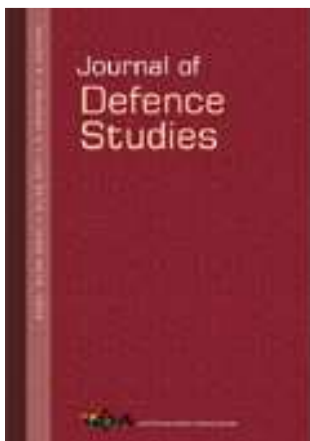


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The Battle of Imphal March–July 1944

*Hemant Singh Katoch**

The year 2014 is the 70th anniversary of the Battle of Imphal. To mark the occasion, this article looks at who fought it; how and where the fighting unfolded in Manipur; how it was a battle fought in the air as well; and the link with the INA and the Chindits. It also notes the many reminders of the Second World War in Manipur today and concludes with a brief overview of the state's overall experience of the war. The article aims, in effect, to introduce the reader to the Battle of Imphal, an extraordinary event in India's history that has received little to no attention till date.

The state of Manipur in India's North-East was a key battleground during the Second World War. A quiet corner of the Raj until then, in 1942, it suddenly found itself on the frontier between the Japanese in Burma (now Myanmar) and the British in India. It turned into a massive battlefield in 1944 when the Imperial Japanese Army, together with Indian National Army (INA) units, launched Operation U Go, with its main objective of capturing Imphal, Manipur's capital. The period from March to July of that year saw fierce fighting take place across the state in what is called the Battle of Imphal.

The year 2014 marks the 70th anniversary of the battle. This commemorative article revisits the Battle of Imphal, an extraordinary event

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in modern Indian history that has not received the attention it rightfully deserves. It looks at the participants, the mode and spatial aspects of the fighting, and, finally, the link with the INA and the Chindits. The article covers the many reminders of the Second World War that dot Manipur and concludes with a brief reference to the state's overall experience of the war.

BATTLES OF IMPHAL AND KOHIMA

The fighting around Imphal, and in Kohima in Nagaland (known jointly as the Battles of Imphal and Kohima), was the turning point in the Burma Campaign of the Second World War. It was at Imphal–Kohima that the Japanese invasion of India and march through Asia was stopped, with the British-led allies subsequently driving them out of Burma in 1945. Although estimates vary, it is clear that more than 30,000 Japanese soldiers died due to fighting or disease in the greatest defeat on land in Japan's history.¹

British military historian Robert Lyman describes the importance of the twin battles: 'It is clear that Kohima/Imphal was one of the four great turning-point battles in the Second World War, when the tide of war changed irreversibly and dramatically against those who initially held the upper hand.'² The battles at Stalingrad, El Alamein and in the Pacific between the US and Japanese navies were the other three. In April 2013, the Battles of Imphal and Kohima were together named 'Britain's Greatest Battle' by the National Army Museum in the United Kingdom (UK).

THE WARRING SIDES

Involved in the Battle of Imphal were more than 120,000 men of the British Army, including a mix of Gurkhas, Indians and the British. They made up the Imphal-based 4th Corps of the British 14th Army, which initially consisted of three infantry divisions—the 17th, 20th and 23rd Indian Divisions—as well as the 50th Indian Parachute Brigade and the 254th Indian Tank Brigade. Later, two brigades from the 5th Indian Division and one from the 7th Indian Division were flown to Imphal from the Arakan (present-day Rakhine State in Myanmar) in March and May 1944. The British also had in place the intelligence-gathering V Force in the mountains to the east/north-east and west/south-west of Imphal.

On the Japanese side in Manipur were around 70,000 men, including two divisions—the 15th and the 33rd—of its 15th Army. Over 6,000 men

from the INA's 1st Division also participated in the Battle of Imphal.³ This included the Gandhi and Azad Brigades, part of the Subhash Brigade, as well as INA Special Groups attached to the Japanese divisions.

THE FIGHTING IN MANIPUR

The battle involved Japanese and INA units attacking Manipur from three broad directions in March 1944: the 15th Division from the north/north-east; Yamamoto Force (part of the 33rd Division) from the south-east; and the 33rd Division from the south/south-west.⁴ The British had always planned to withdraw their two forward divisions deployed along the India–Burma border—the 20th Indian Division at Tamu and the Kabaw Valley and the 17th Indian Division at Tiddim—to the edges of the Imphal Valley at the first sign of a Japanese attack.

