

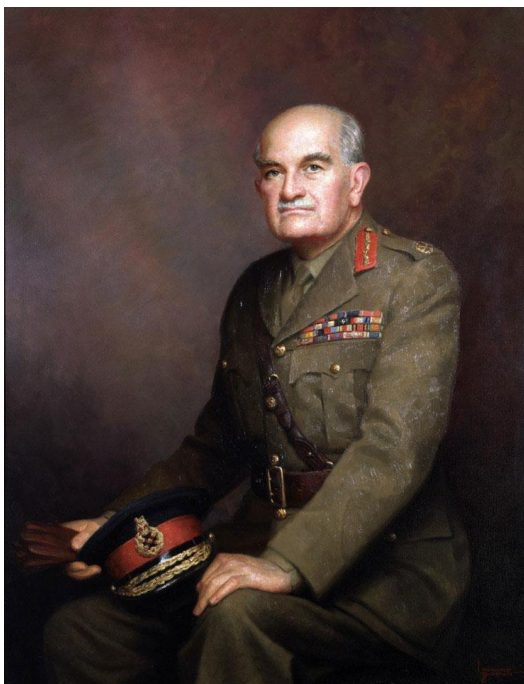
Speech given by lord slim on 11th march 2024



I am delighted to be with you all this morning and I was so pleased when general Webb-carter invited me to speak at these wonderful memorial gates in the 80th anniversary year of the battles of Kohima and Imphal. it is a very important milestone and later this month I will be travelling to Nagaland to attend the commemorations there. I am very pleased to be travelling there with two of my sons (one of which just happens to be named bill) and

also my nephew. in addition to the ceremonies planned in Kohima we will also be taking part in a 78 mile walk following the footsteps of the 1st assam rifles from jessami to Kohima as they fought a rear guard action against the Japanese prior to joining the battle at Kohima. they covered the distance in 39 hours which we will be trying to emulate and is one of the reasons why I am taking some younger support!

Now why were Kohima and Imphal and indeed the Burma campaign so important and why should it receive more coverage than it does? Burma was the longest and largest British led campaign of world war two starting in 1941, involving at its peak 1.3 million men and women and ending in august 1945. if the Japanese had prevailed at Kohima, the supply road to Imphal would have remained blocked and the huge supply centre at Dimapur would have been captured bringing 14th army to a standstill and



potentially defeat. the Japanese would have invaded the remainder of India taking control of the country including its substantial manufacturing capacity. in due course they may even have moved on into the middle east and challenged for control of oil production there which would have had a profoundly negative effect on Britain's fighting capabilities in Europe. The victory at Kohima stopped all this. along with the eventual victory at Imphal, it was the turning point in the Burma campaign. from here 14th army went on to deliver to Japan the biggest land defeat it has suffered in its history. if the allies had not won at Kohima and gone on to achieve total victory against the Japanese imperial army, all the resources Japan poured into Burma could have been concentrated in the pacific and made the island battles there even more hard fought than they already were. so Kohima and Imphal are very important as they turned the tide, avoiding the potential disasters I have outlined and thereby forming the path to total

victory.

Now I said earlier that the Burma campaign was British led and so it was. but 14th army was not a British army. it was made up of over twenty nations comprising many different religions and cultures, requiring a huge variety of ration packs and speaking many different languages. they all fought together as a team, a huge multinational army working as one in a common cause determined to achieve the outcome they strove for together in their great joint effort – another reason why more attention should be given to the Burma campaign as it was the living embodiment and the best example ever of how multi-culturalism can work so well.

over 100,000 of the troops in 14th army were from the west and east coasts of Africa and 700,000 came from the Indian subcontinent. indeed 20 of the 27 VCs awarded to 14th army were awarded to soldiers from this area including naik Gian Singh from the 15th Punjab regiment who fought quite heroically destroying a Japanese position and an anti-tank gun almost single-handedly even though he himself had been wounded. I am pleased to say that his son, Charanjit Singh sangha is here with us today and I am sure he is quite rightly very proud of his father's great achievement.



There are several good books that describe so well the great struggles that took place at Kohima and Imphal – in my view Robert Lyman and Fergal Keane have written the best ones. they were brutal and desperate battles, fought by very brave and determined men in the most horrendous conditions against a very brave and fanatical enemy. all of us today should be grateful and proud of the victories won by the allies in these violent encounters. let us salute and be grateful to the

participants of those great victories here again today. they deserve our eternal admiration and thanks.

and Kohima and the Burma campaign is a great example of why the memorial gates are here today. over five million men and women from Africa, Bangladesh, the Caribbean, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka volunteered to fight alongside British forces in the two world wars. the memorial gates stand as a monument to reflect not just the tremendous role these volunteers played, but also Britain's gratitude for their vital contribution in its hour of need. I am proud to be with you here today to honour the men and women who chose to join Britain in its fight against tyranny and to remember with great respect those who gave their lives so that others could live in freedom.