



E-ISSN: 2706-9117
P-ISSN: 2706-9109
Impact Factor (RJIF): 5.63
www.historyjournal.net
IJH 2025; 7(12): 143-155
Received: 23-09-2025
Accepted: 24-10-2025

Loitam Akashnanda Singh
Central University of Tamil
Nadu (CUTN), Thiruvavur,
Tamil Nadu, India

Holding the line: The Maibam roadblock and operation Ayo-a tactical comparison, battle of Imphal, 1944

Loitam Akashnanda Singh

DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.22271/27069109.2025.v7.i12c.606>

Abstract

This study presents a comprehensive comparative analysis of the Maibam roadblock and Operation Ayo at Torbung during the Battle of Imphal (1944), WWII, scrutinising their strategic objectives, operational execution, and distinguishing characteristics. Although both engagements were designed to impede the enemy's line of communication, they were shaped by divergent tactical doctrines, force compositions, and battlefield conditions. Utilising memoirs, oral testimonies and secondary sources, this study deconstructs the dynamics of these confrontations to provide a nuanced understanding of how opposing forces employed flanking manoeuvres or hook and counter-manoeuve tactics, offering critical insights into the broader operational frameworks that defined this pivotal phase of the battle. The findings provide critical insights into the operational frameworks that governed this pivotal phase of the battle, culminating in a severe setback for the Japanese 33rd Division.

Keywords: Battle of Imphal, WWII, Maibam roadblock, Operation Ayo, Torbung, Hook tactics

I. Introduction

The Battle of Imphal in 1944 was a complex conflict, distinct from conventional engagements in the Western Theatre. Rather than a singular, coordinated confrontation, it comprised numerous chance encounters, a multitude of desperate and fragmented clashes, attritional frontal assaults, tenacious defensive actions, ambushes, and relentless bombing raids.^[1] Each of these was emblematic of the multifaceted nature of modern warfare. In broader terms, the battle unfolded as a series of independent engagements fought in isolated pockets.^[2] Although each encounter was shaped by its immediate local conditions, all functioned with a considerable degree of operational autonomy while remaining embedded within the overarching strategic design of the Burma campaign.

The significance of Imphal lay not just in its geographical position but in its symbolic value; it was the final shield guarding the Indian heartland from the advancing Japanese forces. As the eastern gateway to British India, a breach at Imphal would have opened the path to the plains of Assam and Bengal. In this context, one author rightly remarked, '*It is impossible to describe the fighting on the Imphal Plain the defence of the Gate of India in its entirety*'^[3]

When the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) initiated *Operation U-Go* in March 1944, its invasion of India was directed against the Imphal region along three principal axes of advance from the east, south, and north. As the campaign progressed, the scope of the offensive expanded markedly, evolving into a complex operation conducted across six major fronts and thereby substantially enlarging the scale of the engagement. Advancing along these axes, Japanese forces succeeded in severing the two principal lines of communication linking Imphal with the Indian hinterland the Silchar Track and the Imphal-Kohima Road thereby effectively isolating the region logistically. Conceived as a comprehensive encirclement, the operation generated simultaneous engagements across multiple sectors.

Corresponding Author:
Loitam Akashnanda Singh
Central University of Tamil
Nadu (CUTN), Thiruvavur,
Tamil Nadu, India

¹ McLynn, J. Frank, *The Burma Campaign*, p. 304. See also, Hudson, John, *Sunset in the East*, p. 48.

² Lyman, Robert, *Slim, Master of War*, p. 189.

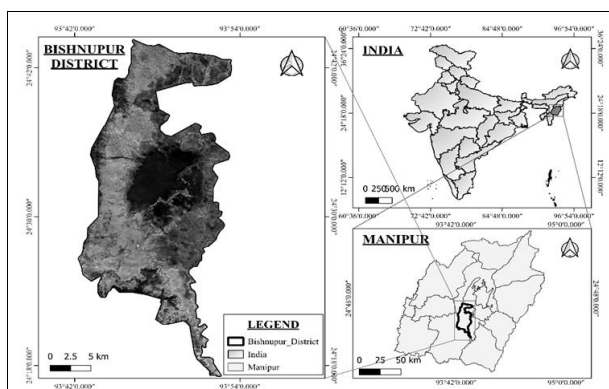
³ Hickey, Michael, *The Unforgettable Army; Slim's XIV Army in Burma*, p. 149.

This multidirectional offensive, compounded by the fluid and often unpredictable nature of jungle warfare, rendered the Battle of Imphal exceptionally complex and difficult to apprehend at both the strategic and operational levels.

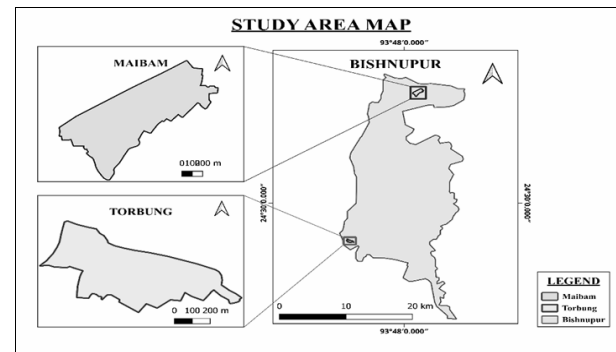
As Lieutenant-General William Slim, commander of the XIV Army aptly described, '*Like unevenly spaced spokes of a wheel, six routes converged onto the Imphal Plain to meet at the hub, Imphal itself: from the north, the broad Kohima road; also from the north, the footpath down the Iril River Valley; from the north-east, the Ukhrul road; from the south-east, the tarmac Tamu-Palel road; from the south, the rugged Tiddim highway; and from the west, the Silchar-Bishnupur track.*'^[4] Slim's depiction underscores not only the geographical vulnerability of the Imphal Plain but also the strategic dilemma posed by a converging enemy force advancing along these disparate routes. Furthermore, he observed that '*It was along the Tiddim road and the Silchar-Bishnupur track, the southern and western spokes of the wheel, that some of the heaviest fighting of this battle of attrition took place*', highlighting the intensity of combat concentrated along these critical approaches.^[5]

By 21st April 1944, the first wave of Japanese advance had been effectively halted. Although their initial momentum was checked, Slim and his IV Corps commanders remained convinced that the IJA had not abandoned its objective of capturing Imphal.^[6] With the first phase concluded, the second phase of the battle commenced around May, during which the events central to this study unfolded. In the Bishnupur sector, *Potsangbam* together with the Silchar track (see Map 9), which wound through the mountains like a serpent emerged as the principal line of confrontation, forming the central axis along which the opposing forces sought to secure positional advantage. Meanwhile, the engagements at *Maibam* and *Torbung* unfolded as deliberate flanking manoeuvres, conceived to unsettle the forward positions along this axis, extend the contested front, and shape the wider momentum of the battle as it progressed.

This study focuses on the southern front, particularly on two pivotal roadblocks: Maibam, established by the IJA, and Torbung, set up by British-Indian forces under the codename 'Operation Ayo'. Both aimed to disrupt opposing forces' lines of communication (L. of C.) through hook tactics, acting as anvils to fix the enemy while the main forces delivered the hammer blow. Though similar in purpose and timing, their tactical execution diverged sharply, reflecting the contrasting operational doctrines of the Japanese and Allied commands.



Map 1: Study area map showing Manipur- Bishnupur.



Map 2: Study area map showing Maibam and Torbung.

