

# The Battle of Kohima

## April-June 1944

### The Battle That Saved India?

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# Lt General Renya Mutaguchi



Commanded Japanese 15<sup>th</sup> Army

Fanatical militarist committed to glory of Japan, its Emperor & himself

Involved in provoking war with China & in capture of Malaya & Singapore

Aimed to conquer India – “March on Delhi”

Expected Indians to rise up against the British



# Quit India!

Most Indians wanted the British out of India – “India for the Indians”

Britain promised gradual devolution of power to dominion status in return for supporting the war

Gandhi & the Congress party called for immediate independence – he & other leaders were arrested & jailed

Wide-scale rioting followed, with ~100,000 arrests & hundreds of deaths

57 British battalions were kept for internal security in India

British troops arriving in India found Indians demanding they leave





# The Indian Army



Despite the civil unrest, > 2 million Indians volunteered to join the Indian army & fight alongside British - largest volunteer army in history

Although many officers were Indian, senior commanders were British





# Mutaguchi's Plan



Huge store depots at Dimapur supplied Chinese in their war with Japan

Dimapur had airfields & good rail connections - held enough supplies to support an army for months

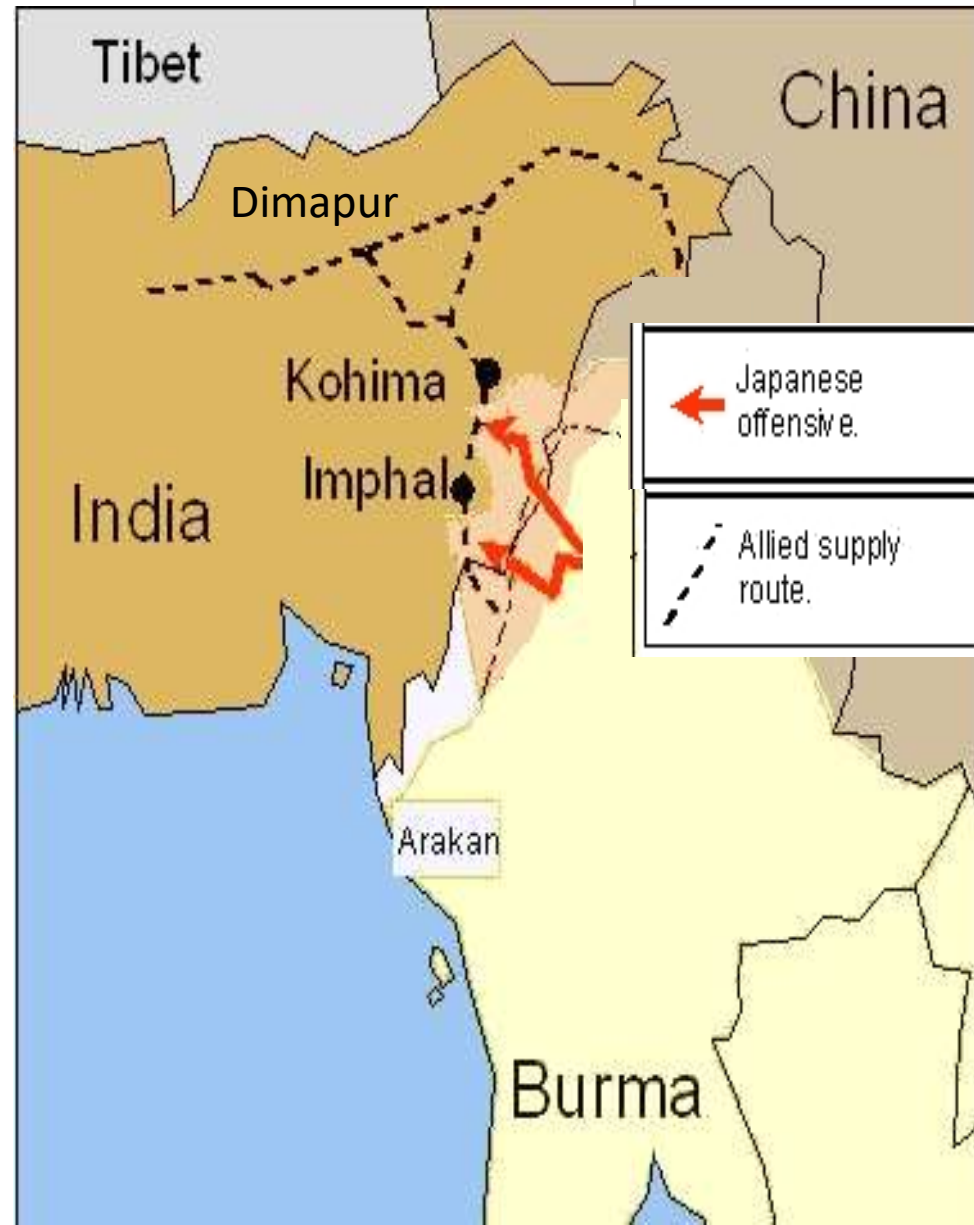
Allied IV Corps was at Imphal

Supplies to Imphal came via Kohima

Capturing Kohima would cut off Imphal

Allied IV Corps, isolated at Imphal, could then be destroyed

Seizing Dimapur would stop supplies to China & springboard invasion of India



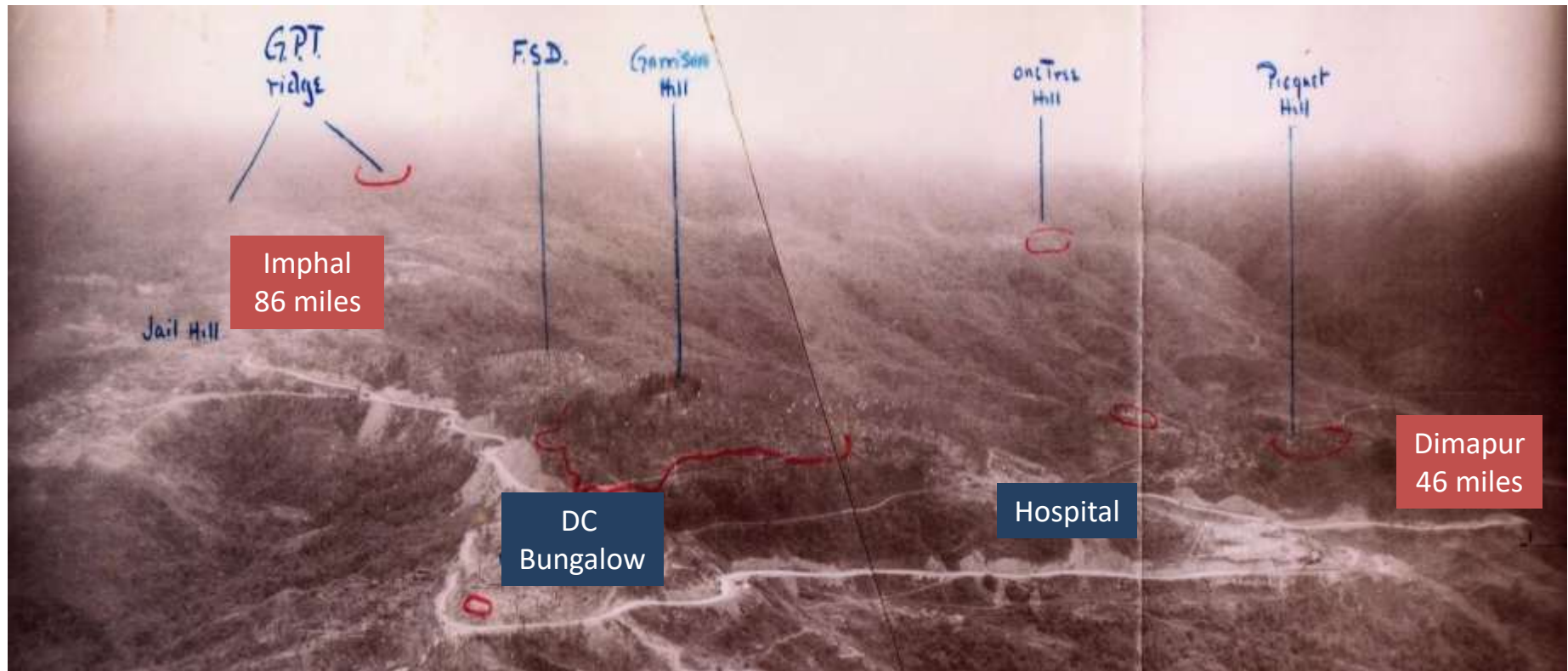
# Kohima

46 miles from Dimapur, the road to Imphal is dominated by Kohima Ridge

Ridge had steep sides & a series of thickly wooded hills along its top

District Commissioner's bungalow sat above road, where it turns towards Imphal

Other buildings included a hospital, jail, bakery & food depots



