The Battle of the Tennis Court?? Sounds like a kid’s fantasy game, doesn’t it? In fact, the battle of Kohima and Imphal in a rugged part of northeastern India may be the most important military engagement you have never heard of! And the tennis court was literally at the center of the conflict.

Let’s recall how widely the British Empire extended prior to World War II. Figure 1 is a folded newspaper/book-rate wrapper sent in 1896 from the British base in Gibraltar to the 42 Bengal Infantry in Kohima, India. Although it was mailed from Gibraltar on October 9, the Kohima backstamp is dated sometime in November. Communication remained an issue during World War II, due to the isolation and rough terrain in Eastern India and the need to encrypt important messages. In 1942, the Japanese conquered Burma but at that time they did not invade eastern India. Kohima is part of Nagaland in northeast British India, just north of the princely state of Manipur (see map at right). Imphal is the capital of Manipur. This remote area was important militarily because the road between Kohima and Imphal was the main supply route for Burma.

During 1944, the struggle for control of India was overshadowed by the D-Day invasion of Normandy which began on June 6, 1944. The Allied forces and the newspapers understandably focused their attention and resources on recapturing France from German control, but the daring attack on Kohima by Japan was designed to disrupt British rule in India, and to prevent the British from retaking Burma and resupplying China.

In 2013, Britain’s National Army Museum sponsored a contest to vote on Britain’s most important battle. The results? Not Waterloo, not D-Day, but Kohima and Imphal was voted Britain’s greatest battle! According to Robert Lyman, the author of “Japan’s Last Bid for Victory: The Invasion of India 1944,” the Japanese consider this battle to be their worst defeat ever. In 2004, Benham sponsored and paid for an official Royal Mail postmark to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the battles of Kohima and Imphal (Figure 2). The photograph gives a hint of the challenges in moving troops through the jungles in monsoon season.
On Remembrance Sunday in 2012, Queen Elizabeth II chose to honor the remaining veterans of the Battle of Kohima at Buckingham Palace, and Prince Andrew traveled to East India to lay a wreath at the World War II Cemetery at Kohima.

To set the stage for this conflict, on January 19, 1944 General Renya Mataguchi received orders to march 100,000 troops of the Japanese 15th Army from Burma to Imphal. The censored military postal card in Figure 3 was sent from Troop 7368 Yoshida Unit in Burma to the parents of the sender in Osaka. The soldier named Kou Uesaki talks about the recent New Year’s holiday in this tropical country, which came in “the middle of an event here.” He expresses concern for the health of his parents during the cold winter in Japan. The red military post markings include the censor mark of Taniguchi. The message and markings do not include specific dates or locations, but this unit formed part of the 15th Army that attacked Imphal.

The Japanese carried only 3 weeks of rations per soldier, counting on capturing British supplies in a quick attack. Their goal was to block the road connecting Kohima and Imphal before the monsoon season arrived in May, cutting off Imphal. The mission of the British 14th Army under General William Slim was to keep the Kohima Road supply line open, which would give British forces the opportunity later to reopen the Burma Road, retake Burma, and deliver aid to China.

When the Japanese attacked in March, the defenders were predominantly Indian troops. The 50th Indian Parachute Brigade held out on a hill outside Kohima for six days despite a lack of fresh water. This delayed the Japanese and allowed the Allies to reinforce defenses in Kohima and Imphal, preventing the Japanese from obtaining supplies from those towns. In contrast to 1942, the Allies’ air superiority allowed them to use airdrops to resupply their troops with 14 million pounds of rations and large amounts of ammunition.

How does the tennis court come into play? When the Japanese troops advanced on Kohima, they attempted to capture Kohima Ridge, a rough assortment of hills and gullies overlooking the road to Imphal. This area included Garrison Hill and the adjoining tennis court outside the bungalow home of Charles Pawsey, the District Commissioner for the Naga Hills area. Figure 4 shows a modern view of the hill, including a large terraced military cemetery.
for casualties from this battle. The Indian Army built trenches on one side of the tennis court at the northeast portion of Kohima Ridge, and the Japanese built a protected trench on the opposite side of the court. The two sides exchanged fire across the tennis court from April 9 to April 18, using grenades, artillery, and mortars. At one point the British lowered a tank down the slope, resting it on the baseline of the tennis court, and fired at the Japanese from a distance of only 20 yards.