The idea was to fight the latter in conditions favourable to the British. Despite some scares, this was ultimately achieved as the Japanese were forced to fight at the end of a long and precarious supply line extending all the way back over the mountains to the Chindwin River in Burma. Confronted with mounting logistical difficulties, the onset of the monsoon and a better trained and supported—medically and from the air—opponent, the Japanese attack failed and its forces, together with INA units, were forced to return to Burma by July.

It is not easy to describe the flow of the Battle of Imphal as the fighting was spread out across Manipur and involved simultaneous actions in several sectors. In his memoir, *Defeat into Victory*, General (Gen.) William J. Slim, Commander of the British 14th Army, notes:

Like unevenly spaced spokes of a wheel, six routes converged on to the Imphal plain to meet at the hub, Imphal itself.... It was by these that the Japanese strove to break into the plain. The fighting all round its circumference was continuous, fierce, and often confused as each side manoeuvred to outwit and kill.⁵

Perhaps then the simplest way to understand the Battle of Imphal is to look at what happened on each of the said spokes.

The Imphal–Kohima Road

This road was in 1944—and remains so even today—Manipur's lifeline and main connection to the outside world. On 29 March 1944, the road was cut by the Japanese, who then reached as far as Sekmai, before the British began to push back. One of the main battles on the Japanese



Figure 1 A historic moment. Indians from Imphal and British from Kohima meet as 4 and 33 Corps link-up at milestone 109 on the Imphal-Kohima road. Jemadar Karnail Singh of 7 Light Cavalry shakes hands with Major A.C.T. Brotherton, a staff officer of 33 Corps, June 1944

Source: USI CAFHR (USI Centre for Armed Forces Historical Research), New Delhi.

advance down the road took place at Kanglatongbi, where the Indian Army has erected a war memorial.

On the British side, it was the 5th Indian Division, commanded by Major General (Maj. Gen.) Harold Briggs, which led the British effort to open the road northwards. On the Japanese side was the 15th Division, commanded by Lieutenant General (Lt. Gen.) Masafumi Yamauchi, which had the objective of invading Imphal from the north.

The fight to open up the road northwards from Sekmai was a slow, difficult one. The Japanese had taken up defensive positions in the hills overlooking the road, each of which had to be prised from them. Giving a sense of the fighting from a British perspective, Lyman writes:

The battle for the road consisted of many small actions repeated, seemingly endlessly, often at section, platoon or sometimes company level. A hill, defile or bridge would be isolated and attacked in the traditional way by artillery if available (given the grave shortages by this time), by battalion 3 inch mortars, by Hurribombers or

Vengeances, possibly a Lee Grant or Stewart tank firing main armament from the road, but principally by infantry closing on the enemy bunkers with bayonet and grenade.⁶

The Imphal–Kohima Road was not opened until 22 June 1944, when men of the 2nd British Division coming from Kohima and those of the 5th Indian Division from Imphal met at Milestone 109 near Kangpokpi.⁷

The Iril River Valley

The Iril River valley runs almost parallel to the Imphal–Kohima Road. The two are separated by a collection of hills. According to Lyman, these hills, bound by Molvom in the north and Mapao in the south, became, during the Battle of Imphal, ‘a Japanese defensive arena par excellence’.⁸ The 5th Indian Division was active west of the Iril River, while to its east were the British formations covering the Ukhrul Road. As with the Imphal–Kohima Road, the British faced the Japanese 15th Division in this sector. After the initial thrust by the Japanese, aimed at capturing Imphal, the bulk of the subsequent fighting consisted of British efforts to dislodge the former from the area. The hill known as Nungshigum, as well those around Molvom and Mapao, were some of the major battlefields here.

The Battle of Nungshigum, from 7–15 April 1944, was the iconic battle of this sector. It involved a struggle for the recapture of Nungshigum massif from the Japanese, which was the closest they ever came to Imphal. The British used a combination of armour, artillery and infantry in the battle, together with support from the air. Gen. Slim gives a riveting description of the fighting:

On the 13th [of April, 1944], while Hurribombers, their guns blazing, dived almost into the treetops, and tanks, winched up incredible slopes, fired point-blank into bunker loopholes, our infantry stormed both peaks [of Nungshigum]—and held them. The Japanese grimly defended their positions until the last men still fighting were bombed or bayoneted in their last foxholes.⁹

Casualties were heavy in the battle, with Lyman estimating that some 250 men were killed on the Japanese side alone.