# Kohima Unprepared

Minimal defences prepared at Kohima as terrain was thought impassable to large units coming from the frontier

Jungle-covered mountains between frontier & Kohima

No roads to Kohima from frontier, just a few narrow, winding tracks

**March 15<sup>th</sup>**, Japanese 31<sup>st</sup> Division set off for Kohima, 120 miles away

Mules & elephants, but no motor vehicles



# Reinforcements

British & Indian troops were air-lifted to Dimapur in response to the invasion

As well as men, air-lifted heavy equipment & pack-animals

**April 4<sup>th</sup>**, 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion Royal West Kents reached Kohima, after air-lift to Dimapur



**April 4<sup>th</sup>**, Japanese reached Kohima on the same day





# Allies at Kohima

4<sup>th</sup> Battalion Royal West Kents – veterans of earlier campaigns in Egypt & Burma – largest Allied unit – confident -

“We were up for it” - Lance Corporal Dennis Wykes

1<sup>st</sup> Assam Regt & 3<sup>rd</sup> Assam Rifles – fought heroically against Japanese advance guard (March 27<sup>th</sup> - 30<sup>th</sup>)

Variety of small Indian, Burmese & Nepalese units with little or no experience



West Kents referred to other units as “odd & sods” – small numbers, often inexperienced – never previously operated together

Disunity of command

**Total: ~1,500 combatants & ~1,000 non-combatants (hospital, admin & depot staff; 75<sup>th</sup> Indian Field Ambulance)**

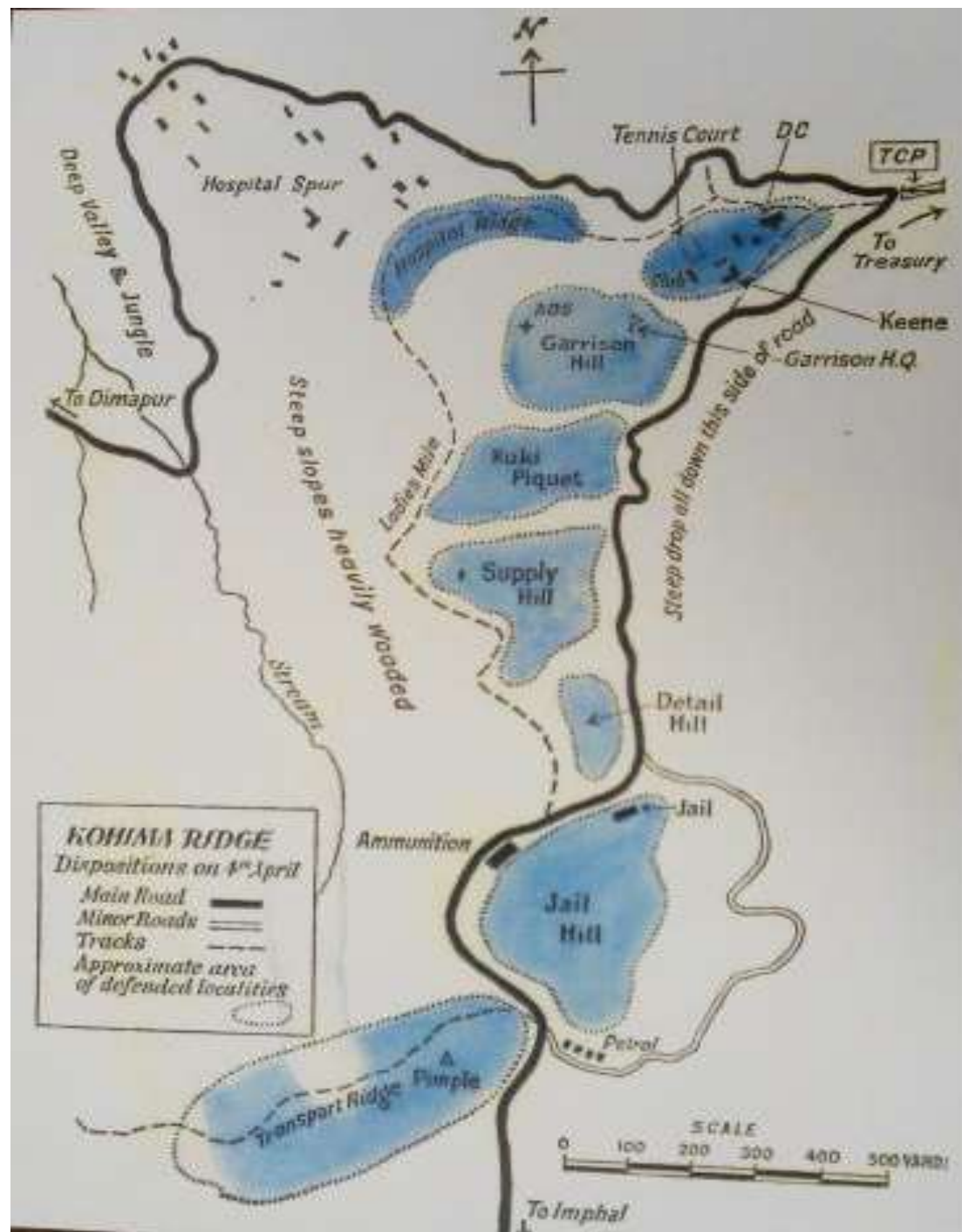


# Allied Positions on April 5th

at start of siege of Kohima

Series of wooded hills extending ~1 mile along ridge – ~1/4 mile wide

Troops in short, shallow, slit trenches or bunkers with timber rooves





# Japanese 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division

Strength estimated at 15,000 – 20,000

Battle-hardened veterans

Only light mountain artillery & no motor vehicles

Led by Lieutenant General Sato – experienced & successful



# Japanese Supply Problems

Japanese only carried enough rations for 20 days, the time it took to reach Kohima