II. Maibam Roadblock (20th-29th May)

The nine-day engagement at Maibam (Red Hill) from May 20th-29th, 1944, was a decisive confrontation between the British 17th Indian Division (ID)* and the II/214th Regiment of the Japanese 33rd Division. The Japanese objective was to sever the *Tiddim Road* and disrupt the British L. of C., thereby isolating forward positions and weakening British operational mobility. Anticipating a major Japanese thrust and seeking to improve the coordination of its own forces for forthcoming offensive action, the Headquarters of the 17th ID was shifted from Imphal on 6th May to a forward position at Milestone 10 † along the Tiddim Road.^[7]

Before launching their offensive, Japanese forces stationed at *Samu-Manbi Hill* closely observed British-Indian troops' movements. To facilitate their advance and sustain battlefield coordination, they established communication lines along the *Irengbam Khujairok* stream and fortified *Irengbam* village with artillery support. Then, under the cover of darkness on the evening of May 20th, the Japanese commenced their assault. Their initial success came when they overran a British-Indian outpost at *Ushak-Khangdabi lane (Oinam)*, forcing its defenders to retreat.^[8] Having secured this position, they proceeded to destroy key bridges at *Oinam* and along the route to *Yumnam-Khunou* while laying extensive mines along the *Tiddim Road* to obstruct and delay British reinforcements advancing from Bishnupur. At approximately 2200 hrs. (10 p.m.), the Japanese launched a full-scale assault on British positions at Maibam *Lotpa Hill*.^[9] Under covering fire, the II/214th Regiment initiated its main attack, successfully securing the southern slopes of the hill. However, their attempt to capture the highest point, designated as Point 2926, was met with stiff resistance.^[10] Recognising the strategic significance of the elevation, British-Indian forces launched a determined counteroffensive, during which Captain J.A. Cummings was killed in action. By the morning of 21st May, armoured reinforcements from Bishnupur advanced toward Maibam, comprising four tanks. Japanese defensive measures proved highly effective: two tanks were destroyed near Oinam, likely by a concealed mine, and a third was knocked out at Maibam, further impeding the British effort to reclaim the lost ground. On the same day, British guns at Bishnupur opened a sustained artillery barrage against Japanese positions on Maibam *Lotpa Hill* and *Irengbam*. Yet, even

* Although the formal abbreviation for Indian Division is *Ind. Div.*, this study adopts the shorter form *ID* for consistency throughout the paper.

† This MS10 corresponds to the present-day Phojing-Chingmang area.

⁷ Grant, Ian L., *Burma: The Turning Point*, p. 160.

⁸ Oinam, Tomba, Interview with Author.

⁹ Toarem, Gouramahon, Interview with Author

¹⁰ Randle, *Battle Tales from Burma*, p. 49.

⁴ Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, p. 323.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 328.

⁶ Kirby, Stanley Woodburn, *The War against Japan*, Vol. III, p. 312.

under relentless shelling, the hill remained firmly in Japanese hands, forcing Major General 'Punch' Cowan to reconsider his course of action.

So, on May 25th, he ordered a coordinated three-pronged assault to break the deadlock. However, the onset of monsoon rains severely hampered movement, turning the battlefield into a quagmire of mud. The difficult terrain slowed British advances and complicated logistical operations. 'A' and 'C' Companies of the 7/10th Baluch pushed forward from the north but were halted at a strongly fortified position known as First Pimple, where they encountered fierce resistance. Meanwhile, 'B' Company, supported by armor, attempted an advance from the west, only to be met with equally determined opposition from the Japanese defenders.

On May 26th, a crucial reinforcement arrived in the form of the 50th Indian Parachute Brigade (Woodforce), significantly tipping the balance of power in favor of the British. Recognising the importance of mechanised support, British engineers constructed a tank track along the northern slopes of *Maibam Lotpa* Hill, allowing armour to engage Japanese defensive positions more effectively. One tank successfully destroyed several enemy bunkers before being immobilised by a well-placed shot from a Japanese mountain gun. The 3/1st Gurkha Rifles launched a renewed assault on First Pimple, eventually securing it after intense fighting. However, a swift and determined Japanese counterattack temporarily reversed these gains before British-Indian forces reasserted control. The battle proved costly for the British, as Lieutenant Colonel Wingfield and two company commanders were killed in action, further underscoring the ferocity of the engagement.

By the night of May 28th, it became evident that the Japanese position was untenable. Facing mounting casualties and dwindling supplies, they executed a tactical withdrawal to Irengbam, abandoning significant quantities of weapons and equipment near Oinam. By May 29th, British forces had fully secured the area, capturing several shell-shocked and severely weakened Japanese soldiers who had been left behind.

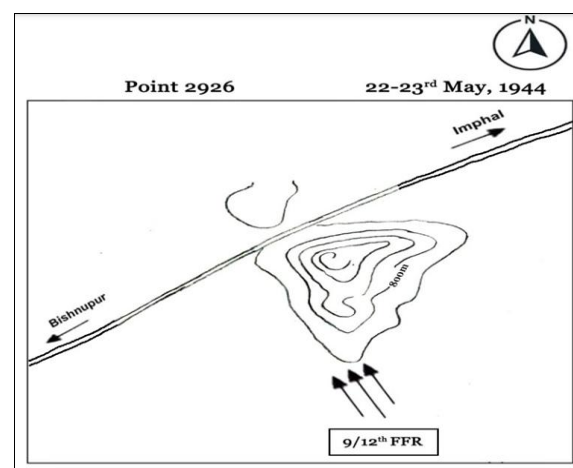
After the Maibam engagement, the II/214th Regiment retreated to Irengbam. On 30th May, about eighty troops with minimal gun support were driven from the settlement.^[11] At the same time, tanks and concentrated artillery barrages pounded *Samu-Manbi* Hill and the adjacent ridges. Once the bombardment subsided, British-Indian forces conducted a systematic sweep of the village, eliminating any remaining Japanese soldiers before advancing toward the foothills. In the aftermath of these operations, and to forestall any further hostile movement, a fortified position armed with an artillery piece and oriented toward the mountain range was established on the eastern side of Irengbam (present-day *Irengbam Kangjeibung Lampak*).^[12, 13]



Image 1: The Samu-Manbi Hill, located at the western outskirts of Irengbam.

The magnitude of Japanese losses was considerable; out of the 640 troops ‡ who took part in the battle, only thirty-seven returned capable of continuing the fight.^[14] This crushing defeat, compounded by the onset of the monsoon season, must have dealt a severe blow to Japanese morale and operational capacity. During his visit to the Maibam battleground, made at an unspecified moment, though his observations seem to suggest that it was after the engagement, Lt-Gen. Slim assessed the ferocity and carnage of the clash; he remarked, "*I was struck by the way in which several Japanese gun crews had obviously been shot and bayoneted while serving their pieces in the open at point-blank range.*"^[15]

However, despite their substantial setbacks, 2/Lieutenant (later Brigadier) John Randle of the 7/10th Baluch commended the fortitude and combat effectiveness of the II Battalion/214th Regiment, stating: '*For a week they had dug in and held that position under constant artillery and mortar fire, with no reinforcements nor resupply of food or ammunition, and no succour for their wounded; they repelled three attacks, well mounted by seasoned battalions and bravely pressed, and inflicted heavy casualties on us.*'^[16]



Map 3: Showing the first Allied forces' assault at Maibam Hill.

¹¹ Evans and Brett-James, *Imphal*, p. 335.

¹² Irengbam, Samungou, Interview with Author.

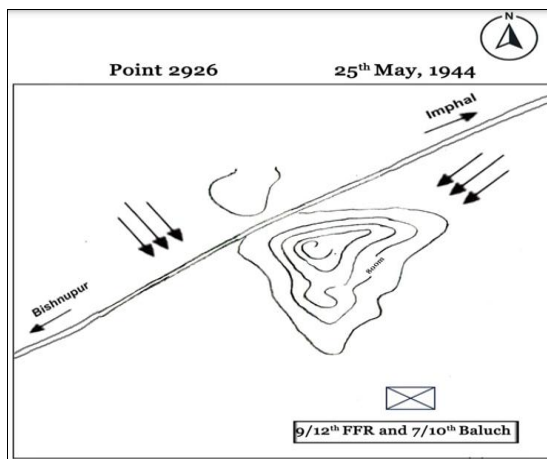
¹³ Thingbaijam, Chouyaima, Interview with Author.

‡ The troops consisted of about 500 infantry, 100 gunners with three light-caliber guns and 40 sappers.

