significance. By March 28, 1944, the road to Imphal had been severed, setting the stage for a decisive confrontation. The ensuing battle, unexpectedly thrust upon Kohima, underscored the critical importance of this unassuming hill town in shaping the course of history.

5.12. Battle of Kohima

Kohima was as a key point strategically located at the apex of a pass, providing the most direct route from Burma into India and connecting the logistic base at Dimapur in the Brahmaputra River valley to Imphal, where British and Indian troops stationed within the IV Corps were poised to counter the primary Japanese thrust. Atop Kohima Ridge, running from north to south, sat the administrative hub of Naga Hills in 1944, presided over by Deputy Commissioner Charles Pawsey. Pawsey's residence, nestled on the hillside amidst gardens, a tennis court, and a clubhouse, prominently marked the road's eastern flank. While terraced areas around the village were cultivated, the ridge's steep slopes remained densely forested. To the north lay the populous Naga Village, distinguished by Treasury Hill and Church Knoll, a testament to the enduring influence of Christian missionaries. On the southern and western flanks loomed GPT Ridge and the densely wooded Aradura Spur, forming integral features of the surrounding landscape. Various military encampments in the vicinity lent their names to significant landmarks, such as the Field Supply Depot (FSD)(Sun & 2016, n.d.-c). In preparation for the impending battle, both British and Japanese forces assigned codenames to key locations, such as Garrison Hill, designated 'Inu' (meaning 'dog') by the Japanese, and Kuki Piquet, dubbed 'Saru' (meaning 'monkey'). (Figure5.2)

General Mutaguchi, harboured ambitious plans not only to seize Kohima but also to advance the 31st Division of the Japanese 15th Army towards Dimapur. This strategic move cantered on deploying the 31st Division, comprising the 58th, 124th, and 138th Regiments, along with the 31st Mountain Artillery Regiment, with the daunting mission of navigating the challenging terrain of the Naga Hills along three distinct routes, aiming to exploit the capture of Kohima, sever British supply lines to Imphal, and enhance operational flexibility(Rooney, 2013):

1. Homalin-Ukhrul-Maram-Kohima.
2. Somra-Kharasom-Mao-Kohima.
3. Tamanthi-Layshi-Jessami-Phek-Kohima.

However, Sato, the 31st Division commander, had his reservations since, he felt marginalized in the planning process and doubted the feasibility of the campaign, fearing the grim prospect of troop starvation. Furthermore, Sato's relationship with Mutaguchi was strained(Nish et al., n.d.).

On March 15, 1944, the Japanese 31st Division undertook a strategic manoeuvre, traversing the Chindwin River near *Homalin* and thereafter advancing northwest along the intricate jungle trails, spanning a frontier nearly 60 miles in width. The left flank of this division, spearheaded by the bulk of the 58th Regiment under the command of Major General Shigesaburo Miyazaki, encountered the vanguard of British Indian troops belonging to the '50 Indian Parachute Brigade' on March 20, 1944, marking the inception of the clash famously known as the '*Battle of Sangshak*'. Though Sangshak wasn't within Miyazaki's primary objectives, he resolved to eliminate this obstacle along his intended trajectory. The skirmish persisted for a gruelling six days, during which the '50 Parachute Brigade' suffered a staggering loss of 600 men while the Japanese incurred over 400 casualties(Rooney, 2013).

This unforeseen engagement significantly impeded Miyazaki's advance towards Kohima, which lay along the most direct route among the converging Japanese forces. Simultaneously, the right-wing column encountered staunch resistance at *Jessami*, where a mere 450 men from the 1st Assam Regiment held their ground for five days. Similarly, the middle column confronted a formidable stand-off at *Kharasom*, contested by another 120 valiant soldiers from the same regiment. These gallant defenses, orchestrated by the

resolute troops of the '1st Assam Regiment,' were orchestrated with the directive to withstand the Japanese onslaught and buy precious time for the fortification of Kohima's defenses. However, Colonel Richard, stationed at Kohima, eventually withdrew the order to fight to the last man, acknowledging the futility and potential devastation it would entail in the face of overwhelming Japanese forces. Regrettably, this withdrawing order failed to reach *Kharasom* in time, as the advancing Japanese swiftly encircled the outpost, severing all communication lines. Captain Jock Young, recognizing the dire circumstances, valiantly upheld the spirit of the 'last man, last round' directive while simultaneously ordering his men to retreat (Colvin, 2012).

Despite encountering considerable challenges, the withdrawal order eventually reached *Jessami*, where the defenders embarked on a tactful retreat towards Kohima. The resilience exhibited in these engagements significantly impeded the progress of the 31st Division towards *Kohima*, which, at that juncture, stood vulnerable due to its scant defenses. Reflecting upon these events at a later juncture, Sato himself remarked, 'Had Miyazaki not been delayed at Sangshak and Torikai at Jessami, the outcome of the Kohima battle might have been drastically different.' Amidst the tumult of unfolding events, General Slim confronted a stark reality; the full weight of a Japanese division was appreciated converging upon Kohima (H. Katoch, 2016). Initially, he and his staff assumed that the rugged terrain would act as a natural impediment, restricting the enemy's advance to the scale of a mere regiment. Yet the gravity of the situation swiftly dawned upon them. Within the fortified confines of Kohima, meagre fighting units, bolstered only by a handful of non-combatant personnel within the logistical framework, stood as a fragile barrier against the imminent Japanese assault. Meanwhile, Dimapur, a vital lifeline situated 46 miles to the north, lay exposed and vulnerable, devoid of any substantial combat force.

Aware of the catastrophic implications should Dimapur succumb to enemy control, General Slim urgently appealed to his superior, General George Giffard, for reinforcements. His plea aimed to fortify the defenses of Dimapur and initiate strategic preparations for the relief of Imphal, a crucial theatre of operations (Lyman, 2011).

In mid-March, Kohima stood guarded by a mere handful of defenders; scattered platoons of Assam Rifles, the Burma Regiment, the Shere Regiment, and some troops hailing from the Royal Nepalese Army. The 4th Royal West Kents Regiment, part of the esteemed 161st Indian Brigade, hurriedly arrived in Kohima, only to be promptly redirected back to

Dimapur. However, on the 5th of April, amidst the burgeoning chaos of battle, they were swiftly redeployed to Kohima, just before the Japanese encirclement ensued(Sun & 2016, n.d.-c). Meanwhile, the remaining elements of the 161st Indian Brigade, comprising the formidable 1/1st Punjab Regiment, the indomitable 4/7th Rajput Regiment, and the brigade's artillery, managed to secure positions at Jotsoma, a strategic outpost located a mere two miles west of Kohima.

In a testament to their resilience, the 1st Assam Regiment, comprising approximately 260 determined soldiers, successfully disengaged from the fierce engagements at Kharasom and Jessami, arrived at Kohima ahead of the encroaching Japanese forces. However, the overall combat strength of the garrison amounted to 1500 men, with an additional thousand non-combatants milling about the garrison, facing off against the formidable might of a Japanese division numbering some 15,000 troops(Swinson, 2015). Facing daunting odds, British Indian Army readied British 2nd Division, stationed 2000km away in western India, for swift deployment to Dimapur via road and rail to strengthen regional defense.

From April 4 to June 22, 1944, intense conflict unfolded in and around Kohima, the capital of Naga Hills in northeast India(Peseyie, 2022). This battleground witnessed a series of crucial engagements that shaped the course of the campaign: -

1. From April 3 to 16, 1944, the Japanese launched determined assaults aimed at securing Kohima ridge, a strategic vantage point that controlled the primary supply route feeding the British and Indian forces of IV Corps stationed in Imphal.
2. Beginning from April 18 to May 13, 1944, British and Indian reinforcements launched a bold counter-offensive, driving the occupying Japanese forces from their entrenched positions. Despite the enemy's retreat from Kohima ridge, they persisted in obstructing the vital Kohima-Imphal route, posing a significant logistical challenge to Allied operations.
3. Transitioning into the subsequent phase from May 16 to June 22, 1944, British and Indian soldiers pursued the retreating Japanese forces with unwavering determination. Through relentless pursuit and steadfast resolve, Allied troops successfully reopened the crucial Kohima-Imphal route, thereby restoring vital lines of communication and supply.