Sato was very concerned about supply

Mutaguchi promised to send supplies, but none came

He expected Sato to capture Allied supplies



# Destination Dimapur?

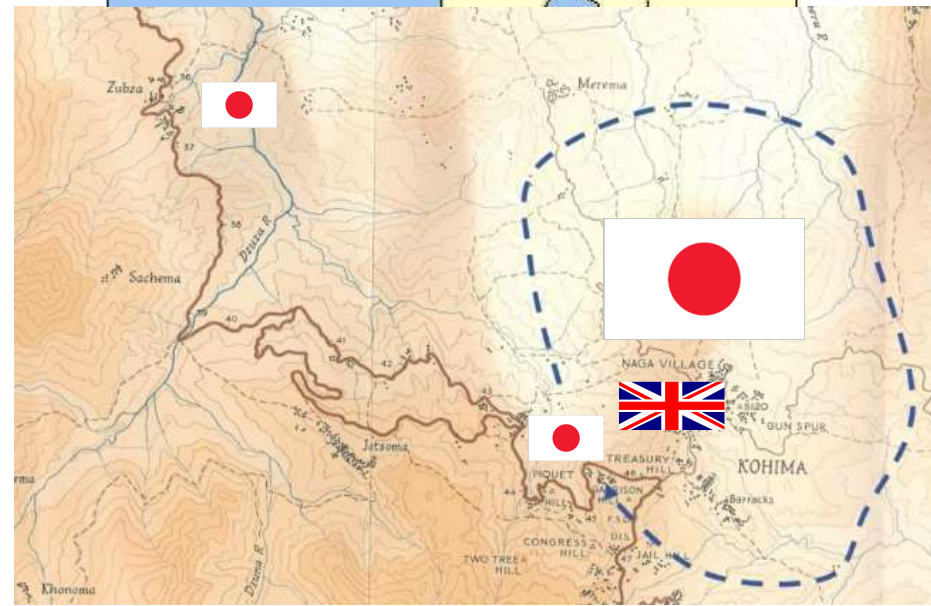
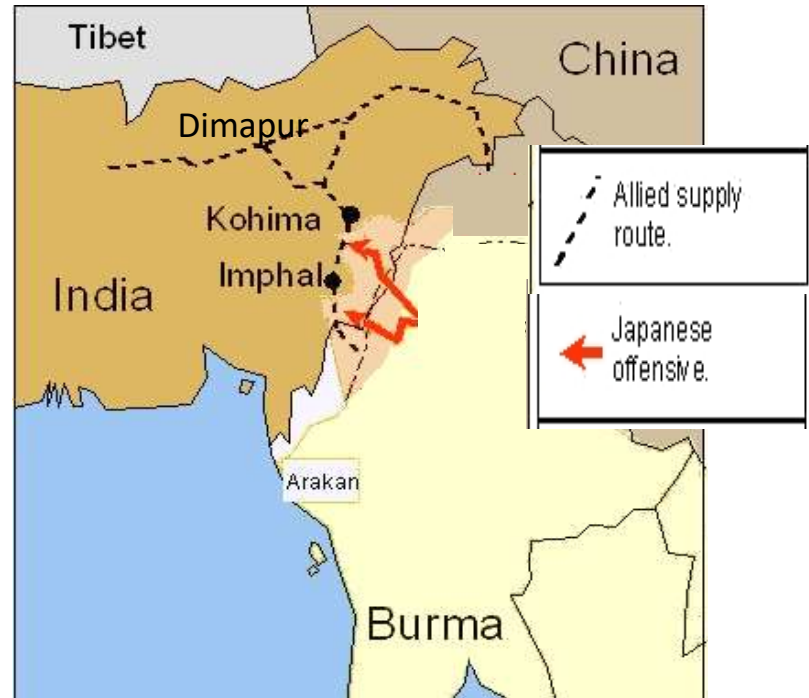
Mutaguchi planned to seize Allied supply base at Dimapur to feed Sato's troops & cut supplies to China

**April 8<sup>th</sup>**, Mutaguchi ordered Sato to press on to Dimapur, but Mutaguchi's superior officer countermanded this order, completely undermining the strategy

**This decision ended the March on Delhi**

Sato built a roadblock cutting off Kohima from Dimapur

British were astonished & greatly relieved to discover that Dimapur was safe



# Supply by Air

Allies attempted to supply Kohima garrison by air – dropped by parachute

Most air drops missed target & were gathered by Japanese – “*Churchill rations*”

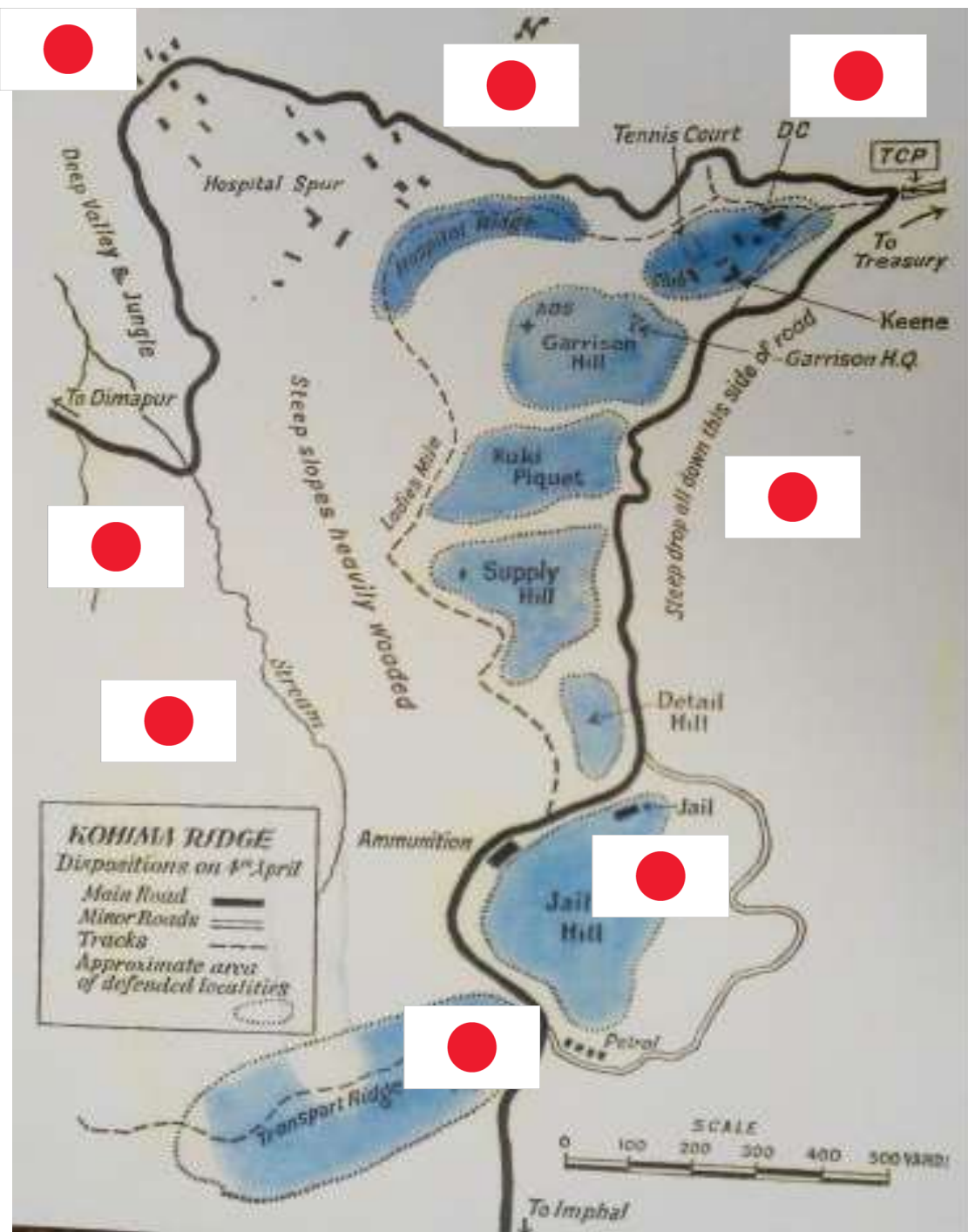


**April 6<sup>th</sup>** Transport Ridge & Jail Hill  
stormed by Japanese

Inexperienced defenders overwhelmed  
with 200 casualties

These positions allowed Japanese to  
overlook adjacent Allied positions

Trees that had covered hills were soon  
stripped of leaves & branches, exposing  
Allied trenches