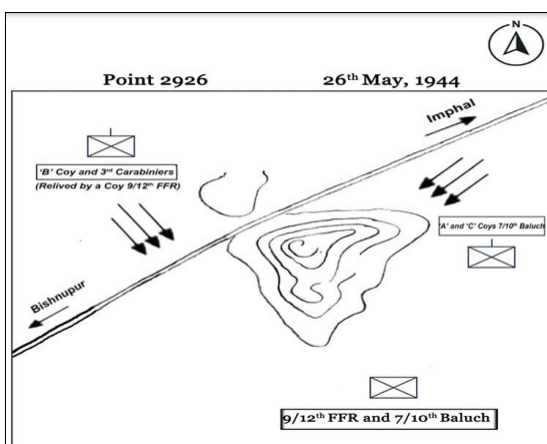
¹⁴ Randle, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

¹⁵ Slim, *op. cit.*, p. 336

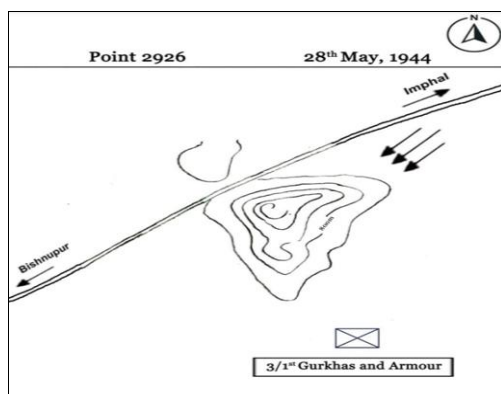
¹⁶ Randle, *op. cit.*, p. 51.



Map 4: Demonstrating the second Allied forces' assault at Maibam Hill.



Map 5: Depiction of the third Allied forces' assault on Maibam Hill.



Map 6: Gurkhas and Armour's advance to Point 2926.

Table 1: Units Involved in the engagement at Maibam.

<i>The clash at Maibam 20th - 29th May</i>	
BRITISH(Composite Force)	IJA (33 rd Division)
7/10 th Baluch	II Battalion/214 th Regiment
9/10 th FFR	
1/4 th Gurkhas	Company of Mountain Guns
3/1 st Gurkhas	
3 rd Carabiniers (M3 Lee/ Grants)	Platoon of Sappers
7 th Light Cavalry(Stuarts)	
114 th Jungle Field Regiment	Total: 640 men (Max)
50 th Indian Parachute Brigade	
Total: 3500 men (Max)	

III. Operation Ayo-Torbung Roadblock (17th- 24th May)

At 0630 hours (6:30 a.m.) of 13th May 1944, the 48th Brigade of the 17th ID less one battalion (the 9th Border Regiment) along with the 21st Indian Mountain Regiment (Artillery), two mule transport companies, and accompanying medical and stretcher-bearer detachments, set out from *Wangjing* in *Thoubal* District for Operation Ayo.^[17] Their objective was to establish a roadblock at Torbung, which would serve as the anvil in a coordinated manoeuvre. Advancing simultaneously from the north was their sister unit, the 63rd Brigade also part of the 17th ID pushing down from the Bishnupur sector to act as the hammer. This pincer movement aimed to sever the L. of C. of the Japanese 33rd Division, thereby enabling the encirclement and destruction of the Japanese forces concentrated in the *Ningthoukhong* and *Potsangbam* areas.

On the evening of 15th May, the 2/5th Royal Gurkha Rifles moved out from *Sagang* under the cover of darkness to launch an assault on Point 3404, a strategically significant elevation overlooking the proposed roadblock site near Torbung, approximately eight miles (twelve kilometres) away.^[18] However, Maj-Gen. Grant appears to have erred in his estimation of the distance between Torbung and Point 3404. The actual distance from Torbung to the foothill of Point 3404 is roughly one and a half miles (roughly two and a half kilometres), and even if measured from the base of the hill and along the entire approach track, it could not reasonably exceed three and a half miles (roughly six kilometres).[§]

By 0600 hours (6 a.m.) of 16th May, the battalion had reached the summit and found the previously fortified position unoccupied.^[19] They swiftly secured the location and established it as the operational base for the roadblock. From this commanding high ground, Cameron's headquarters enjoyed a sweeping view of the plain to the north, providing clear observation of the surrounding villages and the road leading toward *Moirang*.^[20] The panoramic visibility reinforced the tactical importance of Point 3404, as it allowed the position to dominate the surrounding terrain.

On the other hand, while the remainder of the 48th Brigade particularly the 1/7th Gurkha Rifles was advancing to consolidate the position, a light Japanese reconnaissance aircraft appeared at dawn on 16th May. It circled over the tail end of the column, thereby compromising the element of surprise and revealing the British-Indian troop movements. As anticipated, a short while later, Japanese artillery fire originating from a 105 mm gun positioned in the *Khoirentak* area was directed at the advancing forces. However, it proved erratic and largely ineffective.^[21]

At midday on 16th May, the Brigade Commando Company launched an assault on Point 4358, a prominent hill known

¹⁷ Grant, op. cit., pp. 138-39.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 140.

§ The distance between *Torbung* and *Churachandpur* is about 6.8 miles (11 kilometers). From *Churachandpur*, supplies for the Japanese forces, coming from *Tiddim*, were sent to the front line. In many ways, it was like a mini-Kohima, a key point for keeping the frontline supplied. And the distance of eight miles given by Grant is unreasonable for that distance is as far as *Churachandpur*. Furthermore, it is important to note that the engagement occurred at a location far removed from *Churachandpur*, further undermining the claim of an eight-mile distance.

¹⁹ Kirby, op. cit., p. 347. See also, Grant, *Burma: The Turning Point*, p. 141.

²⁰ Evans and Brett-James, op. cit., p. 323.

²¹ Grant, op. cit., p. 141.

as *Sandong*, located roughly two miles south of Point 3404 (see Map 3). This feature commanded the entrance from the plains into the surrounding hills and was strongly fortified with a series of bunkered positions. It was defended by a company of the 33rd Division Transport Regiment based in Churachandpur. The attack met stiff resistance and ultimately failed to secure the objective.^[22]

In the early hours of 17th May, the 1/7th Gurkha Rifles advanced towards the Tiddim Road and established a defensive position. They used the natural cover of a nullah (a dry streambed or gully) at MS 33.2 to secure the northern perimeter, while a smaller nullah marked the southern flank.

^[23] Acting on the orders of Lieutenant Colonel Robertson, the battalion began entrenching without delay. Dannert concertina wire was laid out, and mines were deployed along the road to reinforce the position. By evening, the defences had been firmly established. The only physical obstruction placed directly on the road was a pile of corrugated iron pipes stacked across the northern bridge, effectively completing the roadblock.^[24]

As regards the laying of the mines, Lieutenant Mahesh Sharma of the 70th Independent Field Company, Bengal Sappers and Miners, recalls:

'At the Torbung block, I was ordered to go as soon as it was dusk and lay some mines on the road; we had heard some Jap tanks. As soon as it became dusk, we moved on the road in a defile. We were ambushed and lost two mules with mines on their backs. But we picked up the mines and went on. We laid the mines, were coming back about one or two o'clock in the morning, and on the way back... Coming back, I thought it prudent to stop by the riverbank to see if the Japs were about, before crossing. One of the sappers asked my permission to move away to answer a call of nature. I told him to do it here. But out of respect, he wouldn't and moved about six feet away. There was a big bang, and he started screaming. You are [we are] in unknown territory, how did that mine or booby trap get there? The Japs must have been setting booby traps for us...'^[25]

On the night of 19th May, following a series of evening artillery barrages, the IJA launched their first determined assault on the roadblock, deploying the I/67th Battalion (Seko). Despite their tenacity, the attack was repelled. Japanese losses were severe, with 116 bodies recovered around the perimeter; total fatalities, including the battalion commander, were estimated at approximately 200. British-Indian casualties were minimal, though Lieutenant Colonel Jim Robertson, the battalion commander, and Captain John Moon, the Gunner Forward Observation Officer, were wounded by mortar fire.^[26] That same night, the Japanese launched their first assault on Point 3404, held by the 2/5th Gurkhas, during which a platoon infiltrated the perimeter, and in the ensuing confusion, Captain Raye Evans was killed.^[27]

Likewise, on the night of the 20th May, a similar assault was carried out by the remnants of the *Seko* Battalion and a platoon from the II/154th Battalion (*Iwasaki*), with both units receiving support from a 150 mm howitzer. The attack

was nevertheless repelled. Simultaneously, the British-Indian position at Point 3404 also came under attack. These piecemeal assaults continued until 23rd May.^[28] On that day, Colonel Matsuki was replaced by Colonel Kishita as the Japanese commander, and the *Seko* Battalion and a company from the *Iwasaki* Battalion launched a more coordinated assault. However, the attack was decisively repulsed by a well-executed British-Indian counter-offensive.^[29] By now, the 48th Brigade had held the roadblock for six days.

