



The battle of Imphal may be a forgotten footnote for many Indians, but it is of paramount importance to the countries that were directly involved in the Second World War. Every year, thousands of people from foreign shores visit these two war cemeteries to witness a piece of history, and pay their respects to the buried soldiers, says SOMEN SENGUPTA

# Remembering the fallen heroes

Imphal is where the world sleeps on the lap of Mother India. In its two military war cemeteries, more than 3,200 graves and dedicatory stones throw light on the testimony of a saga that mankind will love to forget. Yet for many families and military units across the globe, each memorial stone is a story in itself. On most of these stones are names of those who died in war, the regiment they belonged to, and the age at which they were martyred.

Heart bleeds to note that most of them were below 30 years of age and died many miles away from their near and dear ones. Their death reminds us of an era which was perhaps the most horrific in the history of mankind.

The grey sandstone gate that has the words 'Imphal War Cemetery' (1939-1945) carved in makes one feel that you are not in any ordinary place. The moment one enters the cemetery by leaving a small room on the left, the view leaves you in a stony silence.

Around 71 years ago, Imphal was filled with the sound of guns and screaming of people. Its soil was drenched with the blood of more than 50,000 people, many of them had perhaps never heard of a place called Imphal, which was their final resting place.

History talks in whispers here, and reminds us that in 1944 the Second World War was at its zenith and saw unimaginable brutality, causing a huge loss of human lives. This phase of world history has its additional significance to us because it was the time when a small group of Indians took up arms and officially participated in the war as independent soldiers.

Today, the world has accepted that the most difficult battle in the history of England was fought during the Second World War at Imphal, then an unknown human habitation in Manipur. Japan officially acknowledges that its biggest military loss in terms of human lives was in the battle of Imphal in 1944. The United States of America records it as one of the biggest achievements of the Royal Air Force and still spends money to recover its missing soldiers' remains from the dense forests of Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur.

China still wants to cover it up as much as possible, fearing it may glorify the pre-Communist era of the nation's history. As soon as Japan conquered Rangoon and Singapore, Japanese bombers started invading Indian skies, and Imphal was first bombed on May 10, 1942, and then again on May 16.

It was enough to give London a message that time had come to pro-



PHOTOS: SOMEN SENGUPTA

tect India from Japanese attack and that pushed the Allied Forces to mobilise a huge army with modern weapons. One of the biggest logistical challenges was overcome by building motorable roads. As many as 1.2 lakh soldiers of the 14th British Army gathered at Imphal in mid-1942.

Rangoon, then under Japan, was no more a safe haven for the Japanese. The army gathered at the eastern corner of India where minimum basic things were not available. Now, Imphal was no more an untraceable point on the world map. It was in focus by war correspondence across the world and soon gained the glory of being witness to the toughest battle of the Second World War.

Japan's plan was audacious. It wanted to invade Imphal and Kohima so that the supply chain to the British Commonwealth soldiers could be cut by isolating Dimapur. Under the leadership of Masakazu Kawabe, 70,000 soldiers were mobilised to Imphal under 'Operation U-Go', with a dream to capture Imphal. The Japanese troops were aided by 7,000 Indians under the Indian National Army (INA) of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, who had a dream to liberate the country from the British rule through an arm struggle.

INA, under two groups named Gandhi Brigade and Azad Brigade, had an aim to reach Red Fort in Delhi. War finally started on March 8, 1944, and soon the Japanese advanced in great pace. They circled Imphal for more than three months and a large area in Manipur Japanese army had a free run. At a place named Moirang near Imphal, INA even hoisted the Indian flag, thinking that the land was free of British rule. This was the only military success that INA tasted in its history. However, for the Indian and Japanese forces, the excitement was short lived as two British officers named William Slip and Jack Baldwin turned the tables on them.

Along with that, support from

American RAF boosted the Allied counter-attack, and when the Japanese were not even 16 km away from Imphal, the battle was won on July 3, 1944.

The war was over but the loss and sufferings of the war were unthinkable. Till now the exact figures are not available, but it was confirmed that more than 30,000 Japanese soldiers had been killed, 23,000 were wounded and 600 were captured. On the INA side, 500 soldiers were killed. This is till now the biggest Japanese war catastrophe in their national history.