5.13. The Siege of Kohima

The Battle of Kohima lasted for 64 days from April 4th to June 22nd, 1944 and the same can be categorized in two phases; a 13-day siege and the dislodgement of the Japanese 31st Division from the area. It culminated with establishing link between 2nd and 5th Divisions from Kohima and Imphal respectively at Milestone 109, thereby reopening the Kohima-Imphal Road(Y. Kangjam, Connectivity, et al., n.d.).

Before the arrival of the 161st Indian Brigade, the defense of the Kohima area relied solely on the newly raised 1st Battalion of the Assam Regiment and a few platoons of 3rd Battalion Assam Rifles. Initially, the 161st Brigade was deployed in Kohima but was subsequently redirected to Dimapur, perceived as strategically more significant due to its status as a railhead storing the majority of Allied supplies. There was concern that Kohima, viewed as a roadblock, might be lightly defended if the Japanese opted to focus on attacking Dimapur instead(L. A.-(No Title) & 1984, n.d.).

The conflict erupted on April 3rd when Japanese presence was detected in and around Kohima, and an Assam Rifles patrol operating on the Aradura Spur effectively eliminated 15 adversaries. Concurrently, the 1st Assam Regiment from Jessami and Kharasom outposts swiftly reinforced Kohima's defenses(Seaman, 1989). The initial Japanese offensive on Kohima unfolded on April 4th at GPT Ridge (present day official residence of the state CM), marking a significant escalation in hostilities. By April 5th, the 4th Royal West Kents and the remaining units of the 161st Brigade had strategically positioned themselves within and around Kohima in anticipation of the imminent Japanese offensive.

The 4th Royal West Kents, alongside supporting elements from the Assam Rifles and Assam Regiment, dug a network of trenches along the Kohima Ridge, including Garrison Hill (present-day Raj Bhavan), Jail Hill (Police HQ), Field Supply Depot (FSD) Hill (Present day indoor stadium), and Detail Issue Supply (DIS) Hill (Assam Rifle's Officers Mess area). Additionally, the Deputy Commissioner's Bungalow (War Cemetery) served as a vital defensive stronghold. These fortified positions bore witness to intense and entrenched combat, leaving no part of Kohima and its surroundings unscathed.

Acknowledging their numerical inferiority and the imperative to consolidate their defenses, the 4th Royal West Kents strategically withdrew from isolated ridge positions

following the initial major assault. By April 5th, the Japanese had seized control of Naga Village and made significant headway on the ridge, fortifying their positions in preparation for sustained defense(Lyman, 2011). The day's engagement resulted in 80 casualties and 100 wounded among the Kohima Garrison during the Japanese onslaught.

On April 6th, the Japanese deployed artillery, initiating intense combat operations. Responding to the threat, British forces strategically positioned 12 artillery guns at Jotsoma, a vantage point, delivering a barrage of 400 shells per day from each gun. This defensive tactic effectively thwarted the Japanese advance, safeguarding the British and Indian troops stationed on the Kohima Ridge. Simultaneously, the Royal Air Force (RAF) executed tactical air strikes, employing dive-bombing and machine-gun strafing against enemy positions at GPT and Jail Hill, areas occupied by Japanese forces. The RAF's aerial assault, complemented by mortar fire, significantly weakened the enemy's stronghold. However, during the engagement at Jail Hill alone, the 1st Assam Regiment suffered heavy casualties, wherein they lost 2 officers and 20 sepoy(Swinson, 2015).

By April 7th, the Japanese had implemented strategic manoeuvres, isolating Jotsoma by obstructing the Dimapur road below the village. Additionally, they executed a siege tactic by severing water supplies to the Kohima Garrison, intensifying the pressure on British and Indian forces(Hantzis, 2017). Employing psychological warfare, the Japanese utilized loudspeakers, broadcasting messages in Urdu through the INA, urging Indian soldiers within the British Army to defect, asserting that they were facilitating India's liberation from British colonial rule.

On April 8th, the Japanese launched a series of offensives targeting the northeastern sector of the defenses. By the 9th, British and Indian forces in that sector had been pushed back to the tennis court near the Deputy Commissioner's bungalow. Concurrently, the Japanese disrupted communication routes by cutting tracks between Jotsoma and Kohima, as well as the road connecting Jotsoma and Dimapur at Zubza, approximately 36 miles from Dimapur.

The relentless Japanese assaults compelled the Kohima garrison to further retreat within their lines on April 10th and 11th, particularly facing attacks on DIS and FSD positions. On April 10th, the RAF conducted another bombing raid on Japanese positions at Jail Hill and GPT Ridge. As the conflict progressed, the number of British and Indian combatants

fit for duty dwindled to a mere 600 men. Despite dwindling manpower, the fighting persisted. (Figure 5.4)

On April 12th, the British Chindit 23rd Long Range Penetration Brigade initiated movement into the Naga Hills, deploying nine columns, each comprising approximately 300–400 soldiers. Their objective was to disrupt the Japanese 31st Division's supply routes between Kohima and Chindwin.

By April 13th, the Japanese intensified their offensive against British and Indian positions on the ridge near the Deputy Commissioner's bungalow and the tennis court. The defending troops faced relentless artillery and mortar bombardment, coupled with frequent infantry assaults. This sector witnessed some of the most ferocious and close-quarter combat, with grenades exchanged at point-blank range across the tennis court. However, the attackers were repelled by accurate and effective Royal Artillery fire from Jotsoma Ridge. Recognizing the resilience of the British and Indian forces, the Japanese redirected their focus towards the positions of the 161st Brigade at Jotsoma. Despite sustained shelling, the defenders managed to repulse the attacks (Rooney, 2013). In a bid to bolster the besieged troops, the RAF initiated parachute supply drops to their positions on April 13th. Further complicating the situation, the Japanese dispatched a unit from Chakhabama to Cheswema and established an outpost at Phek.

5.14. Relief Operations

On the crucial day of April 14th, a significant shift occurred within the besieged territory. The British 2nd Division, embarking on an arduous journey spanning 2000 kilometres across mainland India, arrived both by air and land. Their arrival proved instrumental as they successfully breached the Japanese roadblock at Zubza along the Dimapur-Kohima Road, employing the might of tanks. The beleaguered garrison at Kohima received word of impending reinforcements on the 15th of April, a beacon of hope amidst the turmoil (W. S.-(No Title), n.d.).

Aware of the impending arrival of reinforcements, the Japanese launched a ferocious and desperate assault against the positions at FSD during the evenings of April 16th and 17th. In a relentless back-and-forth, both sides wrestled control of the positions repeatedly, only to be ousted and reclaimed by their adversaries. The intensity of the conflict and the

resultant casualties compelled British and Indian forces to tactically withdraw from FSD, retreating to the Garrison Hill positions. This strategic move left the defenders ensnared from the south, north, and east, their predicament growing ever more dire. On April 16th, the Royal Air Force executed a commendable feat, delivering crucial supplies to the besieged British Indian troops via airdrops(Annett, 2008).

Amidst the chaos of battle, the combat escalated to brutal hand-to-hand skirmishes, exacerbated by the nauseating stench of decaying bodies both within and beyond the perimeter. The reliance on air supplies, even for the most basic necessity of water, underscored the desperation permeating the ranks, compounded by the disheartening sight of much-needed parachutes often landing within enemy territory. Furthermore, the dwindling artillery stockpile remained largely unusable, as positioning proved futile with the Japanese swiftly detecting and neutralizing any established emplacements. Meanwhile, on April 17th, Mutaguchi's directive to Sato, urging the dispatch of three infantry battalions and a mountain artillery battalion to reinforce the Battle at Imphal, went unheeded(Seaman, 1989). This internal discord and evident friction among commanders mirrored the escalating gravity of the situation on the ground.

On the morning of April 18th, a crucial moment unfolded as British artillery fired relentlessly from the west at the Japanese positions. Intense bombardment rained down upon Japanese positions, complemented by RAF Hurri bombers strafing enemy positions on GPT Ridge. Witnessing the advancing infantry, accompanied by tanks and artillery support, brought a renewed sense of hope to the beleaguered defenders. The British 2nd Division, along with the 161 Brigade, advanced from the northwest of Garrison Hill, supported by tanks of the 33-Armored Corps. Together, they drove the Japanese out of their positions, bringing an end to the siege. Soon, convoys of Bren carriers, trucks, and ambulances followed suit, heralding the arrival of reinforcements. By midday, the 1/1st Punjabis, who had endured their own ordeal in Jotsoma, had established contact with the exhausted companies at Kohima, symbolizing the breaking of the siege. Finally, reinforcements from Dimapur broke through the perimeter, giving much-needed relief to the exhausted British and Indian troops after the intense battle(Jeffreys, 2013).