The Ukhrul Road

The Ukhrul Road and its environs saw continuous action from the second half of March to July 1944. While the Japanese 15th Division was again active here, the area was also affected by the 31st Division that was en route

to Kohima—especially in the Battle of Sangshak (present-day Shangshak) and in Jessami. Facing the Japanese were British formations that were rotated on several occasions over the four-month period. In March 1944, the 50th Indian Parachute Brigade and one battalion of the 23rd Indian Division were deployed in this sector. By the end of the month, the 5th Indian Division arrived here almost straight from the Arakan in Burma. In mid-April, the 23rd Indian Division took over the Ukhrul Road; they in turn were finally replaced by the 20th Indian Division in mid-May.

The Battle of Sangshak, from 22–26 March 1944, was the iconic battle of this sector. It pitted the 50th Indian Parachute Brigade, which had only recently arrived in Manipur, against the much larger bulk of the 58th Regiment of the Japanese 31st Division, as well as elements of the 15th Division. The vastly outnumbered British forces held out for several days in the mountain village of Sangshak against wave upon wave of Japanese attacks, thereby delaying the latter's march towards Kohima and Imphal. This gave just enough time for the 4th Corps in Imphal to reorganize themselves; kept the Imphal–Kohima Road open for a few more vital days; and allowed the 5th Indian Division to be flown into Imphal from the Arakan and straight to this sector. As Brett-James and Evans noted: ‘The defenders of Sangshak had made a fine contribution towards the successful outcome of the battle [of Imphal-Kohima].’¹⁰

Another major battle in this sector took place from 1–8 July 1944 at Ukhrul, where the remnants of the Japanese 15th and 31st Divisions (returning from Kohima) had gathered to make their last stand in Manipur. According to Slim:

By July 1, Ukhrul was encircled. The 7th [Indian] Division attacked from the west and north, the 20th [Indian] Division closed in from the south and south-east, and 23 LRP Brigade [the Chindits] repeated its old role of cutting the escape routes to the east.¹¹

All of Ukhrul was in British hands by 8 July, while the remainder of the Japanese forces were in full retreat towards the Chindwin.

The Tamu–Palel Road

Perhaps the most stirring introduction to the fighting in this sector is by Brett-James and Evans. They write:

‘Nippon Hill’—‘Sita’—‘Crete East and West’—‘Scraggy’—‘Gibraltar and Malta’. These were the names which went to make up the Shenam Saddle position. They are hills unknown to the outside



Figure 2 Shenam Saddle

Source: Hemant Singh Katoch.

world, but they will remain always in the memories of those who fought there. They were the scene of some of the most ferocious fighting of the whole war, and hundreds and hundreds of British, Indian, Gurkha and Japanese soldiers lost their lives on these hills which changed hands time and again as counter-attack followed attack. At the outset clothed with jungle, they became completely bare except for shattered tree trunks.¹²

On the British side, the 20th Indian Division (minus one brigade sent as reserve to Imphal) was active in this sector from mid-March to mid-May 1944. It was commanded by Maj. Gen. Douglas Gracey. It was subsequently replaced by the 23rd Indian Division commanded by Maj. Gen. Ouvry Roberts. They faced the ‘Yamamoto Force’, so named after Maj. Gen. Yamamoto, the commander of the Japanese 33rd Division’s infantry. He also had under him most of the division’s medium artillery, tanks and mechanized transport, and 2 battalions of the Japanese 15th Division. On his left and right flanks were the Gandhi and Azad Brigades of the INA respectively.

The fighting on this sector involved repeated attempts by Yamamoto Force to get past the British defensive positions around the Shenam Pass/Saddle en route to Imphal. The British defences held, but only after months of fighting in conditions likened to the Somme in the First World War. As on other sectors, one of the hardest parts was to dislodge the tenacious Japanese from their bunkers once the British went on the offensive to clear out the area (which was completed by end-July). Lyman writes: ‘...jungle-topped hills became bare from the shell fire and the

monsoon turned positions, often only yards apart, into a muddy morass of indescribable horror and ugliness. Once dug in, the Japanese had to be grenaded out, bunker by bunker. Otherwise they were immovable.¹³

Besides the peaks mentioned earlier, others such as what the British called Ben Nevis were witness to severe fighting, as well as places such as Tengenupal (in particular), the Lokchao Bridge and Moreh. Interestingly, Lyman notes that the Japanese had also given their own names to some of the peaks. What the British called Scraggy was Ito; Crete East was Ikkenya; Crete West was Kawamichi; and Nippon Hill was Maejima.