# Under Constant Fire

Allied positions shelled by Japanese artillery & mortars from surrounding high ground



Snipers watched for movement & shot at anyone who broke cover





# Night Attacks

Attacks came at night

Repeated waves of frontal assaults with maniacal screams “*Banzai*”

Disregarded their high casualty rates – an honour to die for the Emperor

“The Japs made a hell of a racket, blowing bugles, screaming & shouting, psyching themselves up for the charge” – Ray Street, Royal West Kents

Savage hand-to-hand fighting on reaching Allied trenches – kill or be killed



# No Surrender

Japanese taunted Allies & urged them to give up

Reputation for torture & murder of prisoners ruled out surrender for British

“ We often saw our men who, when captured, had been tied to trees ... & used for bayonet practice.”  
- Sepoy Gian Singh, 7<sup>th</sup> Indian Div.



To Japanese, surrender was shameful – suicide was honourable & common to avoid capture

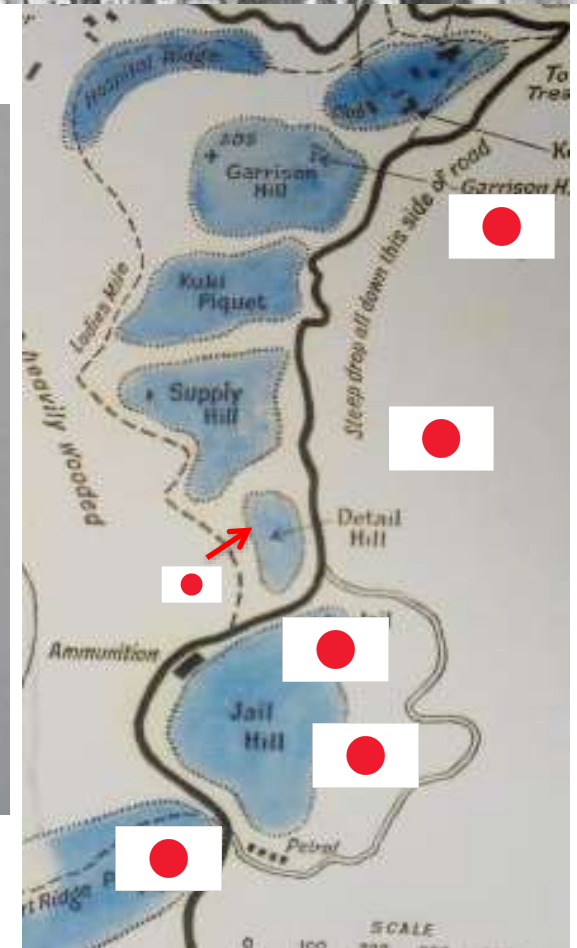
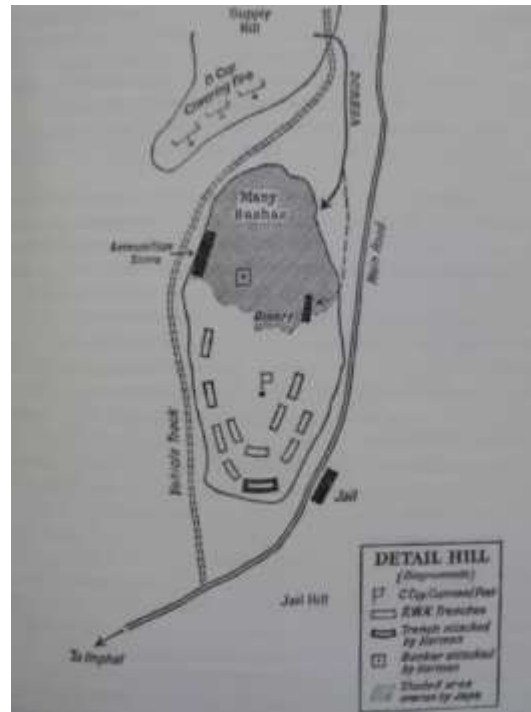
# Infiltration

Effective Japanese tactic was infiltration - sneaking between defensive positions at night

Allies often discovered Japanese behind them

Defenders kept constant watch - alternated 2 hr breaks - became increasingly exhausted

**April 7<sup>th</sup>** Japanese occupied bakery on Detail Hill during night - could only be dislodged by demolishing building with explosives



As sun rose on **April 8<sup>th</sup>**,  
Japanese were again found to  
have infiltrated Detail Hill

Occupied a bunker & set up a  
machine gun overlooking British  
trenches



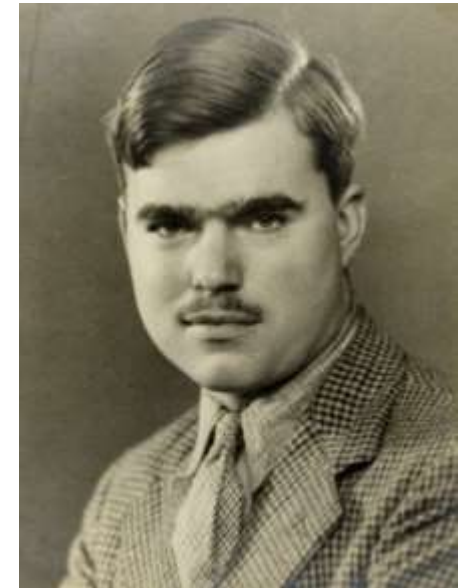
John Harman was a lance corporal in Royal West Kents

29-year old son of a millionaire who owned Lundy Island

Fair-ground fortune tellers had promised him long life, so he  
believed himself safe

Harman crawled alone up the hill & tossed a grenade into  
bunker, killing the Japanese inside

Lifted machine gun over his head in triumph & carried it down  
the hill to his cheering mates





# Lance Corporal John Harman VC

**April 9<sup>th</sup>**, Harman charged alone down Detail Hill at five Japanese with a machine gun

Stopped short & shot four, before bayoneting fifth

Brandished machine gun & then sauntered calmly back towards his mates

Shot in the back – pulled into a trench but soon died in arms of a comrade

Awarded posthumous Victoria Cross

Corporal Taffy Rees had stood cheering Harman, but was hit & paralysed - attempts to rescue him resulted in more injuries - became delirious & lay dying for 8 hours crying for parents