Amidst the chaos of battle, Japanese snipers persisted in their merciless assault, targeting the wounded as they were evacuated downhill for medical treatment. The deployment of tanks by the British proved to be a game-changer, shattering Japanese defenses in terrain

deemed impassable. Advancing relentlessly, tanks pounded enemy bunkers, inflicting heavy casualties and compelling a gradual withdrawal.

The appearance of tanks left an indelible mark on the Japanese psyche, far more ominous than the threat posed by aircraft. Captain Shosaku Kameya of the 3/58th Infantry Regiment recounted the harrowing encounter with enemy tanks on April 19th, as Japanese forces resorted to desperate measures, including suicide squads armed with magnetic mines and explosives(K. Tamayama et al., n.d.). Lieutenant Chozaburo Tomaru, the supply officer of the 138th Japanese Regiment, conceded a sense of defeat upon witnessing the formidable presence of tanks in the fray(F. K.-(No Title) & 2010, n.d.). The relief of Garrison Hill completed by April 20th. On the same day, Hurribombers launched a lethal bombing, supported by an artillery barrage, on Japanese positions dispersed across GPT Ridge and Jail Hill. While Garrison Hill and its defenders, comprising British and Indian forces, were relieved of the siege, Japanese forces remained entrenched on the remainder of Kohima Ridge.

The toll of battle weighed heavily on the garrison, with 600 casualties recorded alongside numerous sick and wounded(Lowry, 2009). Among the valiant defenders, the Assam Regiment suffered a profound loss of 36 officers and men amidst the 260 who stood steadfast since the siege's inception(Chasie & Fecitt, 2017b). Similarly, the Royal West Kents, who bravely advanced onto Kohima Ridge on the fateful morning of April 5th, bore the brunt of the conflict. Of the 446 who ventured forth, a mere 168 emerged unscathed, while the remainder, 278 soldiers, either perished or sustained grievous wounds during the relentless sixteen-day ordeal. Among the brave soldiers who fought at Garrison Hill, some were recognized for their exceptional courage. While 19 British and Indian regiments were honoured for their roles in the Battle of Kohima, only the Royal West Kents and the Assam Regiments received the special title 'Defence of Kohima(J. L.-(No Title) & 2004, n.d.).' The total number of Allied casualties during the siege on Garrison Hill, lasting from April 4th to April 20th, was around 1375. This number shows how intense and deadly the fighting was. Kohima was a turning point of the Burma Campaign and the Japanese never made any major land advance again(Edwards, 2009).

5.15. Clearance of Kohima

Despite the relief of Garrison Hill, the Japanese still held strong positions along most of the Kohima Ridge, including key locations like Kuki Piquet, DC's Bungalow, Jail Hill, Detail Hill, Supply Hill, GPT, Naga Village, and Aradura Spur. After the British Indian troops relieved Garrison Hill, the Japanese switched to a defensive stance. The subsequent clearance of Japanese forces from Kohima until the reopening of the Kohima-Imphal Road on June 22nd involved intense fighting, resulting in significant casualties on both sides. The soldiers faced appalling conditions, exacerbated by the onset of the monsoon season.

From April 21st to May 2nd, both sides consolidated their positions, leading to a stalemate with no territorial gains. Troops were prepared and moved for further assaults, resulting in positions being overrun and retaken, often involving fierce hand-to-hand combat. Between May 3rd and June 9th, British and Indian troops launched a full-scale offensive against Japanese positions. By mid-May, the Japanese began withdrawing from key positions, culminating in their abandonment of the Aradura Spur by June 6th, completing the clearance of Japanese forces from Kohima.

The Battle of Kohima officially ended with the clearing of roadblocks and the reopening of the Kohima-Imphal Road on June 22nd(L. A.-(No Title), n.d.). The task of clearing Japanese forces around Kohima and opening the road to Imphal fell upon the 2nd Division, 33rd Corps, and 161st Indian Brigades. Major General Grover, commander of the British 2nd Division, ordered the 4th Infantry Brigade to engage the Japanese at GPT Ridge to the south, while the 5th Infantry Brigade was tasked with clearing Japanese forces from Naga Village in the northeast. The remaining 6th brigade of the 2nd Division focused on clearing the centre, including FSD Hill and Jail Hill. The intensity of the fighting during this period is evident from Major Boshell's observations within the 6th Brigade:

To begin with I took over an area overlooking the Tennis Court... The lie of the land made it impossible to move by day because of Japanese snipers. We were in Kohima for three weeks. We were attacked every single night... They came in waves... Most nights they overran part of the battalion position, so we had to mount counter-attacks... Water was short and restricted to about one pint per man per day. So, we stopped shaving. Air supply was the key, but the steep terrain and narrow ridges meant that some of the drops went to the Japs.

My company went into Kohima over 100 strong and came out at about 60(Lyman, 2011).

The relentless onslaught of Japanese assaults inflicted heavy casualties, yet once the siege was broken, they shifted to a staunch defensive stance, exhibiting remarkable skill and determination in fortifying every bunker(Rooney, 2013). On April 20th, a pivotal moment occurred when British and Indian forces intercepted a fresh directive from Mutaguchi to Sato, commanding the deployment of a regiment from the 31st Division to Imphal. Simultaneously, near Merema village, Sato's orders to certain unit commanders regarding troop movements in accordance with Mutaguchi's directive were seized(Edwards, 2009). This intelligence emboldened the Allied forces to intensify their assaults on Japanese positions, thwarting Sato's ability to reinforce Imphal. By April 21st, Grover, spurred by superiors, hastened efforts to crush Japanese resistance in the Kohima region and eliminate roadblocks obstructing the path to Imphal. The urgency stemmed from mounting pressure to return American aircraft on loan to the RAF, foreseeing dire consequences for supplying beleaguered British and Indian troops at Imphal, reliant solely on aerial support at the time.

On April 22nd, another vital air drop delivered water and provisions to bolster British Indian positions. The Japanese persisted in their attacks on April 23rd but suffered substantial losses as wave after wave crashed upon Garrison Hill, resulting in the decimation of the equivalent of four out of seven attacking companies. Following this setback, Japanese assaults diminished in scale, with a shift towards prioritizing defensive operations(Swinson, 2015).

Stopford relocated his 33rd Corps headquarters from Jorhat to Dimapur on April 24th(Edwards, 2009). By this point, his forces significantly outnumbered the Japanese in their efforts to recapture Kohima. However, a stalemate persisted with neither side gaining nor yielding significant ground. British and Indian troops advanced from Zubza to Merema Ridge, navigating treacherous terrain via steep valleys. Each day brought intense combat, compelling the Japanese to adopt a more defensive posture as Allied reinforcements bolstered their ranks.

The Battle of Kohima posed immense challenges beyond facing a formidable adversary. The harsh, rugged terrain coupled with relentless rain rendered the battle exceedingly gruelling and harrowing for the soldiers. Lieutenant Horner, the signals officer of the 2nd

Royal Norfolks, 4th Infantry Brigade, encapsulated the essence of this struggle with his account:

The physical hammering one takes is difficult to understand. The heat, humidity, altitude and the slope of almost every foot of ground combine to knock hell out of the stoutest constitution. You gasp for air which doesn't seem to come, you drag your legs upwards till they seem reduced to the strength of matchsticks, you wipe the sweat out of your eyes... So, you stop, horrified to be prodded by the man behind you or cursed by an officer in front. You reached the top of the hill, to find it is false crest... all you can think of is the next halt(Colvin, 2012).

On April 28th, a fleeting assault by the Japanese air force rattled Zubza(Edwards, 2009). Amidst the battleground, corpses lay decaying, while the cramped conditions forced cookhouses and graves into uncomfortably close proximity. Despite the grim surroundings, British and Indian forces persisted, sustained by air drops from the Dakotas.