The Tiddim Road

The Tiddim Road stretches northwards from Tiddim village in the Chin Hills of Myanmar right up to Imphal. Once the Japanese invasion began, it was the route through which the Tiddim-based 17th Indian Division made a fighting withdrawal. Most of the battles during the withdrawal—at Tonzang, Singgel, Sakawng—were fought on the Burma side of the road and are not covered here. Instead, the focus here is on the period from April–July 1944 when the Japanese clashed with the British on the Manipur part of the Tiddim Road in their drive towards Imphal.

For the majority of this period, the British forces in this sector consisted of the 17th Indian Division, commanded by Maj. Gen. D.T. ‘Punch’ Cowan, together with 32 Brigade of the 20th Indian Division. According to Slim, it was on the Tiddim Road and on the Silchar–Bishenpur Track that some of the heaviest fighting in the entire Battle of Imphal–Kohima took place.¹⁴ For, facing the British on the Tiddim Road was the Japanese 33rd Division, which Slim recognized as one of the toughest divisions in Burma. This division was commanded by Lt. Gen. Yanagida until May, after which Lt. Gen. Tanaka Nobuo took over.

Indeed, following yet another infiltration attempt by the Japanese near Bishenpur towards the end of the Battle of Imphal, Slim noted: ‘There can have been few examples in history of a force as reduced, battered, and exhausted as the Japanese 33rd Division delivering such furious assaults, not with the objective of extricating itself, but to achieve its original offensive intention’.¹⁵ He went on: ‘Whatever one may think of the military wisdom of thus pursuing a hopeless object, there can be no question of the supreme courage and hardihood of the Japanese soldiers who made the attempts. I know of no army that could have equalled them.’¹⁶

As in the other sectors, the fighting on the Tiddim Road involved

repeated and determined attempts by the Japanese to break through to Imphal, this time from the south-west. The British were equally determined to prevent this from happening. And the result, again, was ferocious to-and-fro fighting between the two sides for several months, until the British finally prevailed. Almost every village between Churachandpur and Bishenpur witnessed clashes of varying intensity, with Potsangbam, Ningthoukhong, Ningthoukhong Kha Khunou, Thinunggei, Phubala and Moirang possibly being the most affected.¹⁷

Some of the iconic battles on the Tiddim Road were those of Potsangbam and Ningthoukhong, the Torbung roadblock and Red Hill (Maibam Lotpaching), where the Japanese have built the India Peace Memorial.

The Silchar–Bishenpur Track

The Track is the section of the Old Cachar Road (also called the Tongjei Maril) from Bishenpur up to the suspension bridge over the Leimatak River. The fighting here was interconnected with simultaneous events on the Tiddim Road. As always, the Japanese objective was to get through to Imphal, this time from the west/south-west, as well as to block the use of the Silchar Track by the British. As with Shenam, the Track and its environs were witness to intense, close, hand-to-hand infantry fighting.

Peaks such as Point 5846, Wooded Hill and Three Pimple Hill (or Mitsukobu), and spots such as Water Piquet and Mortar Bluff, were the sites of many a clash in this sector. Mountain villages such as Ngariyan (or the British-named Halfway House), Mollou, Laimanai, Sadu, Tokpa Khul, Kungpi, Kha Aimol, Kokaden, Khoirok and Nunggang were on routes used by the Japanese to approach the Silchar Track and Imphal from the west.¹⁸

The Siege of Imphal

Ironically, the city of Imphal saw little fighting during the 1944 battle to which it lends its name. As the previous sections indicate, clashes raged all around Manipur's capital and even occurred as close as Nungshigum to the north and Maibam Lotpaching in the south. However, barring the occasional appearance by the Japanese Air Force, the city emerged relatively unscathed from the four-month-long battle.

