

The Wartime Situation In The Assam Province 1942-1944

Kezhanglie Metha

Research Scholar, History Department
Assam University, Diphu Campus, Karbi Anglong, Assam

Abstract: The Japanese 15th Army of Lieutenant-General Renya Mutaguchi launched three army divisions into Imphal and Kohima in March-April 1944. In this campaign, the plan of the Japanese and the Indian National Army was to capture Imphal, Kohima and Dimapur and to advance into the plains of India. This paper is a general survey of the wartime situation in Assam, and not on the battles of Imphal or Kohima. Assam as a province in the year of the war immensely contributed to the success of the Allied forces in the India-Burma-China theatre of the war. The airlift over the 'Hump' following the closure of the Burma Road by the Japanese 18th Division was possible because of the land and water routes and railway lines and the airfields of Assam. The province acted as the second war front in the battles of Kohima and Imphal. It served as a platform for the Allied military mobilization and reinforcement centre and kept the British and the American forces supplied throughout the war. Both Arakan and Assam had played crucial role in the airlift operations throughout the war. Assam province was turned into a centre for the relief operation works during and after the Second World War. In the light of the above, it may be pertinent to state that Assam was strategically a very important base during the war time and directly or indirectly contributed to the victory of the Allied forces in India and Burma.

Keywords: Assam, Japanese, British, US, Ledo, INA, war

The states of Nagaland and Manipur are situated on the extreme northeast frontier of India and came under threat of the Second World War after the occupation of Burma (Myanmar) in 1942 by the Japanese army. Kohima and Imphal, the two state capitals, became the main battle fields of the Second World War in 1944. In particular, Kohima was the headquarters of the Naga Hills district in the then Assam province and had experienced massive destruction during the war. In this campaign, the plan of the Japanese and the Indian National Army (henceforth, INA) was directed to capture Imphal, Kohima and Dimapur and penetrate into the plains of India. The Japanese 31st Division under the command of Lieut. Gen. Sato was defeated at Kohima by the British 33 Corps under the command of Lieut. Gen. Montagu Stopford. The British 2nd Division commanded by Maj. Gen. Grover played the most decisive role in the defeat of the Japanese at Kohima. Subsequently, after their defeat at Kohima, the Japanese 15th and the 33rd divisions commanded respectively by Lieut. Gen. Yamauchi and Lieut. Gen. Yanagida were defeated at Imphal by the British 4 Corps led by Lieut. Gen. Geoffrey Scoones. In

2013, Britain's National Army Museum voted the twin battles of Imphal and Kohima as the "greatest ever battle involving British forces" ("Royal British Legion", 2013). The focus of this paper, however, is not on the battles of Kohima and Imphal, but a general survey of the wartime situation in the rest of Assam.

The province of Assam remained a mobilization theatre and a very busy place during the Second World War. The frequent changes of the army divisions which were brought to Assam during the war time prevented the British to develop Assam into a smooth and a long term base for the army (Slim, 1961) but normal life in the province got disrupted because of the Imphal-Kohima battle. The situation of the war turned Assam into a military base with more than six British army divisions stationed there for the purpose of fighting the three Japanese 15th Army divisions at Kohima and Imphal. The province also became a base for the American forces assisting sections of the Kuomintang army fighting the Japanese in China and in northern Burma. The province became busier because of the Assam railway which was placed under the

control of the British in 1944 to serve the military needs on the war fronts (Guha, 1988).

As early as September 1942, the Japanese Southern Army already had a plan to use the 15th Army to penetrate into Assam via the Kalewa-Imphal-Kohima-Dimapur Road. The 33rd Division backed by the 55th Division in northern Burma, was to advance to the vicinity of Dimapur and Silchar, the latter located on the western base of the Arakan mountain range. The main force of the 18th Division (then under Lt. Gen. Mutaguchi) with mechanized force was to leapfrog the 33rd Division, defeat the anticipated British counter attack from the west of Dimapur, and was to advance towards west of Golaghat. Powerful sections from the 18th Division was to be sent to Ledo through the Hukawng valley to destroy the enemy there and occupy Tinsukia, located on the western side of it. The plan to take Dimapur, Golaghat and Silchar was ultimately suspended because the commander of the 18th Division and the Imperial General Headquarters saw the practical difficulties to launch such an operation at that point of time (Burma Operation Records, 2011).