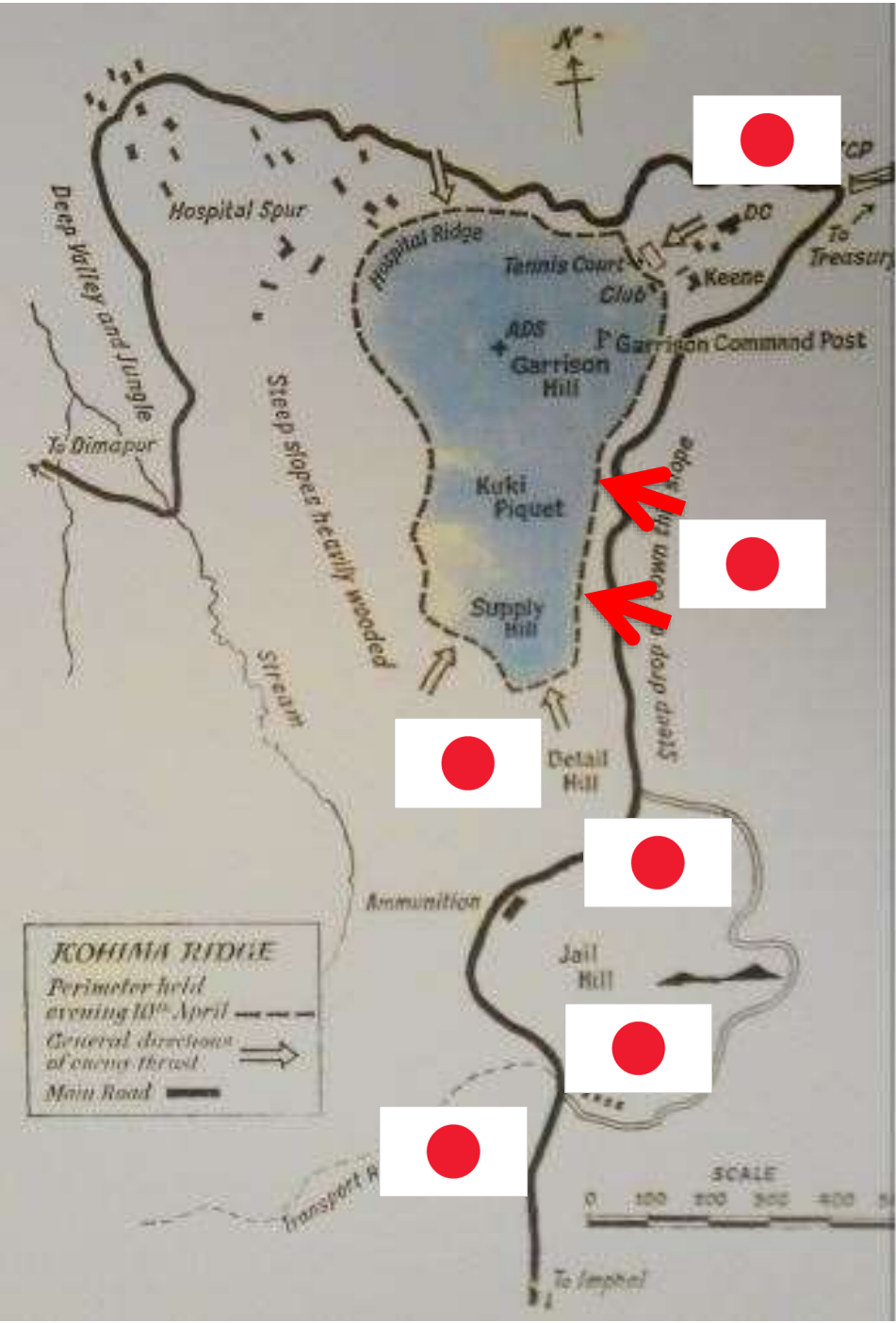
Detail Hill was defended by West Kent C company, but only 15 men remained of ~100 when siege began

Too few to hold on, so Detail Hill was abandoned on **April 10<sup>th</sup>**

Allies pushed back into a shrinking area

Hundreds of fly-blown corpses covered ground in varying stages of decay

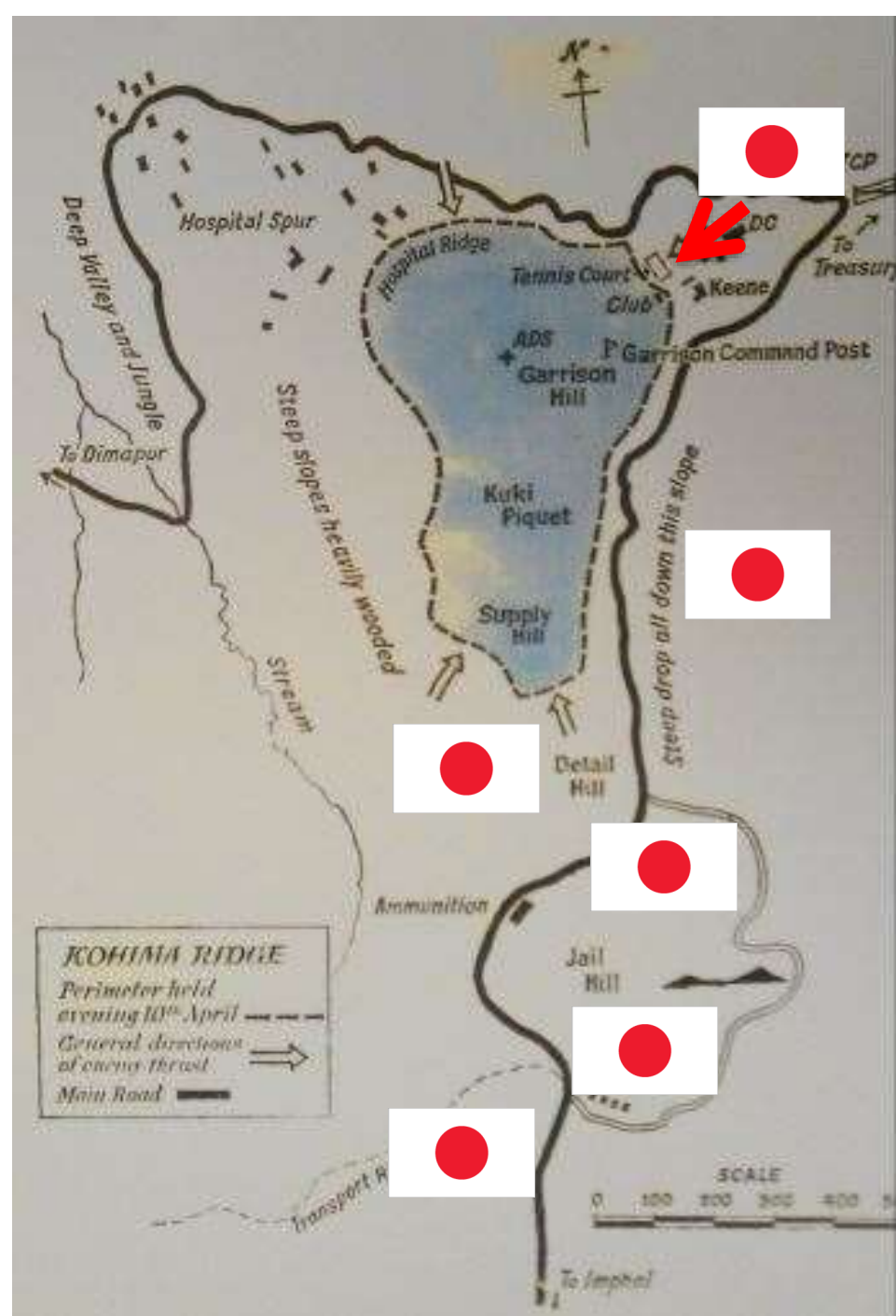
Defenders exhausted & desperately short of water