The war diary of the 1/7th Gurkha Rifles for May 1944 provides critical insight into the intensity of combat at the Torbung Roadblock. It documents the successive waves of Japanese attacks launched against the position and offers a rare glimpse into the scale of casualties incurred by both Allied and Japanese forces during the engagements:

'17 May: 2000 hrs. 4 Japanese light tanks approached from [the] north. Engaged with P.I.A.T.s, Molotov cocktails, and L.M.G.s 2 tanks [were] knocked out, and one [was] damaged.

2200 hrs. 8 lorries approached from the south and were allowed to enter the perimeter when engaged with L.M.G.s, grenades, Molotov cocktails. 52 Japs in lorries were killed, and much equipment, arms, ammunition, and food [were] captured. All Lorries destroyed.

- **18 May:** 2200 hrs. One platoon of [the] enemy attacked from the west. Attack [was] driven off with heavy casualties. Jitter Patrols [were conducted] by [the] Japanese throughout the night.
- **19 May:** 15 Japs counted dead as a result of last night's attack.
- 1100 hrs. Hurricanes strafed us with cannon [and] as a result of which we suffered [the] following casualties-Killed: 5 Gurkha Other Ranks (G.O.R.s), 15 mules.
- 2000 hrs. Heavy attack from south and west put in by Japs and persisted throughout the night, but all attacks were repelled. C.O. (Lt. Col. A.R. Robertson) wounded by [a] grenade discharger shell.
- **20 May:** 105 Japs bodies counted near [the] perimeter as a result of last night's action, and there were many more which we cannot reach in the jungle. Our casualties: CO wounded and evacuated. Killed: 7 G.O.R.s. Wounded 16 G.O.R.s.
- 2000 hrs. Further attacks by the Japs from the west were all repulsed, and 15 dead Japs were counted in the morning. Our casualties: Killed 3 G.O.R.s. Wounded: 10 G.O.R.s.
- **21 May:** 1800 hrs. Japs attacked heavily from south southwest and penetrated the perimeter in our sector. B Coy put in [an] immediate counter-attack led by Major Wyatt and restored the situation. At least 35 Japs killed. Our casualties: Killed 6 G.O.R.s. Wounded 13 G.O.R.s.
- **22 May:** Fairly heavy shelling and mortar fire. No attacks by Japs, except patrols, but driven off.
- **23 May:** Intermittent shelling during [the] day.
- 1900 hrs. Heavy shelling and mortar fire. Own casualties up till midnight: Killed 3 G.O.R.s. Wounded 12 G.O.R.s.^[30]
- An interesting information worth mentioning is the fact that prior to the assault of 23rd May, the 48th Brigade

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., pp. 141-43.

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 143-44.

²⁵ Thompson, Julian, *Forgotten Voices of Burma*, p. 285.

²⁶ Grant, op. cit., pp. 146-47.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 147-48.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Katoch, Hemant, *The Battlefields of Imphal*, pp. 79-80.

received orders on the 22nd from the 17th ID HQ to withdraw from Torbung. The message read:

'Owing [to the] serious situation in Divisional Box at Milestone 10, and 63 Brigade being unable [to] advance due to enemy large infiltration to their north, 48 Brigade will be prepared to withdraw from road-block area and rejoin Division via Shuganu on 24 May or before if situation makes it necessary.' ^[31]

Thus, on 24th May, the 48th Brigade commenced preparations for their night-time withdrawal. And by 1930 hrs. (7:30 p.m.), the 1/7th Gurkha had successfully cleared the block, and within an hour, the battalion had regrouped at the base. The overall withdrawal began at approximately 2130 hours (9:30 p.m.). The monsoon was imminent, and ominous black clouds made the night exceptionally dark. ^[32] The circumstances strongly suggest that, by the close of the action, after six days of sustained and costly fighting at the block, the men of the 48th Brigade withdrew under conditions of extreme fatigue. The weather, typical of the period, was oppressive; the air heavy and still, with rain threatening but not yet breaking. Low cloud cover hung over the jungle canopy, and the ground, already softened by earlier showers, further impeded movement. There was no sense of celebration or triumph, only physical exhaustion and a subdued relief at having endured. Movement was necessarily cautious and quiet, equipment noise was kept to a minimum, and attention was focused forward rather than on what lay behind. The roadblock, having served its purpose, was left behind.

And again, while no firsthand accounts might not have survived from that final moment, in the silence that followed, one might imagine a Gurkha rifleman's quiet reflection:

'We held our ground, but at a high cost. The sounds of screams and gunfire still linger in my ears. Many who fought beside me will never walk this road again. I do not know where it leads, but I remain alive, and for now, that must suffice.'

It is also worth noting, in this context, that when the 48th Brigade was deployed to Torbung, Maj-Gen. 'Punch' Cowan had delegated to Cameron the discretion to decide at the appropriate moment whether to abandon the static defence of the roadblock and move north to assist the 63rd Brigade in mopping-up operations, or to continue holding the block with part or all of his force, thereby leaving the task of mopping up entirely to the 63rd Brigade. Cowan's directive on this matter stated:

'In arriving at your decision, you will bear in mind the objective of your move, which is to enable you to be in a position to prevent the enemy escaping destruction by withdrawing south, or, in the event of his remaining in his present position, to facilitate his destruction by 32 and 63 Brigade operating against him from the rear.' ^[33]

A situation emerged where any curious mind might reasonably question: why, despite the successful defence against relentless Japanese assaults and the considerable damage inflicted upon the Japanese, an order was nonetheless issued by Maj-Gen. Cowan, commander of the 17th ID, for the withdrawal of the 48th Brigade?

The answer is, in fact, quite evident. The IJA 33rd Division's II Battalion/214th Regiment had successfully infiltrated deep into the 17th Division's L. of C. and established a roadblock at Maibam, merely two miles (three km) short of the divisional headquarters located at Khoriphaba Hill (Phoijing). Simultaneously, the I Battalion of the same regiment launched an assault on the Bishnupur Gunner Box, a defensive position crucial to artillery support and communications. This meant that the 214th Regiment was effectively engaging the rear of the main British force, threatening to sever the entire operational backbone of the 17th ID.

Compounding the crisis was the failure of the 63rd Brigade to make significant progress at Ningthoukhong and Potsangbam (Bishnupur sector), further limiting the Division's ability to relieve pressure or stabilise the sector. This heightened the risk of encirclement and the collapse of the forward positions held by the 48th Brigade. ^[34] As a result, Maj-Gen. Cowan had little choice but to order the withdrawal of the 48th Brigade to preserve the cohesion and survivability of his men.

The Japanese incurred substantial casualties throughout the fighting, and an entry from the 48th Brigade's war diary, dated 22nd May 1944, provides a sobering indication of the extent of these losses: *'22 May: 1630 hrs. Enemy casualties since the commencement of scheme "Ayo" counted killed at roadblock 238 and pt. 3404 killed 58. These figures do not include [those] killed and wounded at the nallas and jungle. Estimate statistics at least 500 killed.'* ^[35] Additionally, sixty soldiers perished during the assaults on 23rd May. ^[36] Thereby, the estimated total of Japanese fatalities during Operation Ayo reached approximately 600 soldiers, give or take.

Table 2: Units involved in the engagement at Torbung

The Clash at Torbung 17 th - 23 rd May	
British-Indian Forces (48 th Brigade - 17 th ID)	Imperial Japanese Army (Composite forces)
2/5 th Royal Gurkha Rifles	I/67 th Battalion (Seko)
1/7 th Gurkha Rifles	II/154 th Battalion (Iwasaki) (one company)
21 st Indian Mountain Regiment (Artillery)	Armour (T-95 Tanks)
Sappers and other Auxiliaries	
Total: 3500 men (Approx.)	Total: 1000- 1200 men (Approx.)

IV. Close Analysis of Maibam and Torbung

It would not be far from the truth to admit that the conduct of any war is shaped, in large measure, by the cultural and Doctrinal traditions that guide the armies involved. The Japanese forces, for example, seem to be fervently influenced by Bushidō, a warrior ethos that demanded absolute loyalty, encouraged unwavering commitment to their emperor, and regarded death in battle as an honourable fulfilment of duty. This outlook fostered a preference for bold, often reckless offensives, leaving little room for withdrawal. By contrast, the British-Indian forces operated within a more pragmatic military tradition, one that prioritised discipline, coordination, and adaptability. Their tactics emphasised flexibility and calculated planning rather

³¹ Grant, op. cit., p. 149.

³² Ibid., pp. 149-50.

