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Preface and Acknowledgments

The battle of Imphal . . . is not easy to follow.

—Field Marshal Sir William Slim, 1956

This is a very considerable understatement, as anyone who has studied the battle can attest.¹ It was fought over a period of some ten months—most of 1944—from the preliminary Japanese operations in February until the conclusion of the “monsoon pursuit” in the autumn. It pitted Lieutenant General William Slim’s British XIV Army (in fact largely Indian, Gurkha, and African) against the Japanese *Fifteenth Army*. It was fought on an enormous battlefield—more than three hundred miles from north to south, far larger than any European battlefield, except those of the Eastern Front. When it was over, Slim’s XIV Army had inflicted on the Japanese the worst military defeat in modern Japanese history, virtually destroying the *Fifteenth Army* and opening the way to the campaign in which Slim would reconquer Burma the following year, destroying the entire Japanese *Burma Area Army* (the equivalent of a British army group) in the process. Slim’s victory was overshadowed in Britain at the time by war news from closer to home—the grinding struggles at Cassino and in the Anzio beachhead, the looming cross-channel invasion, and the beginnings of the “V” weapon assault. Later it would be largely ignored in Churchill’s war memoirs and overshadowed in British historical writing by the generation-long fascination with the desert war against Rommel. Only in recent years have Slim’s campaigns been recognized for what they are: brilliant exercises in leadership by the finest British army commander since Wellington.

Slim’s 1944 victory, often called “Imphal-Kohima,” was fought in a landscape some of which had not been mapped, and sustained by a highly precarious supply system. Slim was additionally burdened by a nominal American subordinate whose agenda did not include wholehearted cooperation with

British allies, and also a British military eccentric who had, as a result of Churchill's patronage, a large private army whose separate (and largely irrelevant) operations Slim had nonetheless to support. Then, of course, there was the Imperial Japanese Army, which, despite considerable shortcomings in areas like supply and operational direction, was a ferocious and unyielding opponent, whose rank and file could be depended on to fight and die where they stood rather than accept defeat.

The fact that Slim won a total victory, despite the many handicaps, suggests Imphal should receive more attention than it has. One explanation for this comparative neglect amid the libraries of books on World War II is the nature of the army Slim commanded.² Officially "British," it was in fact largely drawn, like Slim himself, from Britain's other army: the Indian Army. Long one of the props of imperial Britain, the Indian Army had fared ill in the opening stages of the war against Japan, largely for reasons beyond its control. Then during 1943, in a remarkable exercise in military transformation, it remade itself. Slim's victories of 1944 were the capstone on that process of regeneration. But when Imphal was won, the Indian Army of the British Raj had only three years to live—ahead lay independence, the partition of the subcontinent, and the division of the army between India and Pakistan.

Despite Slim's remarkable personal account, *Defeat Into Victory*, one of the best military memoirs in the language, the Indian Army and its achievements in the last war it would fight under the British flag faded from the consciousness of a Britain rapidly becoming postimperial. Much of the writing on the battle focused on one of its most dramatic episodes, the siege of Kohima, where a small garrison made a heroic stand to hold a key point against huge odds. The comparative neglect of the Imphal battle is understandable—up to a point. British national strategy during the war focused intently on the European theater. Afterward historical attention followed wartime strategic focus. This European bias was given a powerful nudge by Winston Churchill, who had always disliked and distrusted the Indian Army and who, in *Closing the Ring*, gave Imphal barely a page—and mentioned neither Slim nor XIV Army by name.

Churchill had swept Imphal and XIV Army's entire campaign to the margins of his narrative, yet they did not attain even that position in the American telling. American interest in the war against Japan had, of course, always centered on the exploits of the fast carrier task forces and the Marine Corps combat epics that carried US forces across the vast reaches of the Pacific. The Forgotten Army, as XIV Army was known during the war, became the "overlooked" army as the narrative of Britain's war took shape afterward and

the “unknown” army in the United States. Lately historical attention has begun to focus on what Slim and the Indian Army accomplished in Burma and so an account centered on Imphal when that accomplishment first became manifest, seems timely.

