



Triumph at Imphal-Kohima: How the Indian Army Finally Stopped the Japanese Juggernaut

By Raymond Callahan

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In 1942, the Imperial Japanese Army, simultaneous with its lightning advance down the Malay Peninsula to Singapore, thrust into British-controlled Burma and relentlessly advanced towards the Indian border. The Indian Army was revealed to be nearly inept and was all but destroyed in the process. Smashed British and Commonwealth units, including the 17th Indian Infantry Division, trickled back to India to refit, recover, and eventually re-engage the Japanese. Under the leadership of General William Slim, the reborn Indian Army — with American and British assistance — pushed back into Burma in 1944 and administered the largest defeat to the Japanese up to that point in the war. The fall, rebirth, and rise of the Indian Army, along with perceptive analysis of British-American combined warfare and logistics, make *Triumph at Imphal-Kohima* a valuable work that offers lessons for today's military.

British policy from the outbreak of war in Europe through 1942 was a large part of the reason the Indian Army suffered such staggering initial defeats at the hands of the Japanese. The Indian Army was largely considered a manpower pool for British interests, with its long-service regular troops sent to Africa and the Middle East to support colonial defenses and the war against the European Axis. These regulars were largely led by British officers as Indian officers were limited in numbers. To backfill the Indian Army, drafts of replacements were leavened with some regulars, but over time there were fewer and fewer experienced troops, NCOs, and officers to spread among the new recruits. The over-expansion resulted in an Indian Army without the requisite experience or command skills needed to master combat operations, as was displayed in the retreat across Malaya and Burma.

The Indian Army's rebirth is central to the narrative of *Triumph at Imphal-Kohima*. Leaders like Slim enacted several policies that allowed for the rebuilding. By capping expansion, Slim prevented further dilution of the experienced soldiers under his command. Furthermore, he enacted fundamental changes in how the army trained, which impacted all units and individuals in the revitalized army. Under Slim's leadership, however, "the training regime was so intense that even the babus — the Indian non-combatant clerks... were required to do physical training." Furthermore, an emphasis on jungle warfare training refocused the Indian Army on the task at hand. The standardization of jungle warfare training helped incorporate lessons learned and disseminate the best tactics, techniques, and procedures to defeat the Japanese.

The impacts of terrain, logistics, weather, and disease also played a major role on the campaign in Burma. Perhaps most striking was the impact of logistics on sustaining combat units. The Indian Army had to rely on single track roads that were not designed for heavy traffic and were incapable of surviving monsoon seasons. This anemic infrastructure significantly hampered mobility and sustainability of Indian operations. As an example, "in August

1942, only seventy-two truckloads of supplies made it through from Dimapur to Imphal," a distance of several hundred kilometers and a major axis of Allied advance. Immense efforts were undertaken to strengthen the lines of communication throughout India and into Burma in order to support the Indian Army. Those logistics assets, however, were low-density, and high-demand units such as the Americans needed the same trucks, trains, and airfields to support Chiang Kai-Shek's Nationalist Chinese, putting further strain on an already weak system and requiring cooperation between the Allies.

Author Raymond Callahan does an excellent job of describing the differing political objectives of the British and Americans in the China Burma India (CBI) Theater. America's desire to support Chiang Kai-Shek's Nationalist Chinese forces came into conflict with British desires to recapture their colonial possessions of Burma, Malaya, and Singapore. Coupled with personality conflicts between the British leadership and American General Joseph "Vinegar Joe" Stilwell, the difficult nature of combined warfare in Burma becomes readily apparent. As Churchill remarked, "the only thing worse than fighting with Allies is fighting without them."

The battle itself is rather quickly covered in the book. Slim's objective of pinning the Japanese at the gateways to the Imphal plain while his XXXIII Corps reopened the Dimapur-Imphal Road were accomplished through the use of combat boxes which broke up Japanese attacks, slowed their advance, and fixed them while they were in turn counter-attacked or surrounded. Fighting in and around these boxes devolved into a "conflict of platoons, companies, and occasional battalions." The logistics efforts before and during the battle were leviathan. "Delivering 12,250 reinforcements and 18,800 tons of supplies, and flying out 13,000 sick and wounded and 43,000 noncombatants, [Operation] Stamina's 7,500 sorties were absolutely essential to Slim's victory." In short, Slim designed the battle, the rebuilt Indian Army fought it at the small unit level, and Allied transport planes kept it supplied through to victory.

Triumph at Imphal-Kohima focuses on the operational nature of this critical battle and the political elements therein. Despite the nature of the fighting around the Imphal plain, there is a limited sense of the combat involved at the battalion level or below. The lack of maps requires readers to consult their own in order to track units, staging areas, and events throughout the text. Despite these minor shortfalls, Callahan has written a readable study on rebuilding armies, combined warfare, and the importance of logistics at the operational level in an oft-overlooked theater.