

## 15th October, 2003- The Battle of Kohima

This battle was the turning point of the Burma Campaign, and thus of the Pacific War. There was lively discussion at this meeting involving older veterans and younger members, after the fascinating presentations of a range of speakers, including Japanese veteran Chairman of the Society, Masao Hirakubo, and others from the Norfolk Regiment, the Cameron Highlanders, the West Kents and the Welch Fusiliers who were all at Kohima.

The Battle of Kohima lasted for two months from 4 April 1944 and, with the Battle of Imphal to the south fought simultaneously, was the decisive battle of the war in Burma in the Second World War in which the Japanese forces after more than two years of major successes were largely destroyed. It was the end of the attempt by the Japanese to invade India.

The village of Kohima at 5000 feet surrounded by tea plantations and peaks up to 9000 feet is 46 miles by winding road from Dimapur in the Brahmaputra valley. Dimapur was then the railhead in India and the main base for British and allied troops in Burma. Imphal, capital of the Indian border state of Manipur, is 86 miles south by road. The Dimapur-Imphal road was the vital supply route with the Kohima Ridge dominating the road. The Ridge, including DIS Hill, FSD Hill, Kuku Picquet and Garrison Hill became the most critical part of the fighting.

In 1942 the defending forces comprising 1st Burma Division and 17 Indian Division with thousands of civilians had retreated north to India pursued by the Japanese. The monsoon began at the beginning of May 1942 stopping the Japanese following up. The two armies settled down out of touch for some months on the borders of Burma and India. In the winter of 1942/43 the Japanese defeated British counter-attacks, and in June 1943 planned a major attack into Manipur.

On 7 January 1944 Lieutenant General Renya Mutaguchi with his 15th Army was ordered to destroy the enemy at Imphal and establish strong defensive positions covering Kohima and Imphal before the coming of the rainy season. Mutaguchi's plan was that 33 Division should attack Imphal from the south, 15 Division would attack Imphal from the north, and that 31 Division should seize Kohima and cut the road from Dimapur to Imphal.

Kohima had a small garrison of troops of the Assam Regiment who were urgently reinforced by 500 men of the Royal West Kent Regiment who had been flown in from the Arakan on the coast. These men held out for 15 days against some 15,000 troops of 31 Division until relieved by troops of 2 British Division. Lieutenant Masao Hirakubo OBE, 3 Battalion, 58 Regiment, 31 Division, described how he was responsible for feeding 1000 troops of this battalion. His superior officer explained that no rations would be supplied from the rear, and that troops would be fed from locally purchased and captured supplies. MH gave each man 20 days supply of rice to be carried on the man. The Division drove with them 15,000 Burmese cattle but only 10% arrived at Kohima which was reached on the planned date of 4 April using steep jungle tracks, crossing the Chindwin River, marching at night with no sleep for three days and nights. Masao Hirakubo himself fell 100 metres into a stream but survived. They were delayed by a battle at Sangshak east of Kohima for nearly a week. They captured 20 British warehouses in Kohima with supplies sufficient for three years for his entire Division. MH removed two months supply of rations for his troops before bombing by the Royal Air Force destroyed the warehouses and contents. Troops in the front line were supplied with rice balls and salt with a bottle of boiled water in bamboo baskets. This had to be done at night because of the overwhelming advantage in arms, ammunition and equipment of 2 British Division. It was a very primitive battle. The Japanese had no air cover or air supply and attacked each night. Officers were equipped with swords, pistols and grenades. The Japanese expected all British and Allied Troops to fight to the last man and did not expect to take prisoners for whom they had no facilities. He had an orderly and small tent and slept on the ground. After two months of bitter fighting they were defeated and were ordered by the Divisional Commander to make a sudden retreat in the monsoon. Nearly all of them were sick with beriberi, dysentery and malaria.

Corporal Roy Wellings, 4 Battalion, The Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment, 5 Indian Division,

described on tape how his Company held DID Hill for five days from 5 April in slit trenches fighting off attacks night and day with rifles, bren guns and grenades, withdrawing to FSD Hill and the Kuki Picquet where they received air drops of water, food, ammunition and medical supplies. Kuki Picquet fell on 17 April but the arrival of 2 British Division artillery prevented the enemy following up. They were relieved by 2 Battalion Royal Berkshire Regiment, 2 Division. He was one of only 10 survivors out of 120 in his Company.

Corporal Gwilymn Davies MBE, 1 Battalion Royal Welch Fusiliers, 2 Division, described on tape first making contact with Japanese forces on Garrison Hill, capturing the summit covered with British and Japanese dead on 19 April and the capture of Kuki Picquet on 2 May after which Japanese resistance seemed to weaken. He believed that the capture of the Garrison Hill with its wonderful arc of fire over the Dimapur-Imphal road was the turning point in the Battle of Kohima. He said: "The Japanese soldier always fought bravely. I have always admired him for that."

Masao Hirakubo, Roy Wellings and Gwilym Davies all spoke of the decisive effect of the overwhelming power of 2 Division artillery to which the Japanese had no effective answer.

Captain Maurice Franses, Royal Norfolk Regiment was recorded in action south of Kohima by a BBC radio commentator, witnessing a Japanese taking his own life with a grenade rather than allowing himself to be taken prisoner.

Major Gordon Graham MC and Bar, 1st Queens Own Cameron Highlanders, 2 Division, who took part in the Battle and initiator of the Burma Campaign Memorial Library housed in the School of Oriental and African Studies, London University, with an identical library in Japan, referred to books on the Battle of Kohima to which reference could be made and suggested the formation of a Kohima Educational Trust to educate the Naga tribesmen in gratitude for their help to the British at Kohima.

After the Battle the Japanese retreated across the Chindwin River heavily bombed by the Royal Air Force. Having inflicted at Singapore the greatest defeat in British military history, the Japanese in the battles of Kohima and Imphal suffered the greatest defeat in Japanese military history with the virtual destruction of five divisions as fighting formations.

Towards the end of the Battle Major General Sato commanding 31 Division complained bitterly to Mutaguchi, his Army Commander, that his troops were without food and ammunition, refused Mutaguchi's order to fight on, and ordered retreat. It is believed that this was the only known occasion in the Japanese Army of a senior officer refusing to obey the order of his superior. Sato was later invalided out of the Army. Major General John Grover commanding 2 British Division was replaced after the Battle of Kohima on the grounds that he had been too slow in getting his Division up the road from Dimapur to relieve Kohima.

Some 50,000 Japanese troops were lost in the Kohima and Imphal battles. 185,149 Japanese died out of 303,501 sent to Burma. Some 37,000 British and Commonwealth troops are buried or commemorated in Burma. The Japanese lost three fifths of their men, compared with roughly one in thirteen of the approximate one million British and Commonwealth ground troops in Burma.

Kohima has become a place of Pilgrimage for British and Japanese veterans, including joint visits. They, and particularly Masao Hirakubo, have helped in the rebuilding of Kohima Roman Catholic Cathedral which stands majestically above the village. The epitaph on the Cross of Sacrifice in Kohima Commonwealth War Cemetery reads:

"For your tomorrow we gave our today."

It is used at all services and ceremonies of the Burma Star Association and other occasions.

Philip Malins

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