Because this book is written with a general readership in mind, it begins with the backstory, a brief account of the most remarkable institution created by the British Empire, the Indian Army, as well as the early career of William Joseph Slim, the last—and greatest—of what Napoleon once called the “se-poy generals” produced by that army. Napoleon did not intend his remark—made about Wellington—to be flattering. Many British Army officers were similarly dismissive of their Indian Army counterparts. Wellington of course won—so did Slim, the greatest British army commander since the Iron Duke, leading his service to a sunset moment of victory.

This is a work of synthesis, the result of years of reading and thinking about the subject, since my interest in it was first kindled by reading Slim’s *Defeat Into Victory* as an undergraduate. During the decades since, I have accumulated numerous debts, to students, colleagues, libraries and archives, a list too long to enumerate. I am very grateful to them all. I would, however, like to acknowledge two friends and fellow historians in particular: Alan Jeffreys of the Imperial War Museum, and Professor Daniel Marston of the Australian National University—both outstanding historians of the Indian Army of the Raj. Their impeccable scholarship has illuminated my own understanding of that fascinating institution and conversation with them has been very helpful as I finished this book. I would also like to thank Jennifer Ferris who turned my handwriting into usable text.

Finally, my thanks to Mike Briggs of the University Press of Kansas, who, over many years, has encouraged and supported me, doing far more than an editor (job description) is required.

The greatest of my debts is acknowledged in the dedication. I began thinking about this book shortly before my wife was diagnosed with Stage IV cancer. From time to time during the years of treatment that followed, encouraged by her, I would jot down some ideas, even whole paragraphs (some of which in my handwritten first draft contain her editorial corrections). After her death I put it all away. When I eventually retrieved it from a drawer, several years later, I remembered that Mary Helen always told me that historians

wrote too much for one another and not enough for a wider readership. I hope she would have approved of this effort to heed that advice, and that my daughter, Sarah, will see it as the fruit of the loving support she has unfailingly given me.

—Raymond Callahan
Newark, Delaware
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Monsoon, 1942

On a May morning during Burma's 1942 monsoon season, a deeply tired acting lieutenant general stood beside a "track"—a rough unsurfaced road—on the edge of the Imphal Plain in eastern India, close to India's border with Burma. For two months he had led "Burcorps" (Burma Corps) as, under continuous Japanese pressure, it withdrew from Burma. Now that withdrawal—the longest retreat in British military history—was over.¹ What was left of Burcorps was trudging up the muddy track from the Chindwin River, where, lacking the ability to ferry them across, the last of their wheeled and tracked vehicles, together with artillery, had been wrecked and abandoned. As they marched, they passed the pathetic human wreckage left by the columns of mostly Indian refugees who had trudded out of India before and beside them, falling victim all too often to hostile Burmese or dying by the roadside of disease and exhaustion.

As he stood there, the general was conscious that he had made mistakes, some quite costly, during the retreat. He also knew that, while now safe from Japanese pursuit, the rest and recuperation that his troops so badly needed and so richly deserved did not await them at Imphal. The formation holding what was now the front line against the Japanese, the 23rd Indian Division, was dangling at the very end of the war's most precarious line of communication. On short rations itself, there was little it could do for the decimated and tattered ranks of Burcorps. The army commander responsible for Imphal disliked the general and seemed both indifferent to the plight of the Burcorps remnants and disdainful of both them and their commander.

As he stood watching his men file past, looking like scarecrows but still behaving like soldiers, a grim determination formed in the mind of this formidable-looking man. He would fix what was wrong, eliminate the mistakes, including his own, that had led to defeat—and then redeem that defeat with victory. Two years later, Lieutenant General William Slim of the Indian

Army's 6th Gurkha Rifles would do just that—at Imphal. The best way to begin an account of how that transformation and the victory that followed came about is with a look at the service to which Slim and most of Burcorps belonged—the Indian Army of the British Raj.



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