Perhaps what affected Imphal most was that it was cut off from the rest of the world by land for over two months—thanks to the blocking

of the all-important Imphal–Kohima Road on 29 March 1944, and the blowing up of the suspension bridge over the Leimatak River on the Silchar–Bishenpur Track on 15 April. Thus, until 22 June 1944, when the Imphal–Kohima Road was re-opened, the city was effectively under siege, with supplies being flown in to airfields in the Imphal plain.

Militarily, of course, Imphal remained the nerve centre from where the British 4th Corps Headquarters directly ran and coordinated the Battle of Imphal, under the overall command of 14th Army and Gen. Slim in Comilla (in present-day Bangladesh). Slim gives a sense of what it was like for Lt. Gen. Scoones, the commander of the 4th Corps in Imphal, at the time:

...it should be remembered that encounters on all of the spokes [leading to Imphal] were going on simultaneously. At no time and in no place was the situation, either to commanders or troops, as clear even as I can make it now. Into Scoones' headquarters, from every point of the compass, day and night, streamed signals, messages, and reports, announcing successes, setbacks, appealing for reinforcements, demanding more ammunition, asking urgently for wounded to be evacuated, begging for air support.¹⁹

The 14th Army Headquarters moved from Comilla to Imphal for a few months towards the end of 1944 to coordinate the unfolding operations in Burma. The cottage in which Slim stayed can still be seen in the Kangla Fort in Imphal today.

VICTORIA CROSSES IN THE BATTLE OF IMPHAL

The Victoria Cross, the highest British military decoration for bravery in the face of the enemy, was awarded to five people for their actions in Manipur during the Battle of Imphal:

1. Jemadar Abdul Hafiz (posthumously) of the 9th Jat Regiment for his actions on 6 April 1944, at Runaway Hill near the Iril River valley. This was the first Victoria Cross awarded to a Muslim in the Second World War.
2. Sergeant Hanson Victor Turner (posthumously) of the West Yorkshire Regiment for his actions on 7 June 1944, at Ningthoukhong on the Tiddim Road.
3. Rifleman Ganju Lama of the 7th Gurkha Rifles for his actions on 12 June 1944, at Ningthoukhong.
4. Subedar Netrabahadur Thapa (posthumously) of the 5th Royal

Gurkha Rifles for his actions on 26 June 1944, at the British position called Mortar Bluff off the Silchar–Bishenpur Track.

5. Naik Agansing Rai of the 5th Royal Gurkha Rifles for his actions on 26 June 1944, at the British positions called Water Piquet and Mortar Bluff on the Silchar–Bishenpur Track.

THE AIR BATTLE OF IMPHAL

All British and other military accounts acknowledge that without support from the air, the Battle of Imphal would have been very hard to win, if at all. Thus, it was as much an air battle as one fought on land. Brett-James and Evans explain it best:

Undoubtedly, one of the most remarkable [features] was the part played by the Royal Air Force, the Indian Air Force and the United States Army Air Force, without whose contribution the outcome of the battle could well have been very different. Besides preventing the Japanese Air Force from taking any real part in the operations, so that few soldiers ever saw an enemy aircraft, for four months they kept Scoones' large force supplied with all its needs in the worst possible conditions. They also provided the means of reinforcing 4th Corps in the nick of time, by flying in 5 Division. Nor did their activities end there. The indirect support they gave to the Army by wrecking the enemy lines of communication and the direct support they provided for the troops on the ground—the Battle of Nungshigum being a typical example—were, in great measure, instrumental in dashing any hopes the Japanese had of capturing Imphal.²⁰

In 1944, there were six airfields scattered around the Imphal Valley.²¹ The three all-weather airfields were Imphal Main (or Koirengei Airfield), Palel and Tulihal (the current Imphal airport), of which Imphal Main was the most important. The fair-weather airfields were Kangla, Wangjing and Sapam.

During the siege of Imphal, these airfields served as a lifeline. Lyman notes:

By 30th June [1944] the operation had flown in 19,000 reinforcements, 14,317,000 pounds of rations, 1,303 tons of grain for animals, 835,000 gallons of fuel and lubricants, 12,000 bags of mail and 43,475,760 cigarettes, an average of 250 tons of supplies being delivered each of the 76 days of the siege. At its height in the second half of April, the airlift employed 404 aircraft from fifteen squadrons.²²



Figure 3 Troops of 5th Indian Division prepare to emplane for Imphal on the Burma front in a US Air Transport Command aircraft, March 1944

Source: USI CAFHR, New Delhi.

