

Battle of Imphal

The battle of Imphal was a decisive engagement between the forces of the Imperial Japanese Army and the British and British Indian forces at Imphal in 1944. It was an attempt by the Japanese to invade British-India but were beaten back with heavy losses, forever altering their fortunes in the Eastern theatre of World War 2

Read on more to find out about the Battle of Imphal for the IAS Exam.

Background of the Battle of Imphal

Imperial Japan had conquered vast swathe of territory that encompassed the entirety of eastern China and all of South-East Asia ever since they attacked the American naval base at Pearl harbour in December 1941. But their string of conquests was brought to a halt when the United States launched a naval campaign of their own. Their problem was further compounded by the Chinese resistance that continued to harass its army in Eastern China.

The Chinese were supplied through flights coming from the Brahmaputra region in North-East India. If the Japanese were to cut off the supply route it would effectively destroy the resistance of the Chinese nationalist army.

Japanese high command had also received intelligence that the Allies were preparing several offensives from India and the Chinese province of Yunnan into Burma. In particular, the town of Imphal in Manipur on the frontier with Burma was built up to be a substantial Allied logistic base, with airfields, encampments and supply dumps. Imphal was linked to an even larger base at Dimapur in the Brahmaputra River valley by a road which wound for 100 miles (160 km) through the steep and forested Naga Hills.

With this knowledge in hand, the Japanese decided to plan for an offensive of their own for an invasion of British India

Events during the Battle of Imphal

The operation to take Imphal was named 'U-go' by the Japanese Army. It consisted of elements from the 31st Infantry Division of the Japanese Army and as well as units from the Indian National Army, who were in primarily support and scouting roles. The Japanese Army crossed into India on the night of 7th March and engaging the British Indian forces guarding the frontiers the morning of 8th March 1944

- By March 12, elements of the British Army were so hard-pressed around the Indo-Burmese border that they were given permission to withdraw to the Imphal Plain. The withdrawal took 20 days to complete.
- So precarious was the allied position that a decision was made to airlift reinforcements and supplies. The Indian 5th Division was flown in along with artillery guns, jeeps and

pack animals between 19th and 29th March. By the time the first elements of the 5th Division arrived, the Japanese were only 30 miles from Imphal

- On 26th March the battle for Sangshak had taken place whose outcomes would decide the battle of Imphal. The 50th Parachute Brigade put up a strong defensive action that delayed the Japanese advance and inflicted heavy casualties on them. The delay cost the Japanese precious time and bought the defenders of Imphal enough time to shore up defences
- On March 29th the Japanese Army cut-off the Imphal-Kohima road and effectively laid siege Imphal
- The part played by the RAF in the successful defence of Imphal cannot be overstated. During the siege, the RAF delivered 14,000,000 pounds of rations, 1,000,000 gallons of petrol, 43,000,000 cigarettes and 1,200 bags of mail. On the return journey to their bases, RAF aircraft took out 13,000 wounded and 43,000 non-combatants. They also flew in 12,000 reinforcements.
- The Siege of Kohima began on 4th April, 1944. Kohima was important as it allowed access into India directly from Myanmar
- Fierce fighting took place in an around Kohima and Imphal for the entirety of April, However, fresh divisions coming in from the Indian mainland ensured that all Japanese advance was halted by 1st May
- The Japanese Army had overstretched their supply lines and most were starving and in no position to take Imphal by this point
- The defenders at Imphal were bolstered when the Japanese were defeated at Kohima as it meant that Allied soldiers based there could move south and attack the Japanese effectively in their rear.
- On June 22nd British troops formally at Kohima reached men from the 5th Indian Division at a point called Milestone 107 along the Imphal-Kohima road – some twenty miles north of Imphal. It signalled the end of the siege.
- On July 18th, the Japanese High Command agreed that a withdrawal was required to the River Chindwin on the Burma side of the Burma/Indian border. The Japanese had sustained 53,000 casualties while the British had lost 17,000 men killed and wounded.

Significance of the Battle of Imphal

The disastrous defeat at the battle of Imphal only had added to the misfortunes suffered by the Japanese in 1944. With most of the experience fighting men lost at Imphal, there was no stopping the Allied advance into Burma the following year. The manpower needed to defend its other holdings in Southeast Asia were expended in a gamble that yielded no-dividends