Mutaguchi withdrew his previous directive for Sato to dispatch a regiment-sized unit to Imphal on April 29th(F. K.-(No Title) & 2010, n.d.). By April 30th, a Stuart tank was strategically positioned in the DC Bungalow area(Edwards, 2009). Concurrently, Sato conveyed to Mutaguchi that the 31st Division had reached its breaking point, prompting inquiries about plans to vanquish Imphal(Lyman, 2011). As April drew to a close, a Japanese convoy arrived, bearing seventeen jeeps laden with 500 rounds of mountain gun ammunition, Sake, and cigarettes, but lacking essential sustenance(L. A.-(No Title), n.d.). Only on two occasions throughout the battle at Kohima did supplies materialize, both times devoid of staples like rice or salt. Consequently, soldiers found themselves compelled to forage for sustenance in nearby villages, further complicating the already arduous fight. On May 4th, Slim received a directive to return 79 transport aircraft by May 8th, heightening the urgency to capture Kohima and reopen the road to Imphal. Despite appeals from Sato to higher authorities regarding the gravity of the situation, no immediate action was taken(F. K.-(No Title) & 2010, n.d.). British Indian troops intensified their offensive, seizing Japanese positions along the Kohima ridge. On May 5th, a Japanese air raid was met with fierce resistance from small arms and anti-aircraft fire. British forces utilized tanks in assaults on FSD Hill and Kuki Piquet(Edwards, 2009).

Despite Allied advantages in resources, including tanks, artillery, and air superiority, the Japanese stubbornly retained control over significant portions of Kohima's major features. Arthur Swinson noted the relentless Japanese defense, despite reports of their dwindling numbers and ammunition shortages. The period from May 7th to the following three days marked the most intense phase of the battle, with the British, Gurkhas, and Indians facing fierce resistance. Despite severe ammunition shortages, the Japanese continued to repel attacks with relentless gunfire and grenades. By May 8th, British and Indian forces had secured Garrison Hill and parts of DC Bungalow, but the Japanese still held key positions(Edwards, 2009). However, by May 12th, Allied troops had gained control of GPT Ridge, prompting a Japanese withdrawal from DIS Hill. The arrival of tanks boosted Allied morale, but the Japanese persisted, even as their situation grew dire. By May 13th, British and Indian forces had seized control of the DC Bungalow sector, with subsequent gains on the tennis court and surrounding hills(F. K.-(No Title) & 2010, n.d.; L. A.-(No Title), n.d.).

On May 14th, another Japanese air raid targeted Jail Hill and met with British Indian anti-aircraft fire. Subsequent days saw sustained attacks on Naga Village, culminating in a concentrated RAF air strike on May 19th. Realizing defeat was inevitable, Sato sought permission to withdraw on May 25th due to ration shortages and heavy monsoon rains. Despite pleas for support, no aid arrived. By June 2nd, British and Indian troops finally overcame Japanese resistance in Naga Village, followed by the clearance of Aradura Spur on June 6th, marking the end of the Battle of Kohima.

As time wore on, the Japanese defense waned against the relentless pressure from British and Indian forces, who, with superior numbers and resources, gradually gained the upper hand. With dwindling supplies and no reinforcements forthcoming, the Japanese began withdrawing by mid-May. Captain Shosaku Kameyama revealed that orders were issued for the Japanese to retreat from Kohima Hills on May 13th and Aradura Hills on June 3rd. As Japanese troops vacated the area, additional British and Indian units from the 33rd Corps were deployed to reinforce and relieve the 2nd Division, along with the 33rd and 161st Indian Brigades. Bolstered by these reinforcements, the 2nd Division and other units launched efforts to clear the Japanese from the crucial Kohima-Imphal Road, laying the groundwork for the eventual lifting of the siege of Imphal(K. Tamayama et al., n.d.).

Despite the Japanese retreat from Kohima Ridge, they erected roadblocks at strategic locations such as Kigwema, Viswema, Mao Song Sang, and Maram, commanded by Major-General Miyazaki. These rear guards aimed to slow down the advancing British troops to facilitate the division's retreat (Swinson, 2015; F. K.-(No Title) & 2010, n.d.). British and Indian forces cleared Kigwema on June 8th and Viswema on June 14th after a five-day battle utilizing artillery, tanks, and machine-gun support. Subsequent progress towards Imphal saw Mao Song Sang fall on June 18th, and Maram cleared soon after. Finally, on June 22nd, British and Indian troops from Kohima and Imphal converged at Milestone 109, officially ending the 64-day Battle of Kohima and the siege of Imphal (Colvin, 2012; Edwards, 2009; L. A.-(No Title), n.d.).

The battle was marked by intense fighting and desperate hand-to-hand combat in inhospitable terrain, exacerbated by the monsoon. The principal weapons used by the British included howitzers, mortars, Bren guns, grenades, tanks, and machine guns, while the Japanese employed mortars, grenade launchers, machine guns, and artillery (Colvin, 2012; Edwards, 2009; Lyman, 2011; F. K.-(No Title) & 2010, n.d.). Japanese infantry effectively utilized grenade discharge projectors and noisy tactics to unnerve their enemies, although these tactics proved unsuccessful at Kohima. Mutaguchi's underestimation of enemy defensive skills and logistical shortcomings contributed to the Japanese defeat, while Allied superiority in logistics and communication played a crucial role (Drea, 2003).

The Battle of Kohima saw significant casualties on both sides, ultimately serving as the turning point of the Burma Campaign. Earl Mountbatten described it as a display of unparalleled heroism, akin to the British Indian 'Thermopylae'. (Figure 5.5)109

5.16. The INA's Role in the Japanese Offensive

During the Battle of Kohima in 1944, the Japanese were bolstered by the Indian National Army (INA) in their struggle against the British. The INA was initially formed in 1942, following the fall of Singapore, by Mohan Singh, a Sikh who served as the second-in-command of a battalion in the Punjab Regiment of the British Indian Army. Despite receiving substantial support from the Japanese, the INA disbanded in 1942. However, Subhas Chandra Bose, an influential Indian nationalist leader, revitalized the INA in 1943 with Japanese assistance. Bose, serving as the Commander-in-Chief of the INA, aligned

himself with the Japanese, endorsing their campaign against India. Japan, bolstered by Bose's support, felt confident in their plans to invade India.

Japan's 'Greater Asia Co-prosperity Sphere(Barker, n.d.)' was announced with the goal of liberating Asia from British colonialism. In alignment with this vision, Japan aimed to wrest India from British control, seizing the opportunity presented in the spring of 1944. Bose believed that Japanese aid could help India achieve independence from British rule, urging Indians to support the Japanese cause(Barker, n.d.). During his visit to Tokyo in 1943, it was proclaimed that Bose was second only to Mahatma Gandhi in the Indian independence movement. In a Tokyo press statement, Bose declared that a strong Japan was essential for Asia's revival and predicted the eventual defeat of Anglo-American forces, the dissolution of the British Empire, and India's liberation from British rule. Bose thus supported the Japanese offensive in India.

The INA comprised mainly Indian soldiers from the British Indian Army who had surrendered in Singapore, along with Indian civilians from Malaya, Burma, and Thailand. Determined to wrest control from the British and secure India's freedom, the INA was prepared to collaborate with Japan and Germany, despite ideological differences with the Congress Party led by Gandhi(M. A.-S. in History & 2007, 2007). To join the Japanese offensive, Bose arrived in Rangoon on January 7, 1944, with key cabinet members, taking steps to properly equip the INA. Bose insisted on the INA's full participation in the offensive, in line with an understanding with the Japanese Army's Chief of Staff in Tokyo(Toye et al., n.d.). He was dismayed by the Japanese proposal to assign the INA a minor role, insisting that the INA should lead the advance into India and that the first blood shed on Indian soil should be that of an INA member.

As the Japanese offensive commenced, the INA deployed its forces alongside three Japanese divisions—the 15th, 31st, and 33rd—acting as guides, spies, and interpreters. Lieutenant General Renya Mutaguchi, commander of the Japanese 15th Army, envisioned victory in India, bolstered by Bose's assurances to both Mutaguchi and Japanese Prime Minister Tojo that India would rise in rebellion once INA forces planted their flag on Indian soil. On March 7, 1944, Tokyo radio announced the Japanese 15th Army's attack on India had begun. The 31st Division, commanded by Lieutenant General Kotoku Sato, advanced across the Naga Hills in three columns, with INA contingents accompanying them on their historic 'March to Delhi' or 'Delhi Chalo.'