THE BATTLE OF IMPHAL AND THE INA

It is hard to overstate the centrality of the Battle of Imphal to the INA story. As Peter Ward Fay wrote in *The Forgotten Army* on the INA viewpoint at the time:

To Shah Nawaz [Khan] and his battalions climbing the Chin Hills, to Prem [Kumar Sehgal] pushing papers in Rangoon though he would much prefer a field command, to Lakshmi [Sehgal] wondering when she will receive word to collect her women and go forward once more with Netaji, to Netaji himself—what is happening in and about Imphal is of enormous importance. Bursting into India, after all, is what the Indian National Army is all about, its *raison d'être*, the excuse for its existence. It can only be done at the Burma–India border. No other place offers an approach.²³

Moreover, what happened during the Battle of Imphal is all the more fascinating as it had Indian troops on both sides: those that made up the majority of the British Army; and those in INA units alongside the Japanese.

Men of the INA Special Groups entered Manipur together with Japanese forces in mid-March 1944. On 14 April, Colonel (Col.) Malik of the Bahadur Group hoisted the INA flag for the first time in India at Moirang, where the INA Memorial Complex—the only one in India—stands today.

As noted earlier, some 6,000 men from the INA's 1st Division also participated in the Battle of Imphal. The Commander of this division was Col. Mohammad Zaman Kiani and its headquarters were set up in the village of Chamol. Its Gandhi Brigade, commanded by Lt. Col. Inayat Jan Kiani, was deployed on the left flank of Yamamoto Force on the Tamu–Palel Road and set up its headquarters in Khanjol at the end of April 1944. A group of some 300 soldiers from this brigade set off via the village of Purum Chumpang for a planned joint attack (with the Japanese) on the Palel Airfield. This did not come to pass and the INA men were repelled. Through May 1944, despite attacks by British forces, this brigade stayed in and around Khanjol and Mittong Khunou.

The 2nd and 3rd battalions of the Subhash Brigade—commanded by Lt. Col. Shah Nawaz Khan—that had earlier been active in the Chin Hills reached as far as Ukhrul in mid-May. The Azad Brigade, commanded by Lt. Col. Gulzara Singh, was deployed in June on Yamamoto Force's right flank and set up its headquarters in Narum.

However, the INA met the same fate at the Battle of Imphal as the far larger force they accompanied, the Japanese, and all brigades began their withdrawal on 18 July 1944.

IMPHAL AND THE CHINDITS

Imphal and Manipur are also intimately connected to the two famous Chindit expeditions of 1943 and 1944. The expeditions involved the sending in of long-range penetration groups deep into Japanese-held Burma and kept supplied by air. Pioneered by British Maj. Gen. Orde Wingate, the Chindits' main objectives were to disrupt Japanese communication and supply lines in Burma.

Imphal was the base of the first Chindit expedition of February 1943, Operation Longcloth. At the time, Wingate's headquarter was set up in the city. Imphal's airfields were among those used for flying out men of the second Chindit expedition of early March 1944, Operation Thursday, as well. The Chindit 23 Long Range Penetration Brigade was involved in disrupting Japanese supply lines between Ukhrul and Burma during the battle for Ukhrul in early July 1944.

Imphal and Manipur are also associated with the passing away of Wingate. His plane took off from an Imphal airfield on the evening of 24 March 1944 and crashed near Thilon village in Manipur's Tamenglong district. His remains and those of his American co-passengers were disinterred from the Imphal War Cemetery in 1950 and reburied at the Arlington National Cemetery in the United States (US).

REMINDERS OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR IN MANIPUR TODAY

Manipur, today, is literally littered with sites related to its Second World War experience. If one arrives in Imphal by air, the airfield one lands at—Tulihal—was first constructed during the war. If one comes to Manipur over land from Dimapur/Kohima, the road one travels on was first upgraded to tarmac during the war.

The following makes up Manipur's impressive Second World War heritage and assets:

Memorials

1. India Peace Memorial, Maibam Lotpaching: The only Japanese war memorial in the country, this was constructed by the Japanese government on the site of the Battle of Red Hill at Maibam



Figure 4 Japanese War Memorial, Red Hill/Maibam Lotpaching

Source: Hemant Singh Katoch.