Eventhough the Japanese army had temporarily shelved its initial plan to advance into Assam, the province as a whole started to experience new socio-economic and political development following the occupation of Southeast Asia, especially Burma, by the Japanese army in 1942. Thousands of refugees from as far as Malaysia, Singapore and Burma landed up in Assam on foot and by sea and air. Many of the evacuees entered Assam to proceed to their respective homes and the heavy movement of the people and the army resulted in intense pressure on the transport system, communication, trade and commerce. These developments dislocated the normal economic activities because the prices kept shooting up as the war dragged on (Ganguly, 2016) for months together. The fourth Saadulla Ministry in Assam (25 August 1942-23 March 1945) was faced with trying situations because of the war. There was inflation and scarcity of essential commodities and food for the people. Between 1942 and 1943, the situation in Assam was aggravated by the general exodus of the non-Assamese wholesale and retail traders to their own provinces. Subsequently, in November 1942, the peasants in Goalpara looted several *hats* (Guha, *op. cit.*). The failure of Stafford Cripps negotiation with the Indian National Congress leaders which was held between 23 March and 11 April 1942, for the future of India also had widened the relationship between the Indians and the British. Amidst the political crisis, the depressing news about the defeats of the Allied forces on the war fronts, especially the seas around India influenced the stand of the Indians. The panic created by the bombings on some of the coastal regions at Trincomalee, Cocanada and Vizagapatnam by the Japanese when Cripps and the Congress leaders were negotiating in Delhi, and the impending danger of such bombing on Madras and Calcutta had caused migration of people from the cities to the interiors of West Bengal. There was great bitterness against the British that at one point of time the Indians forgot the consequence of a Japanese conquest of India (Chand, 1992).

The news of ill treatment meted out to the Indian evacuees from Malaya and Burma by the British further aggravated anti-British feelings throughout the country. In such a situation, Gandhi ultimately came to the conclusion that

the only solution was for the British to quit India. The Congress approved Gandhi's proposal to launch the 'Quit India' movement at its Bombay session held on 7 and 8 August 1942 (Govt. of Assam, 2008). Assam joined the Quit India Movement in the same year and people in some parts of Assam like Nowgong actively disrupted the free movement of the army. The Government retaliated by resorting to firing, imprisonment of the people and by imposing fines on the people of Assam. The province of Assam became more critical because of the impending danger of the war. The Government, with the help of the Provincial War Committee and the National War Front attempted to restore the morale of the people through propaganda work. The National War Front took up the "grow more food campaign" and of organizing own defence parties which was mainly entrusted to the villagers. The War Front failed to enlist the genuine support of the common man while the "grow more food" attracted the landless agricultural immigrants from the famine-stricken Bengal province into Assam in 1943 (Ganguly, *op. cit.*). On the other hand, by 1942, Assam was already confronted by the problem of refugees pouring in through Imphal and Kohima from Burma. The Indian Tea Association (ITA) became an indispensable collaborator in military projects, especially in the construction of roads in the Indo-Burma borders which was considered the highest political and strategic importance of the time. Apart from Imphal and Kohima, the ITA also had played crucial roles in the relief operation works in the Brahmaputra Valley, Silchar and on the Patkai Mountains to Ledo, in Assam. By February, an estimated 150,000 refugees passed through the Dimapur camp and 22000 through the Ledo camp (Tyson, 1992). Bokajan was turned into a military base and also a place for army depots and godowns for war relief measures and 'more than 80,000 coolies were employed in the depots which lined the main road' (Swinson, 1968). The Burma Refugee Organization was already operating from there before the war with one of its branches at Dimapur. More godowns were added at Bokajan for storing food for the army and by December 1944, the godowns accumulated 1, 00,000 maunds of rice, thousands maunds of wheat flour, floured sugar, salt and jaggery. During the first part of April 1944, as the magnitude of the problem in Assam increased, the Government of India deputed the Secretary of State of the Defence Department, Sir Charles Ogilvie, to Shillong, to discuss with the Governor of Assam and immediately the Assam Relief Measures (ARM) was formed to handle the distress situation in the province (Assam State Archive, Sectt. Adm. File No. 5264).

