

**Bob Cook** recounts the bloody Battle of Kohima which raged from April 4 – June 22, 1944...and halted the Japanese invasion of India

Early in 1944 the Japanese 15th Army commanded by General Renya Mutaguchi launched a pre-emptive strike across Burma's Chindwin River. It's primary aim and purpose was to encircle and destroy the British/Indian IV Corps at Imphal to prevent the launch of a British and Indian attack across the border to re-take Burma. To achieve this Mutaguchi ordered two of his divisions, the 15th and 33rd, to encircle and destroy British and Indian forces on the Imphal Plain. His third Division, the 31st commanded by Lt Gen Kotoku Sato, was to strike west to cut the road between the great supply depot and railhead at Dimapur...thus preventing reinforcements from going to the aid of IV Corps. The road was

to be bisected at the small hill station of Kohima, which sat at the pass through the hills. Once this was achieved, Mutaguchi further planned to head off into India proper. He had been convinced that the Indians would then rise up in support against the British. This, the Japanese claimed, was the start of their "March on Delhi".

### The juggernaut approaches

The British knew that the Japanese were heading towards Kohima but they didn't fully appreciate the vast numbers and the speed of approach. The Japanese 31st Division comprised approximately 13,500 men and they were almost racing over mountains, despite the dense



This Bren Gun Carrier belongs to the 2nd Division, and is seen negotiating the Irrawaddy River with 45 gal oil drum floats. The crossing was made after the battle of Kohima, while driving out the Japanese. (All photos Kohima Museum)



covering of primary jungle. Kohima was almost like a transit camp, with soldiers constantly coming and going. As the build-up in Imphal progressed, there was a field bakery, a hospital, vehicle repairs, a leave facility and a battle casualty reinforcement camp. With the constant movement of men, the best estimate is that the garrison, commanded by Colonel

# THE FORGOTTEN BATTLE



2nd Division troops cross the Irrawaddy after the bridgehead has been established.

(Inset) Cross Keys Divisional shoulder flash of the British 2nd Infantry Division.



Many vehicles needed to cross the Irrawaddy in pursuit of the Japanese. Here is a Morris Commercial C8 Field Artillery Tractor, more commonly known as a Quad Mk.I.

## ORDER OF BATTLE - KOHIMA

### BRITISH 2nd DIVISION

#### Royal Artillery

10 Assault Field Regiment - Royal Artillery

16 Assault Field Regiment - Royal Artillery

99 (Royal Buckinghamshire Yeomanry) Assault Field Regiment - Royal Artillery

100 (8 Gordon Highlanders) Light Anti-Aircraft/Anti-Tank Regiment - Royal Artillery

#### Royal Engineers

5 Field Company - Royal Engineers

21 Field Park Company - Royal Engineers

208 Field Company - Royal Engineers

506 Field Company - Royal Engineers

#### Royal Signals

2 Divisional Signal Regiment - Royal Signals

#### Divisional Infantry Troops

2 Recce Regiment Royal Armoured Corps (6 Loyal Regiment (North Lancashire))

2nd Battalion, Manchester Regiment (Divisional Medium Machine Gun Regiment)

143 Special Service Company

#### 4 Infantry Brigade

1st Battalion, Royal Scots (The Royal Regiment)

2nd Battalion, Royal Norfolk Regiment

1/8th Lancashire Fusiliers

#### 5 Infantry Brigade

7th Battalion Worcestershire Regiment

2nd Battalion Dorsetshire Regiment

1st Battalion Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders

### 6 Infantry Brigade

1st Battalion Royal Welsh Fusiliers

1st Battalion Royal Berkshire Regiment

2nd Durham Light Infantry

### DIVISIONAL SUPPORT TROOPS

#### Medical

4 Field Ambulance Royal Army Medical Corps

5 Field Ambulance Royal Army Medical Corps

6 Field Ambulance Royal Army Medical Corps

#### Royal Army Service Corps

2 Div RASC (8 Company, 24 Company, 29 Company)

#### Royal Electrical Mechanical Engineers

2 Div Wksp REME

#### Indian Army Units in Support

161 Indian Brigade from 5 Indian Division

4th Battalion Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment

(Formed original garrison defending Kohima during the siege)

1/1 Punjab Regiment

1/7 Rajput Regiment

33 Indian Bde from 7 Indian Division

1st Battalion Queen's Royal Regiment (West Surreys)

4/1 GR

4/15 Punjab Regiment

20 Mountain Battery from 24 Mountain Regiment Royal Indian Artillery

1st Battalion Queen's Royal Regiment (West Surreys)

4/15 Punjab Regiment

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H U W Richards, consisted of approximately 1,500 combatant troops. These were mainly about 420 officers and men from the 4th Battalion of the Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment which, together with the remainder of the brigade, the 161st from the 5th Indian Division, had been airlifted from the Arakan to meet the threat. Elements of the Assam Rifles and Assam Regiment, together with soldiers from the leave and reinforcement camp, formed the remainder. The Japanese arrived in the Kohima area on April 4, and were soon fully engaged with the garrison and cut the road either side of it. Slowly, day by day, the defenders were inexorably driven back to their final defensive position - the Deputy Commissioner's tennis court and his bungalow.

In the meantime, the British 2nd Division (commanded by Maj gen J M L Grover MC and Bar) was 2,000 miles away in the south-west of India at Belgaum. To meet

the emergency the Division was rushed across India by road, rail and air. Speed was of the essence because the Japanese had also cut the Dimapur-Kohima road and the small Garrison was completely surrounded. In Kohima itself, the Garrison was holding on, but was very nearly at the limit of its endurance. There was no time to form a proper divisional concentration at Dimapur and, as the 2nd Division arrived it went straight into action, piecemeal.

### A change of fortune

On April 12, 1944 the 1st Battalion Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders, with artillery and tank support, attacked and destroyed the Japanese position near the 37th milestone. Operations by 2nd Division to relieve 161st Brigade and the Kohima Garrison went on rapidly and on Tuesday April 18, 1944 the small garrison was relieved and the siege lifted. The Japanese advance had been checked and



Maj Gen Grover, Commander 2nd British Division (left), points out features on his tactical map with Lt Gen Stoppford, Commander 33 Corps and Maj Gen Briggs, Commander 5th Indian Division (centre).