An agreement was forged between General Masakazu Kawabe, the Commander of the Burma Area Army, and Subhas Chandra Bose. According to this understanding, the Japanese Army and the INA would have equal status and work on a common strategy under a unified command, and the INA would be assigned an independent sector. No INA unit would operate with less than battalion strength, and the INA would function under its own military law. Additionally, the Indian tricolour would be the sole flag flying over liberated Indian territories(C. R. Rathee, 1969). With these terms settled, Bose, in consultation with military officers, decided to form a new brigade named the No. 1 Guerrilla Regiment. This regiment would be raised by selecting soldiers from the other three brigades: Gandhi, Azad, and Nehru. This new unit was later named the Subhas Brigade by the soldiers themselves, with Shah Nawaz Khan appointed as its commander. The brigade was meticulously organized, and soldiers received intensive spiritual and military training. A special operation group, known as the Bahadur Group, was also established to operate behind enemy lines(R. M.-(No Title) & 1962, n.d.).

Thus began the INA's historic 'Delhi Chalo' campaign. The Subhas Brigade was given independent charge by the Japanese Generals to advance towards Kohima with instructions to rapidly advance and cross the Brahmaputra into the heart of Bengal following the fall of Imphal.

Initially, the INA was disappointed as they were not placed at the forefront of the main Japanese army attacking India as previously agreed. Instead, they were assigned comparatively minor tasks. The Japanese General explained that this was to test the INA's efficiency, and if successful, they would be placed at the forefront of the main offensive. The INA proved their battle worthiness in the offensive carried out in the Haka-Falam region, demonstrating their military skills and efficiency. Satisfied with their performance, the Japanese issued orders for the main body of the Brigade to proceed to Kohima. Consequently, about 150 and 300 INA soldiers were left at Haka and Falam, respectively, with the rest marching towards Kohima(Gill, 2001).

In March 1944, the INA crossed the Indian frontier over a wide front spanning about 200 miles. The INA-Japanese soldiers, primarily foot soldiers without the support of artillery vehicles or air support, marched through the rugged mountains and jungles of the Naga Hills with extraordinary speed. At the northern end of the line, the Japanese 31st Division, along with the INA regiment, marched towards Kohima and engaged in a fierce battle. In

the weeks leading up to their substantial arrival in the villages, reconnaissance patrols from the INA and Japanese forces extensively traversed the Naga Hills, mapping out trails and identifying food sources. Lieutenant M.G. Mulkar, reflecting on these movements in his memoir dated April 3, 1944, noted, "We were traversing the Naga Hills. Here and there, we observed a unique form of farming—terrace cultivation on the hillsides. Naga villages are perched atop these hills." On April 7, he recorded, "We have laid siege to Kohima town. The fighting is intense and critical to our future success(KUMAR, 2006)."

Khumbo Angami, recalling the events at Kohima, described encountering several INA officers dressed in military uniforms who displayed the Indian national flag and various badges to the local people(F. K.-(No Title) & 2010, n.d.). At Phek, a villager recounted, "Indian officers guided the Japanese into our village, and when they spoke with our elders, they did not seem threatening." Sipohu Venuh from the same village mentioned, "I saw dark-skinned men (INA soldiers) accompanying the Japanese(R. L.-(No Title), n.d.)."

Subhas Chandra Bose was reported to have been in Ruzazho village, approximately 75 km from Kohima. An eyewitness, Poswuyi Swuro, claimed to have served as a dobashi (interpreter) for Bose. In Chesezu village, residents Vezo Swuro, Poswunyi, and Zhouhuyi Nyekha recalled meeting Bose during his stay. In Thenyizu village, not far from these locations, N. Theyo recounted witnessing Bose reprimanding two Japanese soldiers for taking rations without village permission. In Kigwema village, located 10 km from Kohima, Bose was reported to have camped during the Battle of Kohima. Viketu Kiso recalled being appointed as Bose's interpreter when the INA-Japanese forces camped in his village. Along the routes traversed by the INA and Japanese, similar stories are preserved in the oral history of the local people. Initially, the fighting in the Imphal-Kohima sector was primarily conducted by the Japanese, with the INA playing a supporting role. However, as the Japanese faced increasing pressure, they called upon the Subhas Brigade for assistance(C. R. Rathee, 1969). The INA's strategy focused on avoiding large-scale battles due to their limited arms, ammunition, and manpower. Their overarching plan was for INA units to advance towards Kohima and Imphal alongside Japanese forces. Once these locations fell, the INA was to push further, cross the Brahmaputra, and enter Bengal. As the INA-Japanese forces advanced through the Naga Hills, they overcame all opposing British outposts. By April 5, 1944, the battle for Kohima had begun in earnest, with the INA-Japanese forces closing in to within 600 meters of the

perimeter before their advance was halted. By then, they had captured most of the Kohima ridge, leaving the British garrison clinging precariously to the last vital piece of ground. In one area, only the width of the town's tennis court separated the two sides. The battle for Kohima featured some of the fiercest close-quarter fighting of the war, with the defensive perimeters of the two sides separated by just a few hundred meters. According to Robert Lyman, the defended area was reduced to just 350 square yards(Lyman, 2021).

Japanese troops were often accompanied by INA detachments who prowled the area, using loudspeakers to broadcast messages in English and Urdu, attempting to persuade Indian soldiers in the British Army to defect. They would announce, 'Hindustani ki jawan! Soldiers of India, the Japanese Army has surrounded you. Bring your rifle and come over to us. We are liberating India from the iniquities and tyrannies of British rule(C. P.-(No Title) & 1966, n.d.).' Despite these efforts, their attempts were unsuccessful. Women soldiers also accompanied the Japanese-INA forces, as noted by villagers in Jakhama who saw female soldiers among the troops. Despite various challenges, the INA posed a significant political and intelligence threat to the British. To counter this, the British labelled the INA as JIFS (Japanese Inspired Fifth Columnists or Japanese Indian Fighting Force) to undermine their nationalist image(F. K.-(No Title) & 2010, n.d.). They also established 'josh' (enthusiasm) units to boost troop morale. These 750 josh groups aimed to instill the doctrine that India must destroy the Japanese or be destroyed by them, preparing Indian units for potential encounters with armed JIFS in the field. The British refrained from revealing to the Nagas or the Indian public that Subhas Chandra Bose's liberation army was entering India to liberate the country, instead branding it an 'invasion(Chasie & Fecitt, 2017b).

The Azad Hind Dal was tasked with taking charge of conquered territories and managing them until a regular government was established. The tricolour flag was hoisted on the lofty mountaintops around Kohima. However, despite occupying much of Kohima, the Japanese-INA forces faced fierce resistance from the British, who clung to other strategic points in the area. Weeks of intense fighting gradually turned into a war of attrition. The British, with superior resources, were in a better position, while the Japanese-INA supply lines became inoperative due to the monsoon and enemy air strikes. Until mid-April 1944, only the first regiment of the INA's 1st Division had seen action. It was only on April 30 that the 2nd Regiment, or Gandhi Brigade, was brought to the front and engaged in action

for the first time at Pallel. The 3rd Regiment, or Azad Brigade, was not deployed until the end of May, by which time the battle was nearly lost for Japan with the onset of the monsoon. By the time regular INA troops arrived at Kohima in late May, the military situation for the Japanese forces had significantly deteriorated. Despite their valiant efforts, the INA could not hold their positions and fend off repeated British attacks(Pandit, 1988).

By early July 1944, the Gandhi Brigade's frontline strength had greatly diminished due to battle casualties, disease, and starvation. The British, aware of the INA's condition, launched a fierce attack, encircling the entire brigade, which suffered heavy losses and had to withdraw(R. M.-(No Title) & 1962, n.d.). As the war intensified, the condition of the Japanese-INA soldiers worsened due to a lack of supplies. Discipline broke down, and there were reports of rape, murder, and maltreatment by INA soldiers, which earned the resentment of the Nagas, who had initially welcomed the INA-Japanese but watched their retreat silently. The INA-Japanese forces' greater pressure on local Nagas for guides and support led to further disappointment and resentment among the people.

Despite their bravery and reckless courage, the INA was outgunned and outnumbered. A.J. Barker noted that the plan for the 'march on Delhi' was a daring gamble that nearly succeeded but was ultimately defeated by superior organization, manpower, equipment, and the imaginative use of air power by the Allied forces. In the Battle of Kohima, while individual Japanese soldiers fought to the death, INA members often surrendered after a token struggle(Barker, n.d.). If the Japanese 31st Division had captured Dimapur at the outset, it would have left Imphal without food for the British Indian soldiers during the INA-Japanese siege. Field Marshal William Slim took advantage of the situation to replenish his forces, while the INA-Japanese Army paid dearly for the lack of initiative by its field commander(C. R. Rathee, 1969). However, capturing Dimapur would have been risky due to British air superiority and the potential for easier reinforcement. The INA-Japanese might not have survived the retreat, even if they had achieved a short-term victory. For example, the rice dump at Naga village in Kohima was bombed, and similar actions could have been taken in Dimapur if the British realized that the INA-Japanese were likely to capture the food dump(Chasie & Fecitt, 2017a).