Lotpaching, along the Tiddim Road. The battle took place from 20 to 29 May 1944, and was the closest the Japanese got to Imphal from the south. The India Peace Memorial was inaugurated in 1994 on the 50th Anniversary of the Battle of Imphal. There is also an older war memorial nearby that was constructed in 1977.

2. Kanglatongbi War Memorial: This memorial marks the site of a brief battle at Kanglatongbi in early April 1944 during the Japanese drive south on the Imphal–Kohima Road towards Imphal.
3. INA Memorial, Moirang: This is a replica of the original INA Memorial whose foundation stone was laid by Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose in Singapore on 8 July 1945. The original was subsequently demolished by the British when they retook Singapore. The replica is part of the larger INA Memorial Complex in Moirang.
4. Shangshak War Memorial: This memorial in Shangshak (Sangshak) village in Ukhrul district marks the historic battle that took place here from 22 to 26 March 1944.

Cemeteries

There are two Second World War cemeteries in Imphal. These are maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. The first one, the Imphal War Cemetery, contains some 1,600 graves of



Figure 5 Imphal Indian Army War Cemetery

Source: Hemant Singh Katoch.

Commonwealth soldiers, including Indians, the British, Australians, Canadians and East Africans. The second cemetery is the Imphal Indian Army War Cemetery. This contains 828 graves, most of which are of Muslim soldiers of the British Indian Army. The cemetery also includes the Imphal Cremation Memorial which commemorates 868 Sikh and Hindu soldiers who were cremated.

INA War Museum

The INA War Museum in the INA Memorial Complex in Moirang is the only official museum dedicated to the Second World War in Manipur today. Its focus is primarily on the rise of the INA and on the role and activities of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose in particular. Remnants of war from across Manipur dating back to 1944, including arms and ammunition, bayonets, helmets and bottles, among others, are also displayed here.

Slim Cottage

As noted elsewhere, the headquarters of the British 14th Army moved from Comilla in present-day Bangladesh to Imphal for a few months towards the end of 1944 to oversee the unfolding operations in Burma. The colonial-era cottage in which Gen. Slim stayed at the time, and which has since been named Slim Cottage, can still be seen in the Kangla Fort Complex today.

Airfields

As mentioned earlier, there were six airfields scattered around the Imphal Valley in 1944. Of these, Imphal Main or Koirengi Airfield was considered the most important and it can be seen almost in its entirety along the main Imphal–Kohima Road (National Highway 2) on the outskirts of Imphal. Tulihal today serves as the site of the Imphal Airport, while a portion of the Palel Airfield also survives today.

Battlefields

Perhaps Manipur's greatest assets when it comes to the Second World War are the different villages, peaks and hills where the fighting took place in 1944. Some of these 'battlefields', such as Nungshigum, Point 5846 (Laimaton), Red Hill and the hills near Tengnoupal have not changed much in the last 70 years. Others, such as Shangshak, Ningthoukhong and Kanglatongbi, might have become larger, but their present state and



Figure 6 Imphal Main/Koirengei Airfield

Source: Hemant Singh Katoch.

surroundings still enable visitors to visualize the dramatic events that unfolded there during the war.

Trenches and Bunkers

As one visits the old battlefields today, one still comes across the remains of trenches and bunkers that date back to the war. This is particularly the case near Shangshak, Laimaton and Tengnoupal, but it can be said with some certainty that as more and more old battlefields are identified and visited, more such remains will be found. These are sites of immeasurable value which help us understand and imagine the fighting and conditions during the war as perhaps no spoken word can.

MANIPUR AND THE SECOND WORLD WAR

The Battle of Imphal brought people from many foreign lands to Manipur for the first time. In a way it was also for the last time that the state saw such a diverse gathering of nationalities from around the world. After the end of the Second World War in 1945, Manipur went back to being a quiet corner of the world, with few foreigners visiting Imphal and its environs.

Those who arrived during the war included, among others, the Japanese, Americans, Canadians, Australians and the British. However, perhaps the most intriguing was the presence of the East Africans—men from then British-ruled Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika (now Tanzania) and

Nyasaland (now Malawi). They made up the 11th East African Division that came under 33rd Corps in Imphal at the end of July 1944. While the 11th East African Division did not participate in the Battle of Imphal, they passed through Manipur and entered the Kabaw Valley in Burma (Myanmar), where they fought for several months. Manipur is thus linked to perhaps one of the least known, yet interesting, aspects of the Second World War—that of the participation of Africans as part of the Allied Forces in the Burma Campaign.