³³ Kirby, op. cit., pp. 348-49.

³⁴ Prasad, Bisheshwar, *Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War: Reconquest of Burma*, Vol. I, p. 228.

³⁵ Katoch, op.cit., p. 80.

³⁶ Grant, op.cit., p. 149.

than personal sacrifice. These contrasting beliefs fundamentally shaped the way both sides approached combat.

To truly grasp the ideological forces that shaped Japanese military behaviour, it is essential to examine the language and tone of their leadership during the campaign. One particularly revealing example is the *Special Order of the Day* issued by Lieutenant General Mutaguchi Renya, Commander of the Japanese XV Army. More than just a call to arms, this document offers a glimpse into the mental world of an army driven by a potent mix of divine destiny, national pride, and a militaristic tradition rooted in sacrifice and speed.

Issued roughly three weeks before the assault on Imphal began (March 1944), the order embodies not only a battle plan but also a reflection of the ideological fire that sustained Japan's soldiers as they advanced across unforgiving terrain and faced seemingly insurmountable odds. The words below are not merely instructions; they are a glimpse into a worldview where military action is bound with spiritual purpose and the will of the Emperor. The order thus read:

'The Army has now reached the stage of invincibility, and the day when the Rising Sun shall proclaim our definite victory in India is not far off.

This operation will engage the attention of the whole world and is eagerly awaited by 100,000,000 of our countrymen. By its very decisive nature, its success will have a profound effect upon the course of the war and may even lead to its conclusion. Our mission is thus of the greatest importance, and we must expend every energy and talent [in] the achievement of our goal.

I will remind you that a speedy and successful advance is the keynote of this operation... When we strike, we must be absolutely ready, reaching our objectives with the speed of wildfire despite all the obstacles of the river, mountain, and labyrinthine jungle. We must sweep aside the paltry opposition we encounter and add luster to [the] Army tradition by achieving a victory of annihilation.

Aided by the Gods and inspired by the Emperor and full of the will of will, [we] must realise the objectives of this operation.

Conscious of their great responsibilities and their duty to emulate our heroic ancestors, both officers and men must fight to the death for their country and accept the burden of duties which are the lot of a soldier of Japan.'^[37]

Another order, signed by Major-General Tanaka,¹ further exemplified this mindset. It outlined the 33rd Division's assault operations in June 1944, urging his men to embrace their duty at all costs, even to the point of annihilation. The order read:

'Now is the time to capture Imphal. Our death-defying infantry group expects a certain victory when it penetrates the main fortress of the enemy. The coming battle is the turning point. It will denote the success or failure of the Greater East Asia War. You men must get to be fully in the

picture as to what the present position is; regarding death as something lighter than a feather, you must tackle the task of capturing Imphal.

For that reason, it must be expected that the division will be almost annihilated. I have confidence in your firm's courage and devotion and believe that you will do your duty, but should any delinquencies occur, you have to understand that I shall take the necessary action.

In the front line, rewards and punishments must be given on the spot without delay. A man who does well should have his name sent in at once. On the other hand, a man guilty of any misconduct should be punished at once in accordance with the military code.

Further, in order to keep the honour of his unit bright, a commander may have to use his sword as a weapon of punishment; an exceedingly shameful thought it is to have to shed the blood of one's own soldiers on the battlefield.

Fresh troops...afire with valour and dominated by one thought and one thought only- the duty laid upon them to annihilate the enemy.

On this battle rests the fate of the Empire.

All officers and men fight courageously!'^[38]

Closely echoing the underlying ethos of these directives, one veteran later remarked: *'The Japanese regarded their soldiers and machines as equally expendable, the only distinction being which could contribute more effectively to the objective at hand. Their adversaries did not share this perspective. The Japanese were expected to be resolute, to embrace death as martyrs, to burn with sincerity, to exhibit exceptional courage and composure, and to seize opportunities with swift and dispassionate action.'*^[39]

In contrast, when Lt. Gen. Slim visited the 20th Indian Division near the Chindwin River in December 1943, his speech to the 4/3rd Madras Regiment offered a different perspective. Aimed at boosting morale, Slim highlighted the pragmatic approach of the British-Indian forces. He emphasised discipline, efficiency, and strategic use of resources. His message focused on thrift, urging his men to waste nothing whether time, blood, or ammunition to achieve victory. He declared:

'I wanted to come and see you because you are the brigade that is further east than any other in the XIV Army. I also wanted to tell you that this is not "The Forgotten Army". We are not forgotten... Then remember also that we are free men from all the continents of the world... The Indian Army... over 2 million men, all voluntarily recruited, is the greatest volunteer army the world has ever known. An Army in which all races, all castes, all Regiments, all men are equal and have freely volunteered to rid the world of a tyranny. All Indians can take pride in that, and all of us can take pride in our service... I have to ask you for economies. Never waste around. Never waste a weapon. Throw nothing away. We must have victory. We shall have victory... but the way to win is through thrift. Through saving men's lives through our efficiency and attention to every trivial detail...Waste nothing. Neither time, nor blood, nor men, nor ammunition, nor weapons. All armies tend to be careless. To swagger, to boast and be open-handed. You, this Army, must be thrifty...'^[40]

Having gained insight into the operational mindsets of both

³⁷ Evans and Brett-James, op.cit., p. 135.

¹ Maj-Gen. Tanaka Nobuo was appointed acting commander of the 33rd Division in May 1944, and he was formally promoted to full command with the rank of Lieutenant-General in June. On 9th May, Lt.-Gen.

Mutaguchi requested authorisation to relieve Lt-Gen. Yanagida of his command, and the following day, Tanaka received orders to depart from Thailand and proceed to the Imphal front.

³⁸ Slim, op.cit., pp. 335-36.

³⁹ Cross, John P., *Jungle Warfare: Experiences and Encounters*, p. 49.

⁴⁰ Lyman, Robert, *A War of Empires*, pp. 267-70.

the IJA and the British-Indian forces, we may now return to the central discussion: an analysis of the tactics employed by the opposing sides at Maibam and Torbung in their efforts to subdue or dislodge one another. While these tactics displayed certain distinctive features, they largely conformed to patterns evident across the wider Burma Campaign; nevertheless, a closer examination of these engagements remains both relevant and instructive.

However, before we proceed, a key clarification concerns the shifting tactical roles during the engagements at Maibam and Torbung that need to be addressed. At Maibam, Japanese forces initially advanced offensively to establish a roadblock but, once the position was secured, assumed a defensive posture. The function of a roadblock impeding enemy movement necessitated a static and reactive form of defence rather than sustained offensive action. A similar dynamic emerged at Torbung. Although British-Indian forces initiated contact and occupied the initial position, sustained Japanese counterattacks compelled them to adopt a defensive stance, with deployments focused on holding ground. In both cases, early operational initiative gave way to positional defence centred on key road communications.

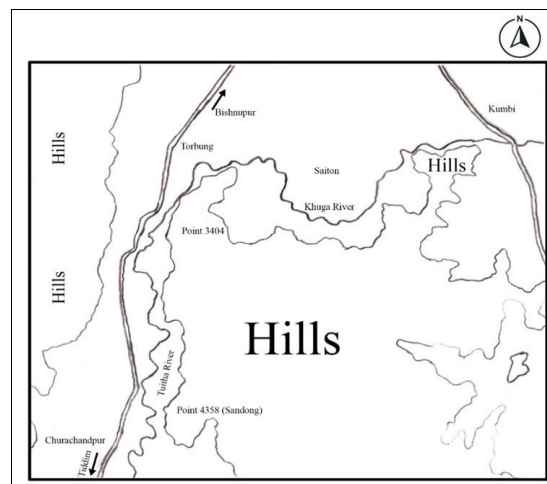
So for this analysis, the engagements at Maibam and Torbung are best conceptualised as defensive actions in operational terms. The allocation of roles, however, was markedly asymmetrical. At Maibam, British-Indian forces sought to disrupt and dislodge a deliberately constructed Japanese defensive system through limited offensive action. At Torbung, by contrast, the Japanese retained the operational initiative, compelling British-Indian forces to absorb the attack and adopt a predominantly defensive posture.