The risk of a Japanese attack on the railways and other vital communications in the Assam province increased during the period of the war. The situation was such that even the police posted in isolated areas like the Manipur Road, Golaghat and Halflong remained to be called to fight the battle any time. In some cases, even oilfields were bombed and the responsibility of the police became enormous (Assam State Archive, Report on Police Adm. File No. 1085). In 1943, the evacuees from the Chin Hills who arrived at Cachar brought with them the rumour of Bose' activities in the Burma-Assam-Arakan region but the local officials suppressed the news from circulation in the province (Govt. of Assam, *op. cit.*). And on 21 June 1944, Berlin Radio announced in Bengali the presence

of Subhas Chandra Bose, the President of the Provisional Government, in India (Arun, 1946). The secret message of Bose from the Indo-Burma Border (1944), with instruction to his friends and followers in India to make all assistance to his messenger who would meet them, is an evidence of the presence of his agents in India (Ghosh, 1969). The news of INA activity was already spreading in Assam province before the Japanese- INA siege of Imphal and Kohima started. On 27 November 1943, some INA pamphlets written in Bengali, Urdu and Hindi were airdropped in the north of Lushai Hills which prompted the Government to conduct search operation in Cachar for suspects having connection with the INA. In order to check the incursion of the Japanese and the INA into the province, the Sadiya sector was brought under heavy military occupation. British troops were also stationed at Aizwal and Lungleh to cut off the supply lines of the Japanese and the INA. The defence of Assam province as a whole became imperative because the plan of the INA was to smash its way into Imphal in collaboration with the Japanese to liberate Manipur, Assam and Chittagong. The whole of Assam province felt the impact of the advancing Japanese troops and the INA into India. The radio propaganda of Bose had already created a kind of impression in the minds of the political workers in the province. The Revolutionary Communist Party in Assam alarmed the provincial government with its pro-Japanese and INA stand. A section of the officials started to believe that the people of Assam could extend their cooperation to the INA in the event the latter achieve a point of overrunning the country. The Revolutionary Communist Party of India in Assam through their slogans reflected that the last chapter of the British rule was near and conveyed to the people that they should think that they were already independent. The party considered it a duty to cooperate with the Japanese if India was to gain freedom. They took the stand of 'Do or Die' in their support for the Japanese and the INA (Govt. of Assam, *Ibid.*). On 19th October, 1943 the Chief Secretary of Assam, H.G. Dennehy, wrote to the Commissioner of Divisions, deputy commissioners and the Deputy Inspector General of Police, Assam that the Communist Party continued considering itself as an outcaste or being regarded with undue suspicion despite the lifting of the ban on the party by the government which had aggravated their tones in their propagandas. The Government of Assam saw it as a kind of the Communist Party wanting the Government's confidence and therefore encouraged personal contacts between the higher officers of the Provincial Government and leaders of the Communist Party. The Government of Assam decided to adopt a neutral stand towards the Communist but made its point clear that the activities of the members were to be judged according to their conduct towards the war (Assam State Archive, File No.6). Within the Congress Party in Assam also, some of the members shared the same view with that of the Communist Party and had advocated that independence of India could be achieved not by fighting the Japanese but by inviting them to Assam. Leaders of the Congress Party in the province disagreed to this idea on the ground that it would be like changing of political masters only. However, there was great enthusiasm among the people in Assam about the news of the INA within Assam territory and the excitement was further

intensified by the rumour that the prominent revolutionary leader, Jayaprakash Narayan, was visiting the province for necessary preparation (Govt. of Assam, *Ibid.*).