Before their withdrawal, the commander of the INA Brigade had established control over approximately 200 square miles of Indian territory, which was administered by the Azad

Hind Dal. Ruzazho village, now in the Phek district, was recognized as the first INA-administered area in the Naga Hills. Reluctant to retreat from these liberated areas, the INA commander held a conference with local Naga chiefs, likely in the Manipur hills near Ukhrul, explaining their predicament. The Nagas pleaded with them not to leave, but with their regiments depleted by sickness and lacking rations, the INA and Japanese troops had no choice but to withdraw to Tamu. Despite their reluctance, the INA suffered heavy casualties during the retreat, with troops bitterly complaining about being used as porters by the Japanese(F. K.-(No Title) & 2010, n.d.).

The INA faced its greatest hardship during the retreat from Kohima. Rations and medicines were completely exhausted, forcing the men to scavenge small quantities of paddy from abandoned Naga villages to survive. Shah Nawaz Khan described this retreat as one of the most challenging faced by any army, with torrential rains washing away tracks and men wading through knee-deep mud. Exhausted soldiers and casualties of both Japanese and Indian origin littered the road due to starvation, disease, and other hardships. Lieutenant M.G. Mulkar noted in his memoir that on June 25, 1944, they began their retreat from the Kohima area, compelled by the relentless rain that made the Kohima-Imphal Road impassable(KUMAR, 2006).

The retreat of the INA-Japanese troops from Kohima also shattered the dreams of Naga nationalist Phizo, who initially believed that aiding the INA-Japanese would help liberate the Naga Hills. Phizo, who was in Burma at the time, had entered into an agreement with Bose, guiding the INA-Japanese through the Naga Hills in exchange for Bose's promise of recognizing Naga independence once the British were defeated(Horam, 1988; Nai, 2022). However, with dwindling supplies and their supply lines disrupted by the monsoon and Allied air superiority, the INA-Japanese forces began their withdrawal as the 15th Army and Burma Area Army also retreated. They suffered significant losses of men and equipment during the retreat, leading to the disbandment of several units.

5.17. End of the battle

At the conclusion of the Imphal-Kohima campaign, Japanese commanders came to realize the futility of their efforts as early as May. Despite warnings from senior officers like Lieutenant General Hikosaburo Hata, Prime Minister Hideki Tojo dismissed concerns, leading to a continuation of the operation. Lieutenant General Kawabe's firsthand

assessment in late May highlighted the grim reality facing Japanese forces, though many officers downplayed the severity of their situation. A tacit agreement between Mutaguchi and Kawabe on the impossibility of success emerged during a meeting in June. Despite illness, Kawabe persisted with futile attacks(Sun & 2016, n.d.-a).

Mutaguchi's orders for renewed assaults were futile, as his divisions lacked the capability to comply. Finally, on July 3rd, Mutaguchi conceded defeat and ordered a retreat. Japanese forces, ravaged by casualties and exhaustion, abandoned their equipment and retreated to the Chindwin River. The Allies reclaimed Tamu in July, revealing the grim aftermath of the battle, with hundreds of unburied Japanese dead and many severely wounded left behind(McKelvie, 2021b).

The Japanese suffered significant losses, totaling 54,879 casualties, predominantly due to non-combat factors such as starvation, disease, and exhaustion. In contrast, the Allies sustained 12,603 casualties. This defeat marked a significant turning point in the campaign, underscoring the challenges faced by Japanese forces and the resilience of the Allied defense.

5.18. Japanese retreat

The turning point in the conflict stemmed from the Japanese dwindling supplies. Initially, the 31st Division embarked on its operation with a mere three weeks' worth of provisions. Once depleted, the Japanese were forced to subsist on meagre rations scavenged from local villages, as their attempts to forage in the Naga Hills were thwarted by British forces(Colvin, 2012).

Despite capturing a vast warehouse in Naga Village stocked with rice, the Japanese found their sustenance cut short by a swift bombing raid that obliterated their food supply. The British 23rd LRP Brigade effectively severed Japanese supply lines, leaving them devoid of essential provisions. By mid-May, starvation plagued Sato's troops, exacerbated by what he perceived as neglect from higher command. Frustrated by contradictory orders and a lack of support, Sato contemplated a strategic retreat to facilitate resupply efforts. On May 25, Sato informed Fifteenth Army HQ of his intent to withdraw by 01 June unless supplies arrived. Disregarding orders to hold positions, Sato's decision to retreat marked a rare deviation from Japanese military protocol. This allowed Allied forces to gain a

strategic advantage, outflanking Japanese positions and pushing southward. Despite Miyazaki's efforts to impede Allied progress, Japanese forces found themselves in dire straits, lacking sustenance as they retreated southward. Many succumbed to weakness, unable to proceed beyond Ukhrul or Humine. The Indian XXXIII Corps pursued the retreating Japanese, with the British 2nd Division advancing along the main road while the 7th Indian Division navigated rugged terrain eastward. The link-up at Milestone 109 signaled the end of the siege of Imphal, with vital supplies swiftly replenishing Allied forces(H. Katoch, 2018). (Figure 5.6)

Throughout the Battle of Kohima, casualties mounted on both sides. British and Indian forces suffered 4,064 casualties, while the Japanese incurred at least 5,764 battle losses in the Kohima region alone, with many more perishing from disease, starvation, or self-inflicted harm in the aftermath(C. K.-A. History & 2019, n.d.).

5.19. Sufferings of the Axis soldiers

As the Japanese soldiers retreated from Kohima, their conditions rapidly deteriorated, culminating in a dire plight characterized by profound deprivation and physical debilitation. Devoid of adequate shelter to shield them from the relentless rain, their footwear deteriorated to the point of being bound with grass. Compounded by the absence of ammunition for their rifles, the soldiers were compelled to traverse treacherous terrain, leaning on makeshift supports to bolster their weakened frames. In instances where the infirm voiced their suffering, callous responses from the medical corps epitomized the harsh reality faced by these men, threatening abandonment over expressions of discomfort(K. Tamayama et al., n.d.).

By the third week of June, casualties within the 31st Division had soared, with 7,315 men either killed, wounded, or succumbing to their injuries. The attrition continued unabated as the soldiers pressed onwards towards the Chindwin, grappling with starvation and malnutrition amidst the gruelling conditions. The landscape bore witness to the harrowing toll of the retreat, strewn with the bodies of fallen comrades, some stripped of their clothing by desperate peers. The once-paved route now resembled a quagmire, cluttered with discarded arms and ammunition, while those tasked with bearing stretchers were themselves emaciated and fatigued(Swinson, 2015). Accounts from Japanese sources vividly depict the harrowing circumstances endured by the retreating forces. Exposed to

incessant rainfall, the corpses lining the path deteriorated rapidly, reduced to skeletal remains by the elements. Despite their efforts to navigate the terrain with the aid of support sticks, the soldiers repeatedly stumbled upon the rocky and root-laden ground, exacerbating their physical distress. As they pressed onward, sustenance became increasingly scarce, compelling them to resort to consuming bamboo roots and even resorting to the flesh of horses for nourishment. The toll exacted by prolonged exposure to such dire conditions manifested not only in physical debilitation but also in a palpable erosion of morale among the troops. Instances of soldiers discarding their weapons and engaging in disputes over limited provisions underscored the pervasive despair that permeated the ranks. Despite their youthful vigor, the soldiers appeared as aged specters, their faculties diminished by the relentless trials of their ordeal(K. Tamayama et al., n.d.).

Yet, amidst the desolation, glimmers of hope persisted, as the promise of respite in Sittaung buoyed the spirits of many. However, such aspirations were often met with bitter disappointment, serving as a poignant reminder of the stark realities of war and the unforgiving nature of their circumstances. To quote Marayama:

The field hospital on the way to Sittaung was terrible. Patients kept flowing into it before others could be transported to the rear. Only a few men were under cover. Most of them were lying outside in the jungle or slung in hammocks from the trees. All that the men had to cover themselves with was an overcoat, and they would shiver with cold. Many of the men whose arms or legs had been amputated were so gone that you could not tell whether they were alive or dead(K. Tamayama et al., n.d.).