Now that these clarifications have been established, the defensive posture adopted by the British-Indian forces at Torbung can be understood clearly in light of their choice of position. The roadblock was sited at the mouth of a narrow valley roughly one and a half miles (three kilometres, give or take) wide, flanked by hill ranges to the east and west (see Maps 3 and 4). This naturally constricted corridor offered considerable tactical advantages, limiting enemy manoeuvre and creating an effective chokepoint against the Japanese forces. The selection of this terrain underscores the British-Indian commanders' awareness of the importance of controlling key bottlenecks in the theatre, and it further reinforces the fundamentally defensive character of their operations at Torbung.

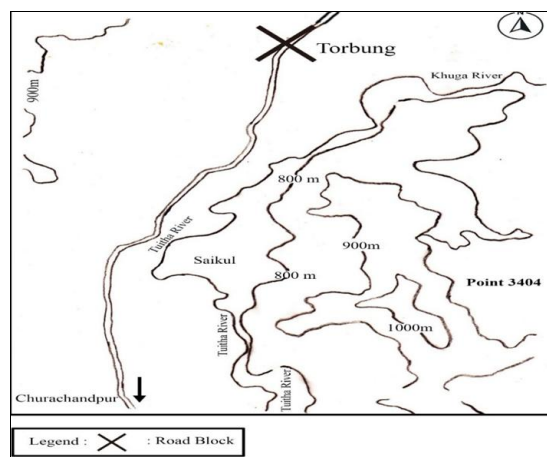
In addition to the strategic advantage of the valley itself, they positioned their artillery guns on Point 3404 (see Maps 7&8), a hill on the eastern side of the Tiddim Road. This location offered a commanding panoramic view of the surrounding area, enhancing situational awareness and enabling effective control of fire support across a broad area. Moreover, the decision to place an artillery piece in such a position also demonstrates an understanding of how high ground can provide both defensive advantages and the ability to direct concentrated fire on critical approaches.

Furthermore, the deployment of two battalions one to man the roadblock in the valley and another to protect the artillery on the hill reflects a well-thought-out employment of resources. The second battalion, positioned on higher ground, could serve a dual role: defending the artillery and acting as reinforcements if required. This strategic allocation of forces indicates a well-thought-out plan to maintain operational flexibility, ensuring the defensive

position can be reinforced or adapted to the evolving tactical situation. Hence, the British-Indian forces' approach at Torbung exemplified an effective integration of terrain, firepower, and manpower, reflecting a thorough understanding of the principles of defence and the necessity of adaptability on the battlefield.



Map 7: Showing the area of *Torbung* and its surrounding vicinities.



Map 8: Illustrating the *Torbung* roadblock across the Tiddim road.

On the other hand, the IJA at Torbung adopted a markedly aggressive approach, favouring impulsive offensive action and predominantly night assaults, as reflected in the war diary of the 1/7th Gurkha Rifles (cited above). This preference was well aligned with a military culture that prized audacity and personal valour. Such cultural predispositions shaped battlefield conduct, encouraging tactics that relied on surprise and aggressive momentum rather than prolonged engagement under adverse conditions. A similar pattern was noted elsewhere during the Battle of Imphal: recalling the fighting at *Sangshak*, Harry Seaman of the 50th Indian Parachute Brigade observed that “*The first assault ... came to a full stop. The damage inflicted by the Gurkhas had been so crippling that the enemy never again initiated a major attack during the hours of daylight.*”^[41]

Their assaults were further intensified by the use of psychological devices screaming, yelling, blowing bugles, and banging cans methods that often unsettled

⁴¹ Seaman, Harry, *The Battle at Shangshak*, p. 86.

inexperienced troops.^[42] These theatrics were designed not only to intimidate defenders and obscure the attackers' true numbers, but also to heighten the morale and momentum of the assaulting parties themselves.

However, this boldness often came at a high cost. In offensive operations, the Japanese were formidable, yet prodigal with human lives. Their tactics relied heavily on courage and numerical strength, often resulting in repeated assaults on the same sector of a defensive perimeter despite severe casualties (with little to no progress).^[43] Similarly, concerning their offensive tactics, several authors remarked that *'Their attacks were often poorly coordinated, relying more on overwhelming numerical strength than on tactical proficiency to achieve success.'* These observations closely correspond to the Japanese assault on the Torbung roadblock. Their rigid concentration of force along a single axis in this instance, the southern sector may have inadvertently allowed the British to rotate their defending troops, thereby keeping their frontline relatively fresh.^[44]

And, while the Japanese embraced an aggressive offensive posture at Torbung, their role at Maibam was reversed. Here, they were cast as the defender, and despite the disadvantages of the terrain, they fought with unyielding resolve. They demonstrated exceptional determination and tenacity. Nevertheless, the site selected for their roadblock was not particularly advantageous. In comparison to the British position at Torbung, which benefited from superior terrain, greater defensibility, and a commanding view of the surrounding area, the Maibam location was comparatively limited in its ability to control movement or provide natural protection (see Image 2).[†] Consequently, even at the height of Japanese resistance, British convoys occasionally managed to breach the blockade and advance southward toward the Bishnupur front.^[45]



Image 2: Aerial view of Maibam Hill, 2025 (eastern side with rice fields and mountain range).

Despite their shortcomings, the IJA demonstrated what a well-structured defence could achieve. What's more

impressive is the fact that an understrength battalion of 600 (\pm) soldiers held their ground and fought fiercely for nine consecutive days, a level of resistance and endurance the numerically superior and better-supplied British-Indian forces failed to match at Torbung. Confronted with overwhelming odds, including a brigade, an additional battalion, and armoured support (though unlikely all at full strength), their stand at Maibam underscored how raw courage, however briefly, could offset significant numerical, firepower, and logistical disadvantages. Though ultimately overrun, their defence remains a powerful testament to determination under pressure.

Furthermore, it demonstrates that even a sub-optimal position, when defended with tenacity and well-executed field defences, can delay a superior force and inflict high operational costs. On occasion, British-Indian forces' attacks on Red Hill/Maibam (*Lotpa Hill*) appear to have been launched from three directions simultaneously, yet failed to breach the Japanese defensive system. The defence of Maibam thus exemplifies how human factors can temporarily offset structural disadvantages on the battlefield.

And while the Japanese defence at Maibam exemplified admirable grit and endurance, their tactics were part of a broader pattern that can be observed throughout the Burma Campaign. 2/Lieutenant Patrick Davis of the 4/8th Gurkha Rifles, 89th Brigade of the 7th Indian Division, offered a vivid description of Japanese field fortifications during this theatre of war. He wrote:

'If the Japanese were formidable in attack, they were incredibly stubborn in defence. At the heart of their defence was the "bunker". Bunkers were placed in groups to give mutual support: troops attacking one came under fire from at least two others. Bunkers were strong points roofed with heavy logs and several feet of earth, and so well camouflaged that in jungle or villages they were invisible to any but close and persistent searchers. They were garrisoned with from five to twenty-five men and numerous machine-guns. They were usually impervious to bombardment by field-guns, and to bombing unless hit directly by a heavy bomb.'

Davis further noted the speed and commitment with which these fortifications were constructed and manned: *'The Japanese dug these bunkers with great rapidity, and fought from within them to the last man and round if told to. Bunkers seemed suited to the Japanese mentality. They felt at ease in them.'*^[46] This detailed description underscores not only the tactical ingenuity of Japanese field defences but also the cultural and psychological factors that shaped their approach to warfare.

In contrast to the impulsive, aggressive offensive tactics of the Japanese, the British-Indian forces adopted a markedly different approach one defined by fluidity, firepower, and operational adjustment. As the attacking force at Maibam, they relied heavily on their numerical superiority and the use of advanced armaments, particularly tanks. However, unlike the Japanese, who concentrated their offensive efforts along a fixed axis, they employed a more flexible approach by launching assaults along multiple axes. And, when their initial plan proved ineffective, they demonstrated a marked ability to adapt. Following the initial unsuccessful assault by the 7/10th Baluch and the 9/12th FFR from the south-eastern

⁴² Davis, Patrick, *A Child at Arms*, p. 92.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

[†] It can be argued that the IJA's choice of location at *Maibam* was not, in itself, detrimental, as the Tiddim Road—that is, the Allied line of communication (L. of C.)—ran between two hillocks and afforded a commanding view of the surrounding area. The principal drawback of the position was its susceptibility to encirclement; and given the limited manpower available to the IJA to man the site, its occupation ultimately constituted a poor tactical decision.

⁴⁵ Grant, op. cit., p.176. See also, Randle, op. cit., p. 49.