At north-east tip of ridge, Japanese were dug in just 20 yards from British, separated by a tennis court – had to stay ever vigilant

Repeated grenade attacks, charges & savage hand-to-hand fighting

“They came howling & screaming ...It was terrifying but the ... screaming let you know where they were coming from and so we ... mowed them down.” – Lance Corporal Dennis Wykes, Royal West Kents



By **April 10<sup>th</sup>**, 75<sup>th</sup> Indian Field Ambulance was caring for ~200 casualties - resting in shallow trenches on Garrison Hill – covered in flies

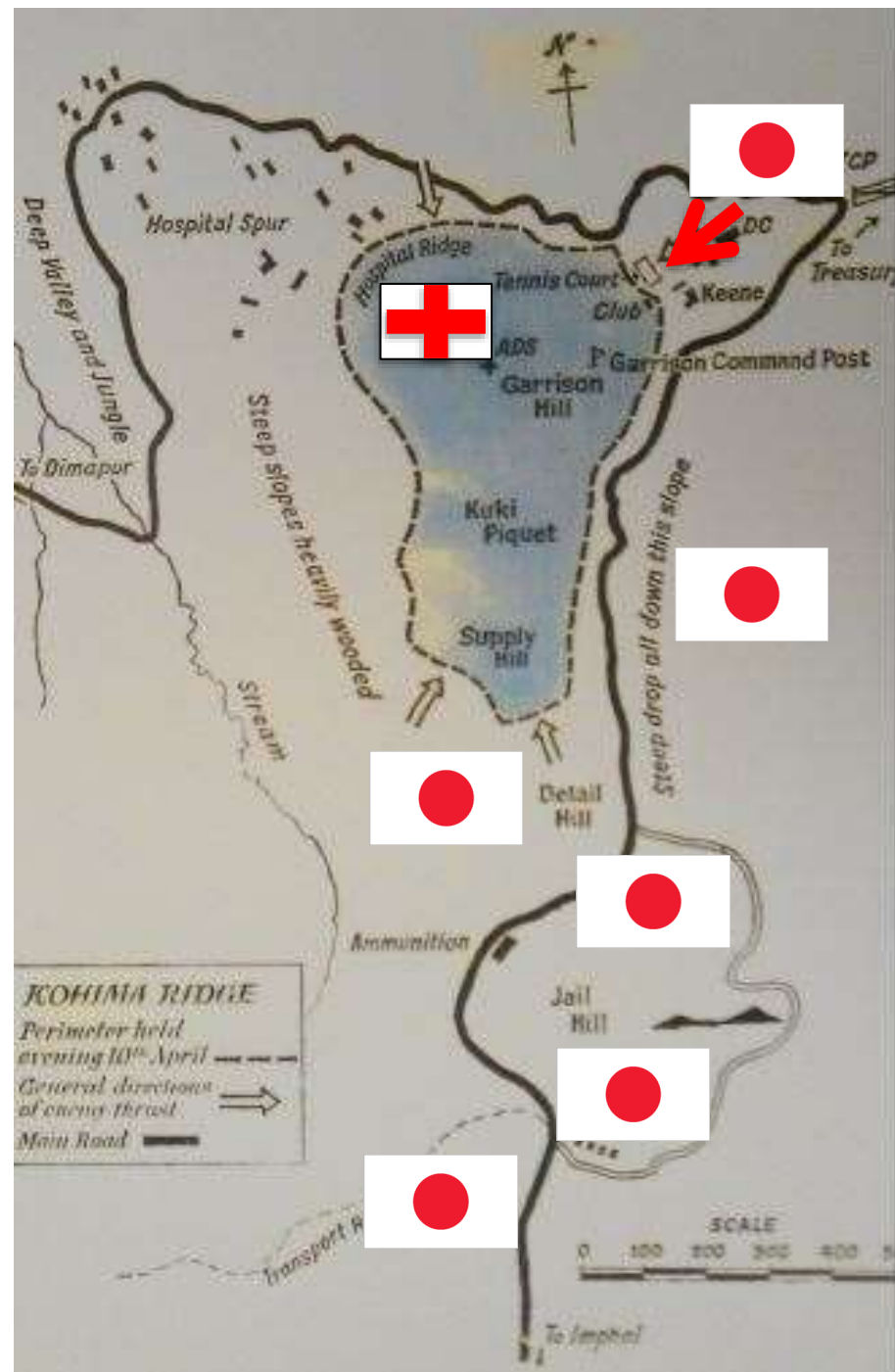
Two pits, ~6 feet deep, used as operating theatres – one had a timber roof & the other canvas – lit by hurricane lamps

Many died of post-operative shock

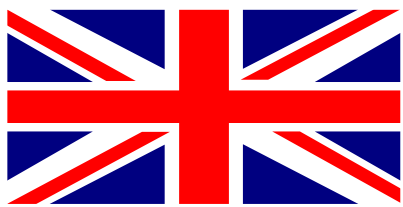
Gas gangrene thrived in the filthy conditions & could kill within hours

“Oh my God, the stink of those dead bodies! It sticks in your nose & mouth, as if death has partly claimed you.” – Lieutenant Bruce Hayllar

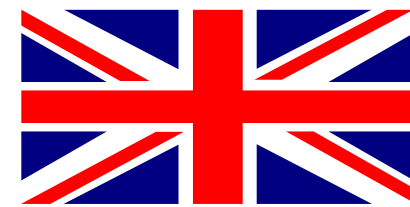
On **April 13<sup>th</sup>**, operating pits took 4 direct hits – 21 killed, including 2 doctors







# Relief On Its Way!



## British 2<sup>nd</sup> Division

### 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade

1<sup>st</sup> Royal Scots  
2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Norfolks  
1/8<sup>th</sup> Lancashire Fusiliers  
4<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance RAMC

### 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade

1<sup>st</sup> Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders  
2<sup>nd</sup> Dorset  
7<sup>th</sup> Worcester  
5<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance RAMC

### 6<sup>th</sup> Brigade

1<sup>st</sup> Royal Welch Fusiliers  
1<sup>st</sup> Royal Berkshire Regt  
2<sup>nd</sup> Durham Light Infantry  
6<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance RAMC

Commanded by Major General John Grover, a WWI veteran who had been wounded 3 times on the Western Front

After Dunkirk, 2<sup>nd</sup> Division protected against invasion the East Riding of Yorkshire (Filey to Spurn Head)