In the midst of their dire circumstances, Japanese soldiers confronted with incapacitating injuries and the bleak prospect of recovery often resorted to self-inflicted death, employing grenades or rifles to end their suffering(Swinson, 2015; F. K.-(No Title) & 2010, n.d.). Such acts became tragically routine, with medics occasionally administering lethal injections to alleviate the agony of those beyond hope. Instances of collective suicide, wherein pairs of soldiers embraced while detonating grenades placed between them, became known as ‘double suicides’ among the Japanese ranks(K. Tamayama et al., n.d.).

The transportation of wounded soldiers to Chindwin was fraught with anguish, as they endured agonizing journeys either on horse-drawn sledges or by stumbling through the

rain-drenched terrain, clutching a stick in one hand and a bowl of rice in the other. Those unable to bear the torment of their untreated wounds and the pangs of hunger resorted to beseeching passersby for the means to end their lives, their emaciated forms beset by writhing maggots and encroaching white worms. The grim procession of suffering along the retreat route earned it the moniker 'Human Remains Highway,' a somber appellation reflecting the pervasive presence of scattered corpses. Fergal Keane aptly captured this macabre thoroughfare in his depiction of the 'Road of Bones,' evoking the haunting image of over 5,000 Japanese soldiers succumbing to exhaustion on a single path. C.E. Lucas Phillip further underscored the profound degradation experienced by the Japanese forces, describing them as 'enfeebled, half-starved, and dispirited,' their once indomitable spirit eclipsed by the relentless onslaught of adversity (C. P.-(No Title) & 1966, n.d.; F. K.-(No Title) & 2010, n.d.).

The retreating Japanese forces found themselves relentlessly pursued by advancing British divisions from Kohima and Imphal, as well as by the formidable presence of the Royal Air Force (RAF) and Long-Range Penetration (LRP) Brigades, alongside the resurgent guerrilla activities of V Force. Reports from V Force headquarters in July documented instances of significant Japanese casualties, including one hundred soldiers drowned while attempting to ford a river and a further twelve slain by local hill tribes exacting vengeance upon the retreating army (F. K.-(No Title) & 2010, n.d.).

Arthur Swinson aptly characterized the Battle of Kohima as inflicting upon the Japanese Army its most profound defeat, compelling a desperate retreat under dire circumstances. The imagery of the 31st Division, in its defeated state, evoked comparisons to a spectral legion as it trudged wearily towards the Chindwin. The profound impact of defeat lingered palpably, exemplified by Colonel Kuniji Kato's steadfast refusal, twenty-one years hence, to broach the subject of Kohima, a testament to the enduring bitterness of defeat. Despite the overarching catastrophe, individual Japanese soldiers persisted in their struggle, displaying a steadfast preference for death on the battlefield or from starvation over surrender. Suicide emerged as a prevalent recourse for those incapacitated or unable to continue fighting, whether by firearm, blade, or the clutching of grenades to their person. Surrender, perceived as an intolerable dishonour, was anathema to the prevailing ethos instilled within Japanese military culture, wherein martyrdom in service to the emperor was venerated above all (Swinson, 2015).

According to the observations of William Slim, the Japanese exhibited an excessive boldness and rigidity that ultimately contributed to their downfall in battle. The repercussions of such failures were swift, with General Sato relieved of command of the 31st Division on July 7th for insubordination. Japanese accounts, however, attributed fault to Sato's superior, Mutaguchi, implicating both the deficiencies of the initial strategic plan and the fractious relationship between the two commanders. Sato's call for a court martial to vindicate his actions and address grievances against the 15th Army Headquarters was thwarted by a declaration of mental incapacitation, orchestrated by Lieutenant General Masakazu Kawabe (Swinson, 2015).

The staggering losses incurred by the Japanese at Imphal and Kohima precipitated a crippling diminution of their defensive capabilities in Burma against Allied incursions. A retrospective assessment by a Japanese commentator underscored the magnitude of these twin defeats, characterizing them as unparalleled nadirs in the annals of military history.

The persistence of Japanese military engagement during this period can be attributed in part to the ideological underpinnings of Bushido, the revered code of conduct imbued with a profound reverence for the emperor. Bushido espoused an ethos of unwavering loyalty and selflessness, epitomizing the samurai spirit, characterized by an ethos of non-materialism and unconditional allegiance to the imperial throne. Even amidst the spectre of defeat and the allure of desertion, the entrenched cultural mores left little room for dissent or retreat. The pervasive belief in the reputed savagery of the Nagas, coupled with the ominous threat of retribution from the feared Kempeitai, effectively foreclosed any avenue of escape for beleaguered Japanese soldiers. The Japanese authorities, cognizant of the paramount importance of ideological fortification, sought to augment the allure of martyrdom by promising certain benefits in the afterlife. Propaganda efforts underscored the transcendental significance of sacrificing one's life in service to the emperor, perpetuating the notion that death in battle conferred eternal glory and immortality (C. P.-(No Title) & 1966, n.d.). Such indoctrination, coupled with the relentless demands imposed upon soldiers, disregarded the constraints of conventional human compassion, as evidenced starkly in the Battle of Kohima.

For the Japanese combatants, imbued with a fervent belief in the divine sanctity of their cause, warfare assumed a sacrosanct character. All conflicts were sanctified as holy endeavours, waged in service of the divine Emperor, with death in his name heralding

ascension to the ranks of the deified. This sacralised conception of warfare, compounded by entrenched notions of racial and cultural superiority, fostered a dangerous hubris that blinded Japanese strategists to the formidable capabilities of their adversaries. Consequently, this overconfidence precipitated fatal misjudgements, ultimately contributing to the decisive British victory in the conflict.

In retrospect, a confluence of factors converged to secure the resounding defeat of the Japanese forces in the Battles of Kohima and Imphal. The decimation suffered by the Japanese 15th Army proved irrecoverable, marking a pivotal turning point in the trajectory of the conflict. Approximately 60% of the 15th Army perished during the tumultuous retreat from Imphal and Kohima. Out of the initial 65,000 personnel who traversed the Chindwin in March, the 15th Japanese Army incurred staggering losses, with 30,000 fatalities and 23,000 wounded, while a mere 600 capitulated as prisoners of war. The auxiliary support and administrative cadre of the 15th Army sustained an additional 15,000 casualties, underscoring the magnitude of the toll exacted by the campaign. In stark contrast, the 14th Army incurred a total of 16,700 casualties throughout the engagements in Imphal and Kohima (Colvin, 2012; Lyman, 2021; Swinson, 2015; C. P.-(No Title) & 1966, n.d.).

The British and Allied forces, bolstered by a strategic influx of reinforcements in personnel and materiel, as well as by critical air support, emerged as decisive factors in tilting the balance of power in their favour. The judicious leadership of Lieutenant General Slim further catalysed the Allied resurgence, masterfully orchestrating operations to exploit vulnerabilities within the Japanese ranks. The triumph at the Battle of Kohima heralded the dawn of a sustained period of victory for the British in WW II, cementing an unbroken string of successes henceforth. Conversely, the defeat in Manipur and Naga Hills precipitated the commencement of a precipitous decline for the Japanese Empire, marking the furthest extent of its westward advance. This decisive engagement irrevocably sealed the fortunes of both imperial powers, embodying a watershed moment in the annals of military history.