In terms of the broader impact of the Second World War on Manipur, John Parratt writes in his book, *Wounded Land*: ‘By the time the war ended, Manipur had been forcibly dragged into the modern era.’²⁴ This is no exaggeration. Indeed, one can arguably make the case that Manipur is the part of India that was most affected by the Second World War.

Imphal became the first major entry point for refugees fleeing Burma in 1942—over a 150,000 are said to have trooped through Manipur en route to Dimapur and Silchar in then Assam.²⁵ On what later became Imphal Main, also known as Koirengei Airfield, was established a large camp to house the refugees. The British Burma Army also retreated through Manipur, with both Gen. Slim and American Gen. Joseph W. ‘Vinegar Joe’ Stilwell passing through Imphal. Imphal itself was bombed for the first time on 10 and 16 May 1942, sending most of the population of the city fleeing.²⁶

In the months that followed, Imphal became an important forward supply base and Manipur’s infrastructure was developed like never before. Bridle paths were turned into tarmac roads, additional jeep tracks were laid, airstrips built where none existed and thousands of troops from other parts of India and the world began pouring in.²⁷ Business boomed in Imphal, with the arrival of the soldiers requiring all sorts of goods and supplies.

Things built up to a crescendo when, in March 1944, Manipur and its people were thrust headlong into the maelstrom of the Second World War with the Japanese invasion. Many had to evacuate their homes and seek shelter elsewhere; villages were bombed; and houses destroyed during some of the bitterest fighting the world had ever seen. And those were just the physical costs. Psychologically, besides being exposed to people from other parts of India and the world in large numbers, Manipur’s population was subjected to intense propaganda both in favour of the British war effort and, to a more limited extent, the INA and Japanese.²⁸

While some sections of the people did side with the latter, others—led by Maharaja Bodhachandra—extended their support to the British war effort.

In a 1993 paper for the Manipur State Archives, Dr N. Lokendra Singh explained that Manipur's experience of the Second World War

...brought rapid but profound changes in the consciousness as well as socio-economic life of the people. These changes not only paved the way for the emergence of new social forces, but also prepared the necessary pre-conditions for a strong popular movement for bringing about broad economic and political changes in Manipur during the immediate post Second World War period.²⁹

In short, Manipur was never the same again.

NOTES

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2. Ibid., p. 262.
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4. Slim, William J., *Defeat into Victory*, London: Cassels, 1956, pp. 371–72.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., p. 230.
7. Brett-James, Anthony and Geoffrey Evans, *Imphal: A Flower on Lofty Heights*, London: Macmillan, 1962, pp. 326–27.
8. Lyman, *Japan's Last Bid for Victory*, n. 1, p. 132.
9. Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, n. 4, p. 373.
10. Brett-James and Evans, *Imphal*, n. 7, p. 173.
11. Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, n. 4, p. 400.
12. Brett-James and Evans, *Imphal*, n. 7, p. 230.
13. Lyman, *Japan's Last Bid for Victory*, n. 1, p. 134.
14. Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, n. 4, p. 377.
15. Ibid., p. 386.
16. Ibid., p. 387.
17. Grant, Ian Lyall, *Burma: The Turning Point*, Chichester: Zampi Press, 1992, pp. 119–201.
18. Ibid.
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20. Brett-James and Evans, *Imphal*, n. 7, p. 336.

21. Franks, Norman, *The Air Battle of Imphal*, London: William Kimber, 1985, p. 20.
22. Lyman, *Japan's Last Bid for Victory*, n.1, p. 223.
23. Fay, Peter Ward, *The Forgotten Army*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993, p. 273.
24. Parratt, John, *Wounded Land*, New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2005, pp. 91–110.
25. Brett-James and Evans, *Imphal*, n. 7, p. 25.
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 26–27.
27. *Ibid.*, *Imphal*, pp. 30–52.
28. Singh, N. Lokendra, *Manipur during World War II (1941–45): Socio-economic Change and Local Responses*, Imphal: Manipur State Archives, 1993, pp. 1–31.
29. *Ibid.*