Finally, on April 18 the Indian Punjab Regiment, with armored support, relieved the Kohima garrison. Fighting continued across the tennis court until May 10 when the Japanese withdrew from the immediate area of the tennis court. Figure 5 is dominated by the memorial monument with the Cross of Sacrifice, inscribed “When you go home, tell them of us, and say: For your tomorrow, we gave our today.” Beneath the Cross you can see the white stone lines of the reconstructed memorial tennis court, a silent reminder of the ferocious battle.

The siege of Kohima continued until May 13, when the Japanese were forced to abandon Kohima Ridge. Although the Japanese continued sporadic attacks until mid-July, their troops had little food or ammunition, and no longer posed a threat to the rest of India. In the battle of Kohima and Imphal, the Japanese lost 55,000 troops and the Allies lost 17,000. Lord Mountbatten, the commander of all Allied troops in India, called this battle “India's Thermopylae.”

The rest of the Japanese army retreated on May 31, leaving a small rear guard to maintain the blockade of the road from Kohima to Imphal. On June 22, British and Indian troops finally finished clearing the road to Imphal at Milestone 107 and ended the siege. The 50th anniversary of the end of the siege was commemorated on June 22, 1994 by a “Victory at Imphal” postmark. Ironically, the cover shown in Figure 6 is franked with a D-Day stamp, so even on a Kohima/Imphal cover, the Normandy invasion overshadows the conflict in British India. On July 18, 1944 the Japanese High Command instructed their troops to withdraw to the River Chindwin in Burma. The hopes of the Japanese that they could invade India and promote Mahatma Gandhi’s independence movement had met the reality of the fierce Indian and British defense of Kohima Ridge and the tennis court. The Japanese 15th Army was destroyed, and the Japanese would not be able to launch another significant attack against India.

Covers from Kohima during this period are scarce but I needed one for this story. After much searching I have acquired the military cover in Figure 7 postmarked on July 18, the date that the Japanese withdrawal from the Kohima area to Burma was activated. Using Virk’s book on Indian Army Post Offices, I’ve determined that FPO 122 served the 20th Infantry Division at the Imphal Front in 1944. The octagonal C 35 marking is a civilian censor from Bombay (C) which processed the letter out of India. It is a common censor marking, but its use on an eastern front of operations cover is unusual. Calcutta (Code ‘A’) would have been the...
Figure 7. The key cover for this article: postmarked on July 18, 1944, from Kohima to Scotland on the day the Japanese army began their retreat to Burma.

geographically closer and usual censor station for covers from Kohima. The Unit Censor X 168 marking indicates the specific Field Army Censorship station which examined this cover at the time of mailing.

Despite being on active service, Rev. Fraser franked the cover, marked “newspaper only,” with two 4 anna India Postage stamps. (The Indian Post Office refused to permit the British Army Post Offices to use British stamps until the end of 1944.) Because the cover was sent air mail, the free surface mail concession for troops which took effect in June 1942 did not apply. The 8 anna franking is correct based on the Postal Department decision of December 1940 to reduce airmail letter rates from 14 to 8 annas for active service members. The continuation of a postage fee was designed to discourage the use of airmail in favor of surface transport. I am surprised that a chaplain sent to a remote and rugged foreign country during a war was required to pay to send an airmail letter home, but those were the rules in WWII in India.

A tennis court will probably never again play such a central and dramatic role in a major battle. By exploring this unexpected and amazing tennis court story, we can all learn a bit more about eastern India and its important role in World War II, and about the philately of wartime India.

Acknowledgments:
John Warren provided confirmation that the cover in Figure 6 was censored in Bombay, though the reason for that remains unknown. Bobby Liao from APS Translation Service, along with Yukie Kawai, translated Figure 3 from the Japanese.

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