Jungle training in southern India since 1942

Travelled 2,000 miles across India by rail, reaching Dimapur

**April 1<sup>st</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup>**





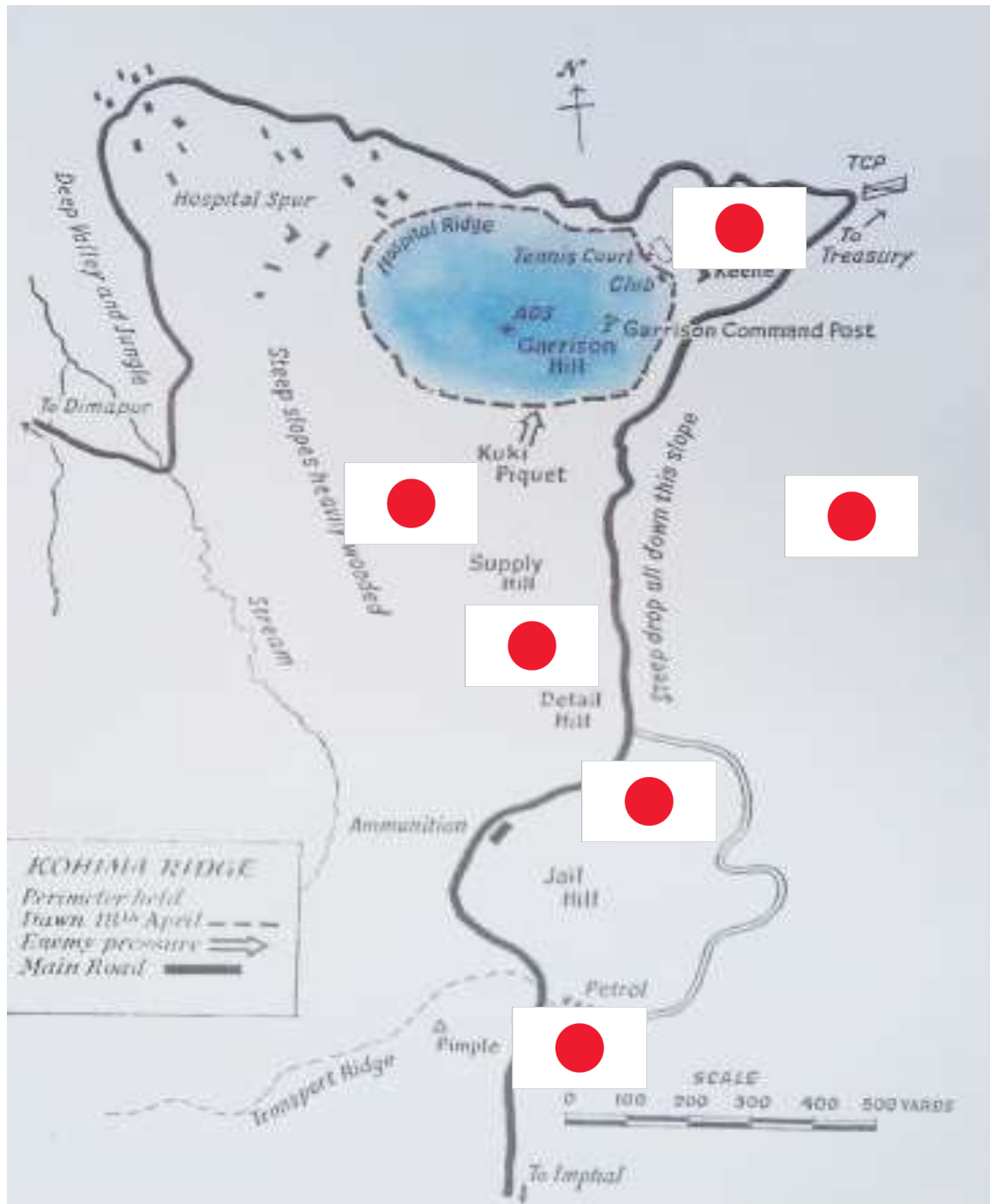
Could see relief approaching

Japanese shelling intensified & attacks became more frantic

During the night of **April 17<sup>th</sup>**, Supply Hill & Kuki Piquet overrun

Tennis Court stood firm

Surviving Allies now crammed onto Garrison Hill - only 350 yards wide



# Relief!

April 18<sup>th</sup>, 1/1 Punjab & 2 Div arrived - tanks & lorries parked below ridge

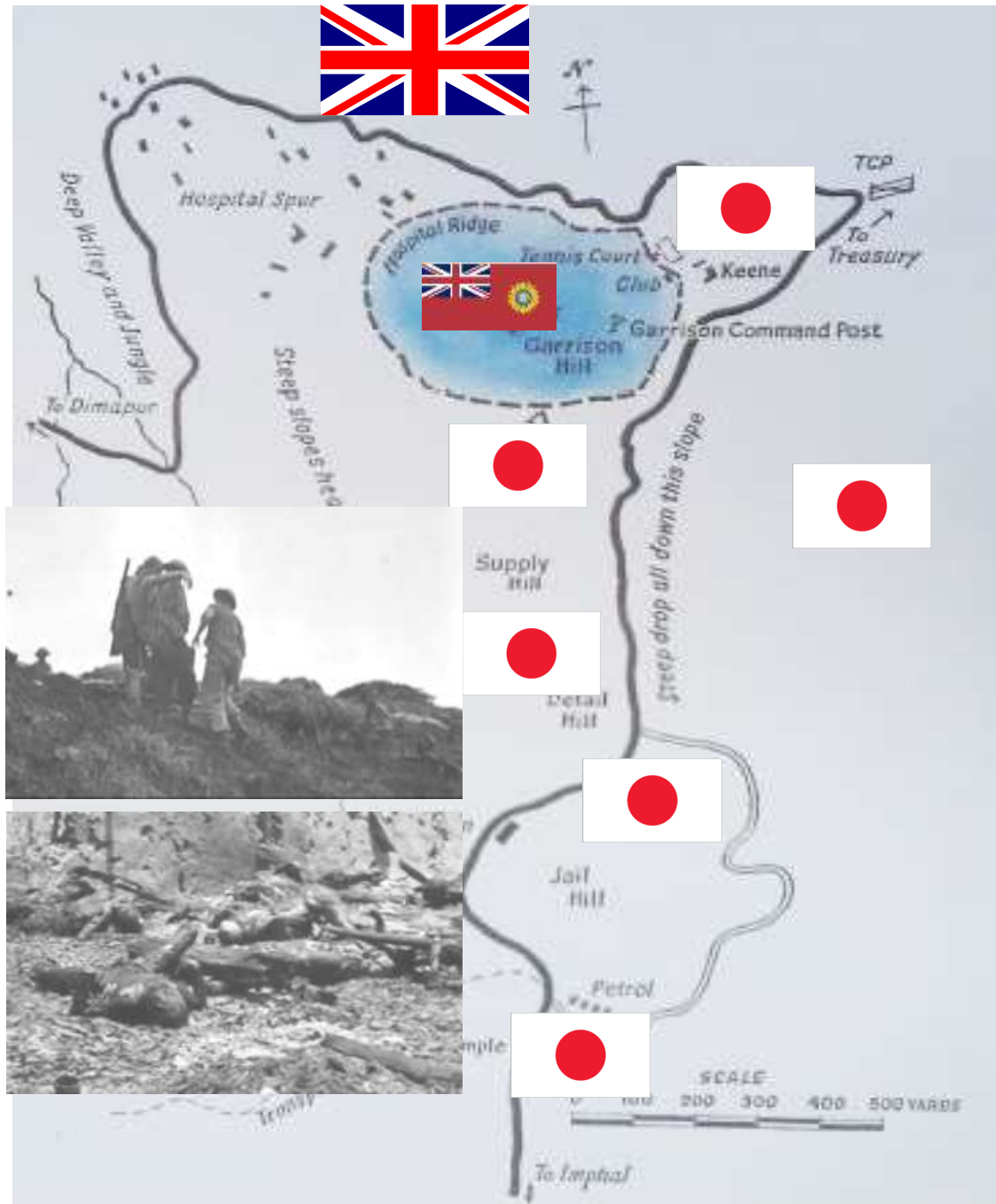
Over 600 wounded carried off ridge

More casualties from snipers & shells

Of the 446 West Kents who arrived on April 4<sup>th</sup>, 278 were dead or wounded