⁴⁶ Davis, op. cit., p. 93.

axis (22nd–23rd May, see Map 3), they rapidly revised their strategy, renewing the offensive from the northern and western approaches (25th–26th May, see Maps 4 & 5).^[47] Such a dynamic method of tactical adjustment is emblematic of a doctrine centred on probing enemy defences to identify and exploit points of vulnerability, in other words, finding the chink in one's armour before striking.

V. Insight and Observation

Bravery in war transcends borders and beliefs. It is often revealed not in triumph, but in resistance, when men stand against seemingly impossible odds. During the Burma Campaign, courage manifested on both sides, shaped by unforgiving terrain, relentless combat, and the will to endure. Japanese soldiers, in particular, displayed an unyielding commitment to their mission.

John Masters wrote admiringly of their courage, *'They are the bravest men I have ever met. In any of our armies, nearly every one of them would have earned a Victoria Cross or a Congressional Medal of Honour. It's fashionable to call their courage fanaticism, but that misses the point. They believed in something and were willing to die for it, even for the smallest detail that might help achieve it. What else is bravery? They attacked when no others would, when all hope seemed lost, but it never truly is, for who knows the enemy's mind or suffering? The Japanese advanced with skill and fury until death stopped them. In defence, they held with unwavering tenacity. They had to be killed, company by company, man by man.'*^[48]

It is poignant to observe how such extraordinary courage was expended so tragically. Men were cut down by machine-gun fire, shattered by the concussive force of mortar and artillery, and ultimately crushed by the relentless machinery of war. This misplaced valour exposes the broader strategic failures of the IJA. Convinced that sheer bravery could compensate for inadequate planning, faulty assumptions, and grossly underestimated logistical realities, the Japanese command rendered heroism an expendable resource. What should have been a strength became a liability, as thousands of soldiers who might have survived the campaign were sacrificed in pursuit of a strategy fatally divorced from operational reality.

The deployment of the II/214th Regiment to establish the Maibam roadblock illustrates this miscalculation with particular clarity. Although the distance between Bishnupur and Maibam was a mere eight miles (approximately thirteen kilometres) and appeared manageable on paper, the battalion was, in effect, marched toward destruction. Denied access to the main valley road firmly held by the British 17th ID the troops were forced into inhospitable hill terrain that imposed severe logistical strain and foreclosed any possibility of sustained supply. Consequently, the regiment was expended not through decisive tactical defeat but through a lethal combination of terrain, overstretched lines of communication, and a command unwilling to acknowledge the operational impracticability of the mission. And given the scarcity of manpower across other sectors of the Bishnupur front, the decision to send a single understrength battalion to operate independently represented a grave misjudgment. A more effective approach might have

been for the II Battalion to join forces with the I Battalion if the establishment of the roadblock had truly been deemed essential. But by dividing their forces, the Japanese diluted their combat strength and undermined their broader operational objective. As a result, the II/214th Regiment was effectively annihilated, ceasing to exist after May 1944.^[49]

A soldier is, above all, trained to fight, to push forward even when fear knocks at the door. Fear can be managed; it's part of the job. What truly haunts a soldier, however, is not the enemy's fire, but the creeping absence of the things that keep him standing: food, ammunition, water, and medicine. A man can stare down death, but it's the slow erosion of strength, the rumble of an empty stomach, and the silence when a wounded comrade cries for help that shatter the spirit. War is not won by courage alone and without ample supplies; even the bravest soldier becomes a shadow of himself.

At Maibam, this grim reality has become painfully clear. Though resolute in their defence, the Japanese forces likely received little to no resupply. Though they held their ground with unwavering grit and discipline, as the days wore on, they must have been left to fight on fumes, with dwindling ammunition and no hope of reinforcement. Wounded men lay untreated, while hunger gnawed at their resolve. Every shot fired was a gamble, and each step forward drained them of the strength they could ill afford to lose.

Taorem Gouramahon of Maibam, who was approximately twelve or thirteen years old when the fighting erupted in May 1944, recalls that acute shortages of food and medicine compounded by the unrelenting monsoon played a critical role in the collapse of the Japanese forces at Maibam. His account aligns with Randle's observations (as cited above). He further recalls hearing from fellow villagers, before the Japanese advanced into Maibam, that the troops had procured supplies from Nunggang as a calculated effort to secure resources along their route.^[50] It is therefore reasonable to infer that similar resupply attempts were made in other villages through which the Japanese forces passed, such as Bungle Chiru and Wainem, ** before reaching Irengbam.

However, given the modest size of these hill settlements, even by contemporary standards, it appears exceedingly improbable that they could have furnished adequate provisions to sustain a force of approximately 640 men for more than a few days. Furthermore, the terrain in these upland regions of Manipur is characterised by largely infertile soil and limited agricultural productivity, a condition that persists to this day, rendering it implausible that such small communities could have supported prolonged military operations.

While oral accounts are sometimes subject to exaggeration or selective memory, however, the consistency of these reports, coupled with the documented logistical challenges faced by the Japanese, lends them credibility.^[51] Hunger, disease, and the harsh weather conditions were as lethal as any enemy fire, ultimately contributing to the collapse of the

⁴⁹ Lyman, Robert, *Japan's Last Bid for Victory*, p. 153.

⁵⁰ Toarem, op. cit.

** According to the 2011 Census conducted by the Government of India, the population of Bungle Chiru was 1,172, Wainem Kabui had 282 residents, and Nunggang Kabui recorded a total of 650 people. See, <https://www.censusindia.gov.in>

⁵¹ See, Roger Annett, *Drop Zone Burma*, p. 120.

⁴⁷ Grant, op. cit., p. 176. See also, Evans and Brett-James, op. cit., p. 332.

⁴⁸ Masters, John, *The Road Past Mandalay*, p. 140.

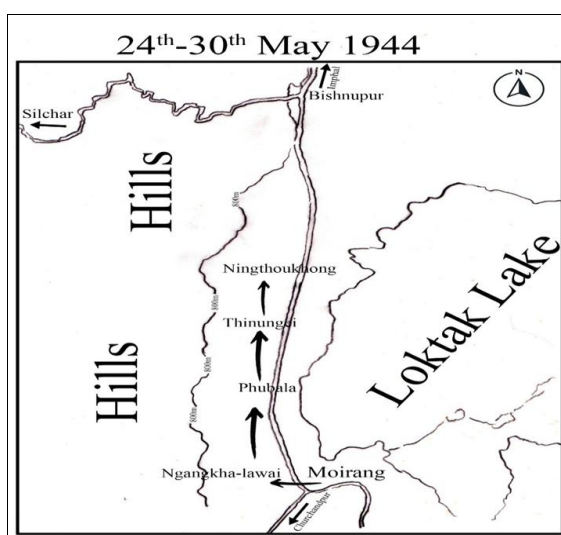
Japanese troops at Maibam.^[52]

In stark contrast, the British-Indian force at Torbung benefited from sustained aerial resupply.^[53] Aircraft delivered food, ammunition, and medical supplies directly into forward positions, mitigating the constraints imposed by terrain and enemy pressure. Beyond its material value, this logistical support ensured continuity of command and unit cohesion. Wounded personnel could be evacuated, casualties properly accounted for, and formations maintained in a state of operational effectiveness.

A critical strategic misjudgment by the IJA was the belief that courage alone could secure victory in modern military operations. Success, however, depends on flexible tactics, prudent decision-making, and most importantly, adequate provision for sustaining forces; there are occasions when a deliberate withdrawal to conserve strength is preferable to an unwavering pursuit of honour. Yet, even while adhering to a flawed plan, the IJA displayed unwavering commitment and remarkable perseverance, proving that, though determination alone could not secure victory, it remained a defining feature of their conduct.

VI. Epilogue

Although both the Maibam and Torbung roadblock operations ultimately failed to achieve their intended strategic objectives, a closer examination of the balance of losses reveals a pronounced asymmetry. The IJA absorbed the most severe reverses, suffering casualties at a scale that severely degraded its combat strength in the Bishnupur sector. In contrast, the British-Indian forces, though compelled to relinquish the Torbung roadblocks and withdraw, inflicted sustained and disproportionate damage on their adversaries. Even during their withdrawal towards Ningthoukhong, they continued to impose steady attrition, transforming what might otherwise have been a straightforward Japanese advance into yet another costly episode for the enemy. This broader pattern of unequal losses is rendered most clearly through the experience of the II/214th Regiment, which encapsulates the operational disparity between the two sides.