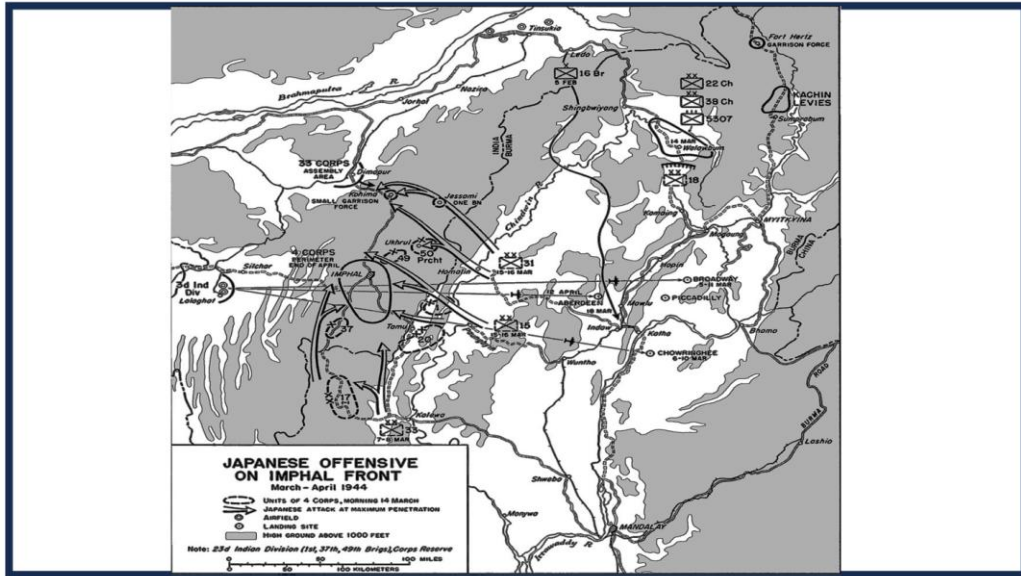


Figure 5.1: The Japanese Offensive in Northeast India, named as 'Operation U Go', 1944.

(Photo Courtesy: Imperial War Museum (IWM), UK)

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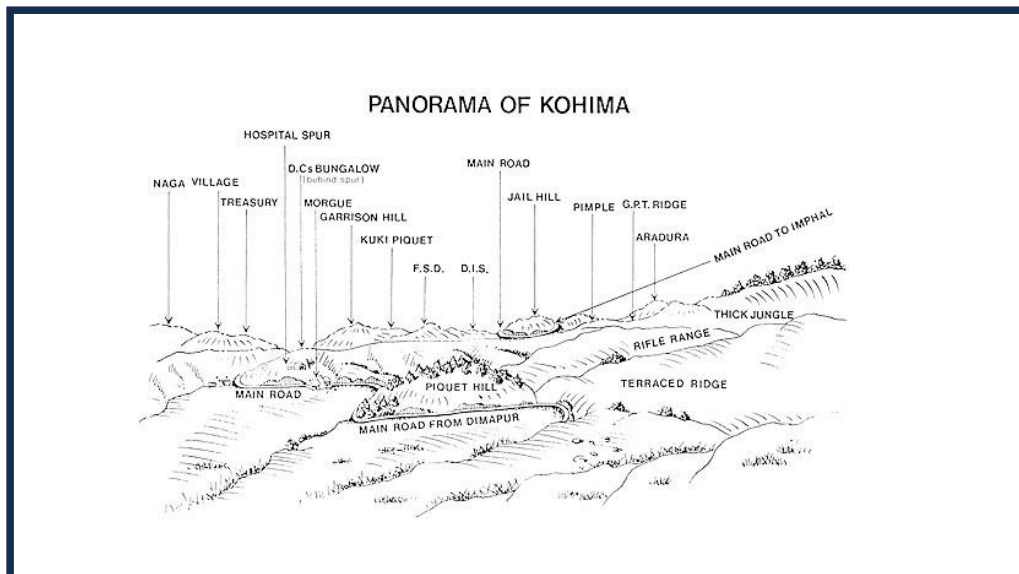


Figure 5.2: The panoramic layout of Kohima, 1944.

(Photo Courtesy: Imperial War Museum (IWM), UK)

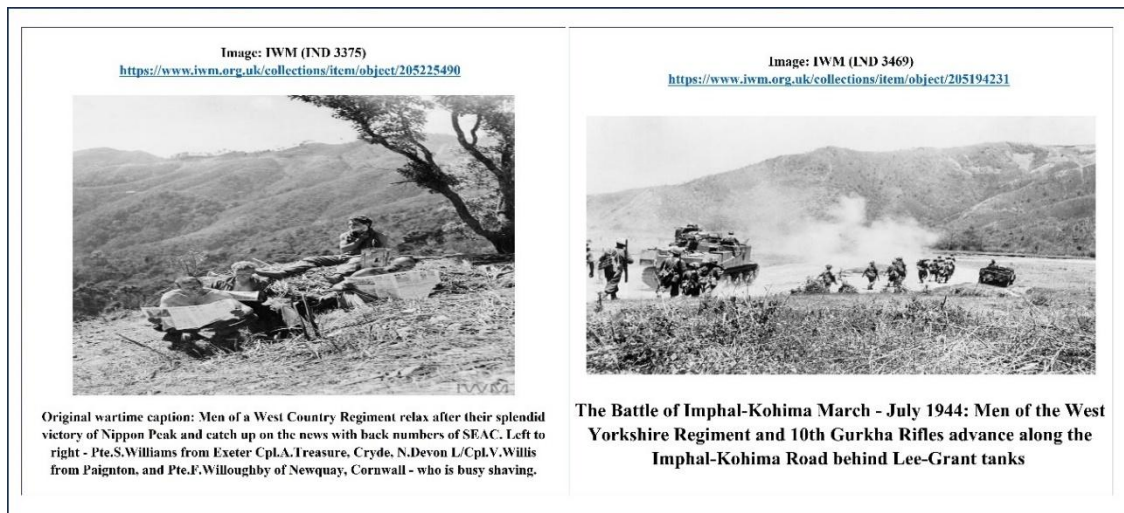


Figure 5.3: Fierce Engagements in the Manipur Region: A Crucial Theatre of War

(Photo Courtesy: Imperial War Museum (IWM), UK)

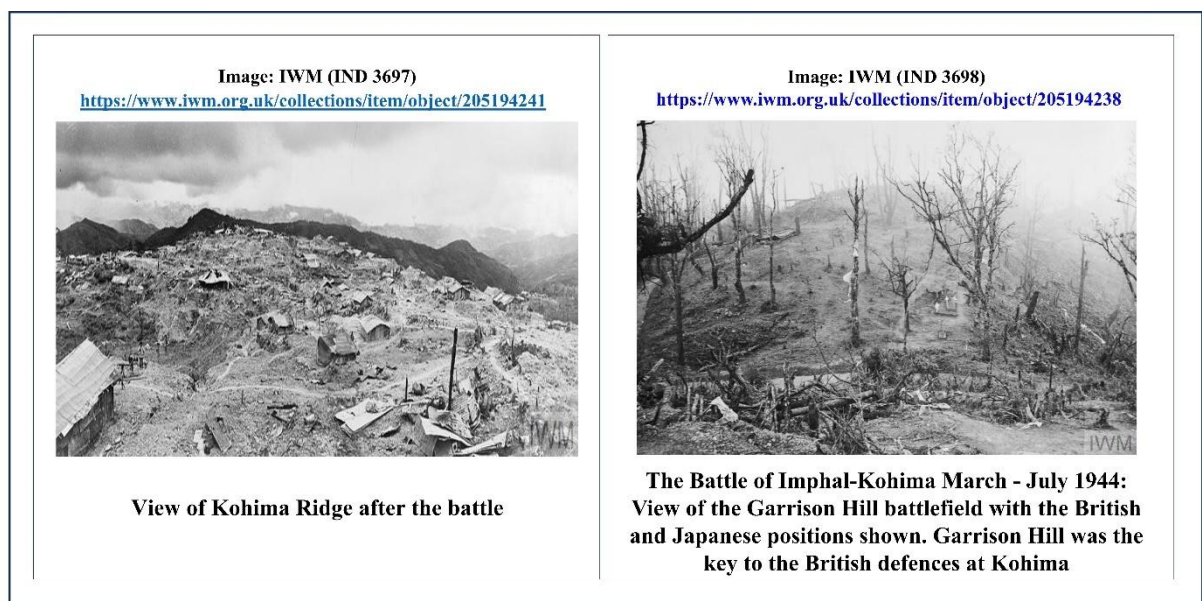


Figure 5.4: The Garrison Hill Battlefield: British and Japanese Positions after the Offensive

(Photo Courtesy: Imperial War Museum (IWM), UK)



Figure 5.5: Lord Mountbatten's Introduction to the Naga People (L) and the Devastated Tennis Court at the District Commissioner's Bungalow after the Battle of Imphal-Kohima(R)

(Photo Courtesy: Imperial War Museum (IWM), UK)



Figure 5.6: The Link-Up at Milestone 109: The 14th Army Breaks the Japanese Siege of Imphal

(Photo Courtesy: Imperial War Museum (IWM), UK)