Slow, dangerous replacement of fresh troops for exhausted, cadaverous garrison

Relieving troops retracted at stench of excrement & rotting flesh

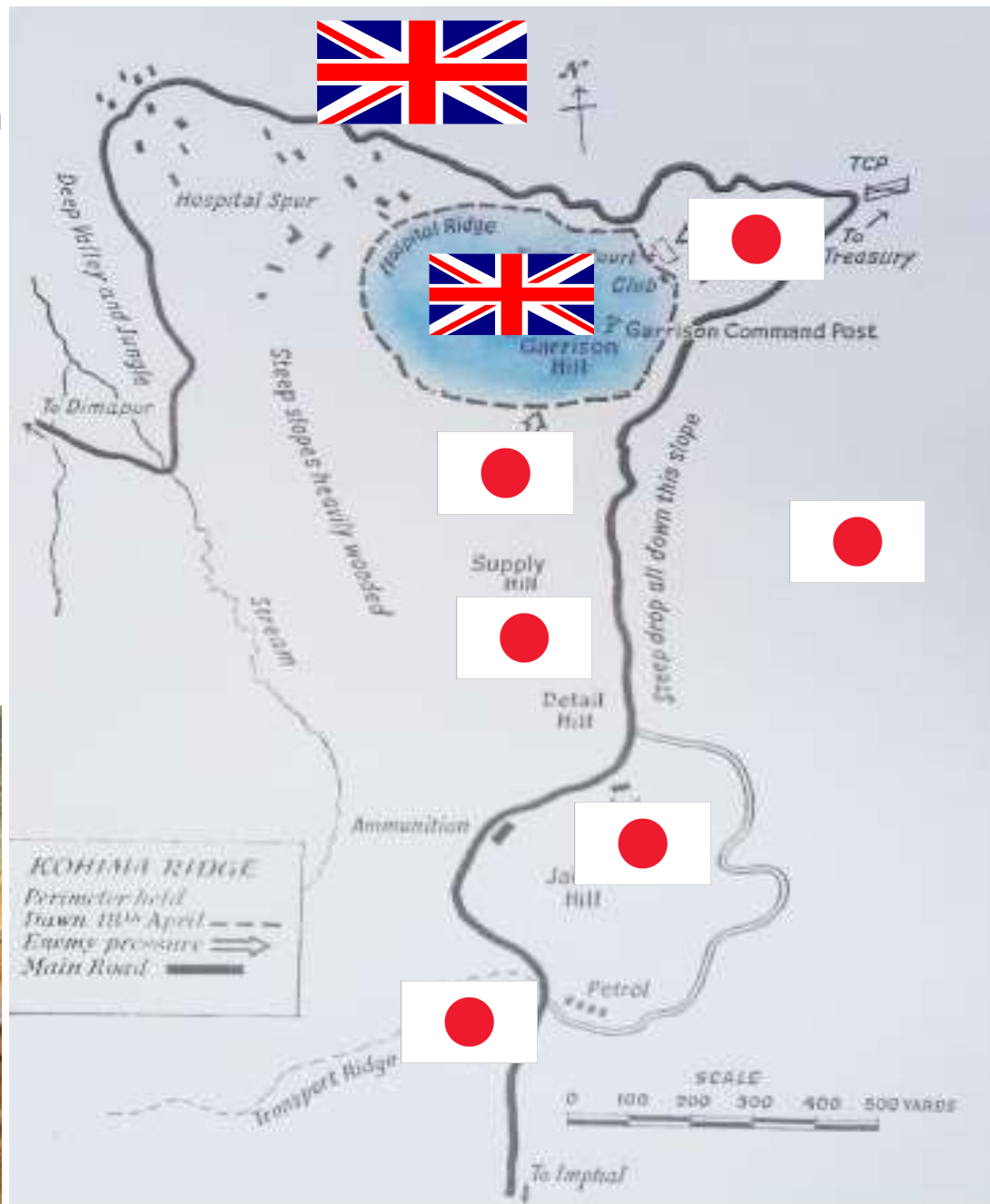


# Retaking Kohima

Essential to drive Japanese from Kohima to re-open road to Imphal

Japanese were firmly entrenched in hundreds of bunkers giving mutual support with overlapping fields of fire

Had to be destroyed by infantry with grenades or pole charges, bunker by bunker – slow & very costly



# Retaking the Tennis Court

To drive Japanese from the tennis court, a bulldozer made a track wide enough for a tank to be winched up the steep slope

Tank's gun was able to blast Japanese bunkers at close range



# Kohima Ridge Retaken

Japanese were receiving no supplies & were starving

**April 30<sup>th</sup>**, Sato signalled “31 Division at limit of its endurance”.

GB 2<sup>nd</sup> Division was reinforced by 7<sup>th</sup> Indian Division, but Japanese clung to Kohima Ridge until **May 15<sup>th</sup>**

Astonishing tenacity & endurance



# A Fighting Retreat

Japanese still held positions blocking road to Imphal - Allied attacks repulsed with heavy losses

**June 1<sup>st</sup>** Sato asked Mutaguchi for permission to withdraw – it was refused.

**June 4<sup>th</sup>** Sato ordered withdrawal anyway. “Our swords are broken and our arrows spent. Shedding bitter tears, I now leave Kohima”.

Fought a series of delaying actions to slow allied advance

**June 22<sup>nd</sup>** Supply line to Imphal restored when Durham Light Infantry of British 2<sup>nd</sup> Division met up with 5<sup>th</sup> Indian Division advancing from Imphal



# The Bleached Bones Road

Like Sato's 31<sup>st</sup> Division, Japanese divisions investing Imphal fell back into Burma

Thousands died from disease and starvation during the retreat

Of the 65,000 combatant troops who had invaded India in March, 81% were casualties (30,000 killed & 23,000 wounded) – only 600 were taken prisoner

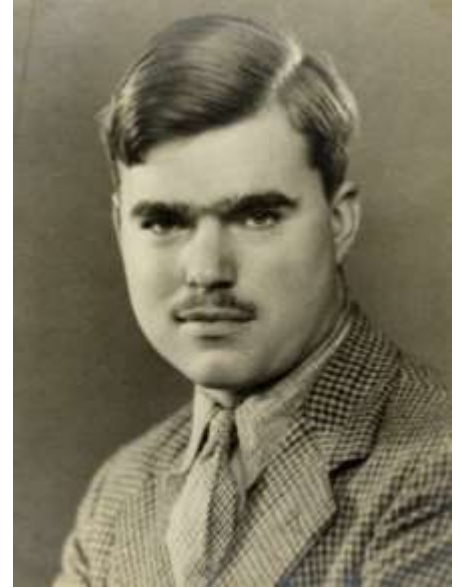
Japanese bones are still being unearthed

A simple monument commemorates them





# West Kents at John Harman's Grave



# Allied Dead Buried at Kohima



# The War Graves Today





BETOKA SWU PHOTOGRAPHY

# Tennis Court



# 2<sup>nd</sup> Division Memorial, Kohima



After 41 years of continuous overseas service, 2<sup>nd</sup> Division returned to York in 1983, from whence it had departed in 1942



Queen Elizabeth II inspected the troops at Imphal Barracks on May 16<sup>th</sup> 1983  
“This year you have come back to a part of the Country where you are well-known and warmly welcome.”

# 2<sup>nd</sup> Division Memorial, York Minster







## 2<sup>nd</sup> Division Memorial, York Minster



**Veterans of Sato's 31<sup>st</sup> Division**