At the time when the Second World War broke out, Assam province did not have any regular infantry regiment of her own. The tribal people from Assam like the Kacharis, Kukis, Lushais, Nagas and other tribes from Assam and the Gurkhas had rendered many years of services in the Assam Frontier Corps police- Assam Rifles. Many of them had fought in the World War I in the Gurkha Rifles and had also served in the Indian Labour Corps. In particular, the Mizos and the Nagas produced 2,000 men each; in addition, there were contingents of Garos, Khasis and Mikirs. These tribes from Assam province had served with distinction in the WWI. In June 1940, the military tradition of Assam found expression in the cabinet proposal of the then Chief Minister of Assam, Sir Muhammed Saadulla for setting up a regular infantry regiment for Assam. The then Governor of Assam, Sir Robert Reid recommended the same to the General Headquarters and the latter gave its approval for setting up the 1st Battalion, Assam Regiment, at Shillong on 30 January 1941. The inauguration ceremony of the Regiment was officially held on 15 June 1941 at Government House, Shillong, by Sir Robert Reid and Brigadier Whitworth. In 1944, the 1st Assam Regiment fought decisive battles against the Japanese at Jessami and Kharasom under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel W.F. Brown and later, at Kohima (Steyn, 1959).

Northeast of Assam province and the eastern part of Arunachal had experienced the involvement of the United States army in the China-Burma-India theatre. Like in the Arakan sector, Assam province faced considerable difficulties during the war period. Dimapur was the base of the Central front with the operational troops and in addition to this 60,000 people were employed for the construction of roads and airfields to serve the railheads at Ledo and Chabua for the U.S. Air Transport Command (Mountbatten, 1960). The occupation of northern Burma by the Japanese in March 1942 resulted in the closure of the 700 miles Burma Road to China. The reopening of this land route to China was important for the Americans because of strategic consideration- to keep engaging the Japanese soldiers on the China front and also to use the country as a base for future operations against Japan. Therefore, in August 1943, the importance of Assam province prominently featured in the Quadrant Conference, held at Quebec, where ambitious engineering projects for India and Burma were discussed for increasing the movement of supplies from Calcutta to China was discussed. Seven important points to do with Assam province were discussed in this conference (Romanus and Sunderland, 1987):

- ✓ An increase in the amount of air cargo being flown to China (using the airfields and storage depots of Assam) by the Air Transport Command (ATC) to 20,000 tons a month by mid-1944
- ✓ A road from India to China (the Ledo Road, Assam) with an initial (January 1945) capacity of 30,000 tons per month
- ✓ A gasoline pipeline from Assam via Fort Hertz in northernmost Burma to Kunming
- ✓ A thin-walled 6-inch pipeline from Calcutta to Assam Province (Tinsukia) to supply ATC airfields there

- ✓ A thin-walled 6-inch pipeline to China
- ✓ An American-operated barge line on the Brahmaputra River to bring supplies forward from the great port of Calcutta to the Allied bases in Assam
- ✓ Improvement of the Bengal and Assam Railway

Lieutenant-General Joseph W. Stilwell, popular known as 'Vinegar Joe' of the US Army was an officer entrusted with many responsibilities and power. He was the Commanding General of the US Army Forces of China, Burma and India Theatre; the acting Deputy Supreme Allied Commanding General of Chinese Army in India and the Commanding General of Northern Combat Area Command (Romanus and Sunderland, *Ibid.*). Stilwell was also the personal representative of President Roosevelt to the Chinese leader, Chiang Kai-Shek and the administrator of the US president's Lend-Lease (Hogan, *op. cit.*); a position which enabled him to push through the construction of the Ledo Road from Assam-Arunachal sector into Burma and to Kunming in China. As per the US president's Lend-Lease, the materials destined to be flown to China arrived in Assam and the United States Tenth Air Force sent its first C-47 cargo to China over the Hump (the eastern spur of the Himalaya- called 'The Hump' by the USAAF pilots) on 8 April, 1942. During this period, Assam province was found to be the nearest and the only alternative air base for the US to supply her troops and the forces of Chiang Kai-Shek under the command of Stilwell. The US transport planes (C-46 & C-47) lifted an unprecedented increase of 3000 net tons of gasoline and military wares to China in July 1943. President Roosevelt ordered for an increase of up to 10,000 ton by September 1942 which necessitated an increase in the number cargo planes and aerodromes in India (Turner, 1998). The distance of the hazardous and narrow air route between Assam and Kunming was 800km. The high mountains, the weather and the Japanese were the main obstacles for the airlift and by the end of the war; nearly 600 transports crashed killing more than 1300 crewmen and the route earning another nickname- the 'Aluminium Trail' (Crouch, 2013). Myikyina, the traditional capital of northern Burma's occupation by the Japanese compelled the US transport aircrafts to fly far to the north above high-rise mountains before taking south towards Kunming which was considered a nightmare for the pilots (Diamond, 2014). The US Department of Defence has stated that about 400 American soldiers went missing in India, mostly from Arunachal Pradesh. The Department claimed that most of these US air crew went missing after their transport planes disappeared due to bad weather and difficult terrain, especially while crossing the Hump to enter Myanmar from the war bases in upper Assam. Arunachal is closest to the Himalayas and majority of the remains are believed to be there.