Map 9: Depicting the withdrawal of the 48th Brigade (17th ID) from Moirang towards Ningthoukhong.

The fate of the II/214th Regiment provides the most definitive illustration of this imbalance. Tasked with holding the Maibam position, the battalion became the focal point of successive and concentrated Allied assaults. Its ability to reinforce or resupply diminished rapidly under continuous pressure, further undermined by the wider collapse of Japanese logistical support. As these constraints tightened, the unit's position became increasingly untenable. By the end of the confrontation, the battalion had been virtually annihilated, ceasing to exist as a coherent fighting formation. In stark contrast, the British-Indian troops though bloodied and forced to cede ground emerged intact, cohesive, and operationally vindicated.

At this juncture having established the divergent outcomes for the two forces the question of casualties becomes central to understanding the operational significance of these engagements. Although casualty figures can seldom be established with absolute precision, given that contemporary reports are often incomplete, inconsistent, or shaped by authorial bias, they remain indispensable for assessing the scale and intensity of combat. Such figures may be contested, yet they provide a crucial window into both the human cost and the tactical consequences of an engagement. Accordingly, while acknowledging the limitations of the available evidence, it remains worthwhile to attempt a reasoned estimation of losses based on the casualty figures and statistical data presented earlier in this study.

At Maibam, the II/214th Regiment commenced the engagement with approximately 640 (\pm) personnel; by its conclusion, only around 37 (\pm) remained combat-capable, indicating a catastrophic loss of 603 (\pm) men. At Torbung, casualties are estimated at approximately 560 (\pm) between 17th and 23rd May 1944. Beyond these actions, further losses must be considered during the British-Indian withdrawal towards Ningthoukhong. This withdrawal spanned six days over roughly ten miles (17.7 km), averaging about 1.7 miles (2.95 km) per day, and was conducted under intermittent Japanese resistance. However, operational circumstances had changed, and an estimated figure of 300 (\pm) fatalities is considered reasonable, given the comparable duration of the withdrawal to the Torbung engagement, the likelihood of continued contact during this phase, and the casualty rates already established earlier in the operation. Taken together, these figures suggest that this phase of Operation Ayo inflicted an estimated total of approximately 860 (\pm) fatalities. When combined with the losses at Maibam, the scale of attrition becomes unmistakable: 603 (\pm) + 860 (\pm) = 1,463 (\pm) fatalities.

With these losses in view and the stark operational imbalance they reveal a series of consequential questions emerges, inviting further investigation. Why, in the first place, did the IJA single out Maibam as the critical point at which to sever the 17th ID's line of communication, and what strategic reasoning informed this choice over other potential axes of advance? If Maibam was indeed judged pivotal, why was the enterprise entrusted to an understrength battalion whose capacity to execute such a demanding task appears doubtful? Equally thought-provoking is the decision to balkanise the 214th Regiment's combat strength, committing its two battalions to separate and uncoordinated actions rather than concentrating them at the decisive point. Whether these choices reflected miscalculation, logistical constraints, or an underlying rationale not yet fully discerned, they mark out a field of

⁵² Rooney, David, *Burma Victory*, p. 164.

⁵³ Grant, op. cit., p. 146.

inquiry that merits closer archival research and critical reassessment.

Lastly, one important question requires clarification: why did the Allied command adopt a markedly more aggressive posture than usual, committing an entire brigade, an additional battalion, and armoured support to subdue 600 (±) Japanese troops at Maibam a scale of commitment seldom applied elsewhere during the battle? The most immediate explanation is geographical and operational: Maibam lay scarcely three kilometres south of the 17th ID's HQ, and no prudent commander would tolerate a hostile force operating in such proximity to a formation's principal command node.

Neutralising this threat became imperative not only for local security but also for preserving the integrity of the entire divisional front. The engagement occurred amid mounting operational pressure in the Bishnupur sector, where even a minor setback risked disrupting the division's broader plans. With seasoned troops engaged on both sides, Allied commanders concluded that only a swift and concentrated application of force would guarantee the prompt destruction of the Japanese detachment and restore freedom of manoeuvre in this vital sector.

VII. Conclusion

The Maibam and Torbung roadblocks were an important episode during the Battle of Imphal (1944), but they were not mere flanking manoeuvres; they were decisive operations that shifted momentum across the southern and western sectors, thereby influencing the overall course of the battle and highlighting the critical impact of tactical positions on broader outcomes. The confrontation between the IJA and the Allied forces resembled a tense game of chess: the former advanced relentlessly, unhesitant in sacrificing every piece in pursuit of checkmate, while the latter, exhausted and cautious, sought to preserve theirs and make the best of each move on the path to victory. This stark difference in mentality shaped their respective strategies and tactics in pursuit of their objectives.

During the confrontation, the Japanese employed aggressive tactics in both defence and offence, relying on direct, forceful engagement to hold ground and press their advance. Guided by a fanatical ethos of sacrifice and unwavering resolve, they frequently launched reckless frontal assaults, infiltrations, and suicidal charges, prioritising immediate objectives over long-term sustainability. Such an approach inflicted heavy and often unsustainable losses on their own ranks. Their tactics also revealed a lack of strategic resources, but at the same time showed a remarkable tenacity only a few could match. Simultaneously, their meticulously constructed defensive works at Maibam exemplified outstanding military engineering, demonstrating how effective fortifications could bolster resilience amid relentless combat.

On the other hand, British-Indian forces show heart in fluidity and adaptability, adjusting their tactics to rapidly shifting battlefield conditions and increasingly relying on decentralised command, small unit actions, and flexible combinations of firepower.^[54] These developments

signalled the early emergence of modern warfare, in which adaptability and initiative at the local level became central. In essence, their operational mentality resembled water seeking its own level, continually reshaping itself to meet the contours of the battlefield.

Despite the efforts of both sides, neither achieved its intended objectives in full, and the roadblocks remained operational for only about a week (give or take). Both forces were acutely aware of the significance of these manoeuvres, committing fully to their defence and assault. Yet, the British gained the upper hand, inflicting severe losses on Tanaka's forces approximately a thousand casualties.^[55] These were not ordinary soldiers, but crucial reinforcements meant to stabilise a faltering frontline. With their loss, a new strategic shift emerged in the later stages of the battle, altering momentum and setting the stage for subsequent Allied operations.

Even before these engagements, Lieutenant-General Yanagida had warned Lieutenant-General Mutaguchi, as early as April 1944 that destroying the British-Indian forces in the Bishnupur sector or advancing towards Imphal from the south was beyond the capacity of the resources available to him. He cautioned that the British had established a formidable 'wall of steel' along the approaches to Bishnupur, which his limited forces were incapable of breaching. Nevertheless, Mutaguchi remained adamant, insisting that Yanagida continue the advance at all costs.^[56] By the end of May, the situation had deteriorated further, exacerbated by the onset of the monsoon, the continual depletion of supplies, and the destruction of the I and II Battalions of the 214th Regiment, among the finest troops in the 33rd Division.

The engagements at Maibam and Torbung thus proved to be the greatest disaster the 33rd Division had suffered at Imphal. Not only were its finest soldiers decimated, but a substantial portion of the reinforcements sent to bolster their efforts was also destroyed, thereby creating a critical vacuum within the division's already fragile structure. Severely weakened and without adequate reserves to fill the gap, the division was left dangerously overstretched and vulnerable. These twin setbacks marked a decisive turning point in the struggle for the mastership of the Bishnupur sector (southern sector), effectively halting Japanese momentum and shifting the strategic initiative firmly into the Allied hands.

Acknowledgement

I humbly wish to express my heartfelt gratitude to *Akoijam Kiranjit Singh* for his invaluable support and guidance in helping me grasp the fundamentals of map creation for this paper. His assistance played a vital role in shaping the visual framework of this study.

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⁵⁴ It can be argued that these tactical developments arose largely as a reaction to Japanese tactics—such as infiltration, decentralised attacks, and sustained pressure in difficult terrain—and that the interplay between Japanese methods and Allied adaptation helped give rise, at least in part, to

approaches characteristic of modern warfare, rather than reflecting any deliberate attempt to develop new doctrines.

⁵⁵ Allen, Louis, *Burma*, p. 278.

⁵⁶ Lyman, *Japan's Last Bid for Victory*, pp. 153-54.

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