

From Major Sudan Dewan BEM [1976 – 94]:

A Visit to Kohima War Cemetery in Nagaland from Nepal

The battles of Imphal and Kohima in northeast India made the news headlines recently, i.e. the UK's National Army Museum conducted a poll on Britain's greatest battles fought over the last 400 years. Waterloo, Aliwal, D-Day/Normandy, Rorke's Drift and the battles of Kohima and Imphal (fought between 7 March and July 18, 1944) during World War II were confirmed to be the top five battles.

Not only it did it come as a surprise but it was also interesting news considering the fact that so little is known about one of the bloodiest battles of Second World War, fought on the soil little less than 500 miles from the Nepal's south-eastern border to India's far north-eastern border with Myanmar (Burma). Here the Japanese advance was finally halted by the British and Indian troops, the brave veterans of the 'Forgotten War'. The main battle was fought on the ridge, later to be named Garrison Hill, on what was once a tennis court adjoining the then Deputy Commissioner's bungalow. It was there that the fiercest hand to hand fighting had taken place (the action is depicted in a painting by the renowned artist Terence Cuneo) also known as the battle under the Cherry Tree. The cherry tree was used as a sniper post by the Japanese near the tennis court. The original tree is not there anymore but a sapling from the stump of the old tree has taken its place. No trace of bungalow exists today as it was destroyed in the fighting but the white concrete lines of the historic tennis course have been preserved permanently. The battle had lasted for 64 days.

Kohima war cemetery is situated on the left of the Impha-Dimapur road close to the town center. There is also a War Museum nearby. The cemetery sits on the old Garrison Hill, home to 1,420 Commonwealth graves. It is well maintained and cared for by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. At the top of the cemetery stands a dome like memorial structure, commemorating the Hindus and Sikh soldiers whose remains were cremated according to their faith. At the lower end of the cemetery, near the entrance, is a memorial to the 2nd Division which bears the immortal inscription, "*When you go home, tell them of us and say, for your tomorrow, we gave our today*". The cemetery also contains a number of other regimental memorials erected on and near the Garrison Hill. A memorial lists the names of all those who died there and sadly includes several unmarked graves. Many of those Japanese soldiers who also fell there must have been buried around the area (in mass graves?). There is only one 2 GR grave in the entire cemetery and it belongs to Major H.G. Lyons-Montgomery. [But thanks to the discoveries of modern science, the recent advances in DNA technology which sheds hope that the remains of these unknown soldiers will one day be tracked?]

I travelled to Kohima (the capital city of Nagaland state) from Nepal for the first time in October last year where I had the opportunity to visit the Kohima War Cemetery. There are several ways to get there, including the bus route from Kakarbhitta (last border town in eastern Nepal) to Siliguri in West Bengal state of India. From there you can reach Dimapur (the largest city in Nagaland) by flight via Calcutta (now called Kolkatta) or a train journey (via Guwahati in Assam state) and then a taxi or bus to Kohima town. But for one with limited time, the best option is to travel by road. The drive from Siliguri to Kohima is roughly 826 kms in distance and will take close to 16 hours.

I went by road from Siliguri to Kohima hiring a car with a driver who had some knowledge of the area. It was completely unplanned, however, road trip offers its own enjoyment and had a refreshing experience of eating at the *dhabas* (roadside cafeteria), encountering road blocks and *bundhs* (strikes) by the *adivasis* (indigenous people), the occasional unexpected detour or two en route. But the general lack of lane discipline meant you were mostly on the edge of your seat! We stopped for a night at Phuentsholing (border town in southern Bhutan). The next morning back on track reached Guwahati

well on schedule time where I went to see the famous 'Kamakhya' Hindu temple and stayed overnight in the city center. (6 GR was the only regiment to worship 'Kamakhya' and this follows their history of a plaque being cured during their tenure in Assam when the whole Regiment was hit by an epidemic!). From Guwahati it took about four hours to reach Dimapur. From there to Kohima was an hour and half of mostly uphill drive. Dressed as the locals helped us avoid undue attention at the various checkpoints where you are required to be in possession of permit to enter (those intending to travel from UK must make a note of this important requirement). On the return leg to Siliguri, we travelled to Cherrapunjee which is known to be one of the rainiest places on earth but much to our delight it was a beautifully dry and sunny day (perhaps the one in 365). The best time to visit Kohima is between October to May. Unfortunately, we were unable to go to Imphal (approx five hours drive south) from Kohima due to the impending strikes called on by tribal activists in Manipur.

The Japanese invasion of Burma during the WWII and the battles fought by the British in the hills around Kohima brought the Nagas in contact with the outside world. During the war, Nagas proved to be the most useful help for the British in fighting the Japanese. The Nagas still carry fond reminiscences of the British governance which was greatly beneficial to them (it stopped headhunting and perpetual warfare, brought peace and prosperity, etc. similar to Dayaks and Ibans of the Borneo Confrontation days). As the British were the only people who ever conquered them - they had extended their friendship and remained loyal to the allied forces till the last day. The British are still remembered and held in high regard by the Naga public even today [The Naga narrative of dissent is still a longstanding issue afflicting India's North-east region though attempts are being made for a peaceful resolution to the issue].



Kohima War Cemetery



War Memorial



"Battle of Kohima" by Terence Cuneo



The historic tennis court ... then



..... and now!



2nd Div War Memorial



...a lone cherry tree but luckily no snipers!



Inscriptions on the 2nd Div Memorial



The only 2 GR grave belongs to
Maj H.G. Lyons-Montgomery

Chatting with the locals I came to learn that Kohima is the land of the Nagaland's major 'Angami' tribe. The name "Kohima" was officially given by the *Angrez* (Englishman) as they could not pronounce the Angami name 'Kewshima' or 'Kewhira' - a prestige dialect for "the land where the Kewhi (*Euphorbia milii*) flower grows".

After note: Thanks to the 'open border' between Nepal and India, I made it across without any hassle but just before India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the demonetization of high Indian currency notes, i.e. a ban on rupees 500 and 1,000 notes to tackle corruption and black money in India. I was fortunate that I had exchanged a few thousand Indian rupees leftover from the trip, just days before they ceased being legal tender. At the time of going to press, the PM's office reportedly said that bribery has gone cashless and Nagaland's got new Chief Minister!

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