The completion of Ledo Road and a pipeline to the old Burma Road south of Myikyina was important for the Allied High Command (Diamond, *op. cit.*). Therefore, the continuation of the construction work of the road was taken over by the American Engineers from the British in October 1942. Colonel Lewis A. Pick took over the command of the work on 17 of the same month. Military engineering groups of the 849th and 1883rd of the Aviation Battalion; 382nd Engineer Battalion; the 45th Quartermaster Regiment, the 209th Combat

Engineer Battalion and the 1905th from the Engineer Aviation Battalion were primarily involved in the construction of this road. The alignment of the Ledo Road which originated at the north-eastern end of the railway head in Assam crossed over to a border town called Jairanpur in Arunachal. It climbed onto the Patkai Range and the Pangsau Pass at Indo-Burma border. On the Burma side, it descended into Hukawng, Mogaung and Irrawaddy valley and into Myikyina- Mogaung area with railway and pre-war roads connection. The purpose of the Ledo Road was not to sustain the Chinese army as a whole or the economy of China but to enable Stilwell to train and re-strengthen the Chinese divisions permitted by the Generalissimo to be used against the Japanese in course of time. Therefore, an all-weather road and a gasoline pipeline which could deliver 65,000 tons a month to Kunming by 1943 was the objective. Vehicles, artillery and small arms to equip the Chinese soldiers under Stilwell's command formed a part of the proposed consignments. Meanwhile, the gasoline pipeline to Fort Hertz in northern Burma got cancelled for several reasons; the Assam line of communication which suffered from congestion was cited as one of it. The success of the Assam-Burma-China Road depended on the Allied success against the Japanese 18th Division in control of Myikyina in northern Burma. Therefore, the combined Chief of Staff directed Lieutenant- General Joseph Stilwell to take on the Japanese in the region and capture Myikyina with his Ramgarh-trained Chinese 38th and 22nd divisions along with the US 5307th Composite Unit (Provisional), also known as the GALAHAD or Merrill's Marauders (named after its commander, Major-General Frank D. Merrill). Coincidentally, in February 1943 the British General Officer Commanding in India, Archibald Wavell gave approval to Brigadier Orde C. Wingate's 'Operation Longcloth'. The idea behind this operation was to penetrate and operate behind the Japanese lines in northern Burma by Wingate's 77th Brigade, known as the Chindits. It involved aerial and other tactical supports. The Chindits proved that provided proper training was given, the British soldiers could also fight jungle wars as good as the Imperial Japanese Army. In May 1944, once again the Chindits' Operation Thursday was successfully executed during the capture of the Myikyina airfield (Romanus and Sunderland, *op. cit.*). The coordinated operations of Stilwell's Chinese divisions, the Merrill's Marauders and Wingate's Chindits were able to flush out the Japanese from northern Burma between February-May 1944 and the passage for the Ledo Road could be cleared. The Merrill's Marauders were foot soldiers and operated like the British's Chindits were trained in jungle warfare. They fought against the Japanese in the Hukawng Valley in northern Burma to Myikyina on the Irrawaddy River. They defeated the Japanese 18th Division from northern Burma after fighting 5 major and 30 minor battles ("World War II 50th Anniversary", 1990). The recapture of northern Burma, especially Myikyina, by the Marauders, Chindits and the two Chinese divisions not only cleared the main obstacle for the Ledo Road but removed the Japanese threat of airlifting supplies to Kunming in southern China.