As many as 12,603 British Commonwealth soldiers of various nationalities also died in Imphal. They were mostly from the Britain, India, Australia, Canada and East Africa. This led to the creation of a cemetery. All around the world the landscaping of the Commonwealth War Cemeteries (CWWC) is similar, with rows of stone slabs. A holy cross stands in the middle and there is also a cenotaph. The cemetery in Imphal is no exception, but it is still distinctive.

On the left comes a board that describes the war of Imphal in short. The massive green field contains 16,000 same-sized memorial slabs, but not all slabs have names as the identity of some dead soldiers was not known. These slabs read: "A soldier of 1939-1945 war — known unto God".

In the lush green arena of the Imphal war cemetery, the first thing you spot is a majestic white cross known as 'The Cross of Sacrifice'. This cross is an indispensable part of any CWWC if it has at least 40 graves. The cross is generally made of white sandstone and holds a sword. While the cross signifies the faith of most of the soldiers buried here, the sword represents the warrior character of the departed.

Designed in 1918 by Reginald Blomfield at the request of Sir Frederic G Kenyon, the then director of the British Museum, the cross



tells the story of a place like this. The soldiers buried in this cemetery came from almost every corner of British Commonwealth to save India, till then a jewel in the crown of London. Here they fought a battle, which is known as the toughest battle in the history of the Second World War, and died before ensuring the biggest ever military debacle of their enemy Japan.

The headstones are placed in rows with a simple equidistant plan. Every small black rectangular headstone spells a few words about the dead. Along with the martyr's name, his regiment, age at the time of death, day he died, and position in the

army, are a few words describing the soldier and his sacrifice, such as "So dearly loved, so deeply mourned", and "Eternal rest grant unto Him, Dear Lord".

Somewhere a heartbroken parent has written on the headstone of their 19-year-old son: "In memory of my darling son Billy, brother of Tony, who we will never forget."

According to one headstone, among those who died were soldiers of various British army regiment like Gorkha Rifles, Border Regiment, West Yorkshire, Egypt Lincolnshire, and Royal Artillery. Of the 1,603 graves, there is only of a woman: Edith Florence Turner, a

20-year-old nurse who died on September 4, 1943.

On one corner of the cemetery is another CWWC motif known as the Stone of Remembrance. Any CWWC with more than 1,000 graves must have this small white memorial stone slab 11 ft in length and 4.9 ft in height, with the words 'Their Name Liveth For Evermore'. This memorial was designed by Edwin Lutyens, who also designed New Delhi.

Imphal has two CWWCs. The other one is meant for Indian soldiers who were mostly Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. Here again the last great war appears like a motion

## TRAVEL LOGISTICS

- Imphal is well connected by air from Kolkata, Guwahati and Delhi
- Several hotels with all modern facilities are available
- CWWC has no entry fee and photography is allowed
- Several organised tours are available to cover Manipur's world war connection
- Travelling in groups is advisable

Helpful websites: [www.battleofimphal.com](http://www.battleofimphal.com) and [www.wa200.com](http://www.wa200.com)

picture. This structure is dedicated to 888 Hindus and Sikhs, and 828 Muslim Indian soldiers belonging to Punjab Regiment, Jaat Regiment, Royal Indian Army, 14th Frontier Force, Bengal Shapers and Mixers, Indian Regiment and Artillery, who fought side by side their Commonwealth brothers.

Considering the religious faith, there is no cross of sacrifice here but there stands a stone of remembrance with the same words carved on it. The Hindus and Sikhs were cremated here in the middle of the field next to a water tank, and two war memorials of Indo-Greek style were erected. On its wall, the names of soldiers were written. Muslim soldiers were buried and their headstones have been placed in a way similar to that of other British Commonwealth cemeteries.

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As the twilight breaks over the monuments, the white marble reflects the melted gold of the setting sun. The crown of the monument turns golden while the grass turns dark green. It is dusk and birds are returning to their nests, rendering a soft shadow over those who were not able to return home for the sake of protecting the homes of millions of Indians.