Assam as a province in the year of the war immensely contributed to the success of the Allied forces in the India-Burma-China theatre of the war. The airlift over the 'Hump'

following the closure of the Burma Road by the Japanese 18th Division was possible because of the land and water routes and railway lines and the airfields of Assam. The province also had served as the second battle front in the battles of Kohima and Imphal by catering to the reinforcement operations and keeping the British forces supplied throughout the war. Both Arakan and Assam had played crucial role in the airlift operations and supply of forces throughout the war. Assam province was turned into a centre for the relief operation works during and after the Second World War. In the light of the above, it may be pertinent to state that Assam was strategically a very important base for the British and the American troops during the war time. The province directly or indirectly contributed to the victory of the Allied forces in India and Burma in the Second World War.

REFERENCES

- [1] Arun (Ed.). Testament of Bose. (1946). Delhi: Rajkamal Publications.
- [2] Chand, Tara. (1992). History of freedom movement in India, Vol. IV. New Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India.
- [3] Crouch, Gregory. (2013). The hump. New Delhi: Geo, Outlook Publishing.
- [4] Diamond, Jon. (2014). Stilwell and the Chindits. GB: Pen & Sword.
- [5] Ganguly, Jalal Baran. (2006). An economic history of north east India 1826-1947. New Delhi: Akansha Publishing House.
- [6] Ghosh, K.K. (1969). The Indian National Army. Meerut: Meenakshi Prakashan.
- [7] Government of Assam. (2008). Political history of Assam, Vol.3. Guwahati: Publication Board of Assam.
- [8] Guha, Amalendu. (1988). Planter-raj to swaraj. (ICHR). New Delhi: People's Publishing House.
- [9] Hogan, David W. India-Burma: The US Army Campaign of WWII. U.S. Army Center of Military History. Retrieved, April 24, 2016, from file://HyperWar The U.S. Army Campaigns of World War II India-Burma.html.
- [10] "Japanese Monograph No.134", Burma Operation Records. (2011). Prepared by Headquarters United States Army, Japan and distributed by Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army.
- [11] Mountbatten, Vice-Admiral the Supreme Allied Commander of South-East Asia 1943-1945. (1960). Report to the combined chiefs of staff. New Delhi: the English Book Store.
- [12] Policy towards the communists. (Record Section File No.6, Year-1944). Assam State Archive, Dispur, Assam.
- [13] Report on the police administration in the province of Assam for the year 1944. (File No.1085, Head-1 (36), Serial No.72). Assam State Archive, Dispur, Assam.
- [14] Romanus, Charles F. & Sunderland, Riley. (1987). Stilwell's command problems (United States army in world war II-China-Burma-India theater). Washington D.C.: Center of Military History, United States Army.
- [15] Slim, William. (1961). Defeat into victory London: Cassell & Company.
- [16] Steyn, Peter. (1959). The history of the Assam regiment, Vol.1 (1941-1947) Calcutta: Orient Longmans.
- [17] Swinson, Arthur. (1968). Kohima. London: Arrow Books.
- [18] Turner, William H. (1998). Over the hump. USA: Air force history and museums program.
- [19] Tyson, Geoffrey. (1992). The forgotten frontier. Guwahati: Spectrum Publications.
- [20] World War II 50th Anniversary Commemorative Edition. (1990). Merrill's Marauders. Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, United States Army.
- [21] WWII American soldiers "remain" in Arunachal Pradesh (n.d.). Retrieved March 3, 2017, from the Northeast Today website, <https://thenortheasttoday.com/wwii-american-soldiers-remains-in-arunachal-pradesh>.
- [22] NPN. Royal British Legion pays tribute to WWII heroes. (14 October 2013). Nagaland Post, October 15, 2013.