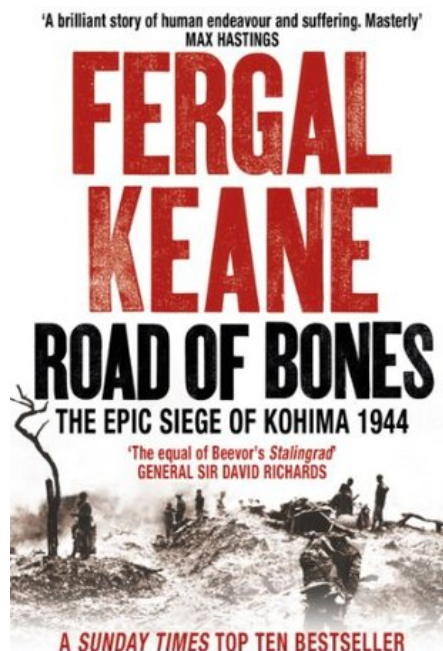




Road of Bones: The Siege of Kohima 1944 - The Epic Story of the Last Great Stand of Empire

Fergal Keane

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(This ebook contains a limited number of illustrations. Maps are best viewed on a tablet.)

The epic story of one of the most savage battles of the Second World War.

Kohima. In this remote Indian village near the border with Burma, a tiny force of British and Indian troops faced the might of the Imperial Japanese Army. Outnumbered ten to one, the defenders fought the Japanese hand to hand in a battle that was amongst the most savage in modern warfare.

A garrison of no more than 1,500 fighting men, desperately short of water and with the wounded compelled to lie in the open, faced a force of 15,000 Japanese. They held the pass and prevented a Japanese victory that would have proved disastrous for the British. Another six weeks of bitter fighting followed as British and Indian reinforcements strove to drive the enemy out of India. When the battle was over, a Japanese army that had invaded India on a mission of imperial conquest had suffered the worst defeat in its history. Thousands of men lay dead on a devastated landscape, while tens of thousands more Japanese starved in a catastrophic retreat eastwards. They called the journey back to Burma the 'Road of Bones', as friends and comrades committed suicide or dropped dead from hunger along the jungle paths.

Fergal Keane has reported for the BBC from conflicts on every continent over the past 25 years, and he brings to this work of history not only rigorous scholarship but a raw understanding of the pitiless nature of war. It is a story filled with vivid characters: the millionaire's son who refused a commission and was awarded a VC for his sacrifice in battle, the Roedean debutante who led a guerrilla band in the jungle, and the General who defied the orders of a hated superior in order to save the lives of his men. Based on original research in Japan, Britain and India, 'Road of Bones' is a story about extraordinary courage and the folly of imperial dreams.

Road of Bones: The Siege of Kohima 1944 - The Epic Story of the Last Great Stand of Empire Details

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From Reader Review Road of Bones: The Siege of Kohima 1944 - The Epic Story of the Last Great Stand of Empire for online ebook

Alan says

I must admit that I tend to focus my ww2 reading on the western and eastern fronts. My knowledge of the Pacific battles is very limited, the soldiers who fought in places like Burma are known as the forgotten army. This is about the battle for Kohima Ridge with a mixed commonwealth army fighting the Japanese, an intense and brutal battle as horrific as Stalingrad though in different ways. Reading this made me want to learn more about General Slim, who many regard as the British army's finest commander in WW2.

Peter says

This was a very detailed book about the siege of Kohima giving the progress of the war in the far east and who the generals were in the British and Japanese armies. The lead up to the battle and the tenacious way the British and Indian troops fought as they had heard how prisoners were treated. The British had had a disastrous campaign and desperately needed a win at all costs. This was eventually achieved in horrendous conditions with terrible casualties on both sides but the Japanese suffering greater casualties as they were attacking fixed positions. The aftermath of the fighting is also discussed and how the soldiers found it so difficult to settle in to civilian life. The Nagas local head hunter tribes who helped the British whose way of life was completely changed with Indian independence and were not given the help they deserved. It would be hard to imagine conscripts fighting in the same way now.

Campbell Mcaulay says

Rorke's Drift, Stalingrad, Dien Bien Phu, Khe Sahn. The siege, held by a vastly outnumbered force against a persistent enemy is one of the most moving and enduring of war stories. Most will have heard of at least two of the aforementioned examples, but the battle for Kohima is one that may be new to many. It, along with the concurrent Siege of Imphal turned the tide against the relentless Japanese Imperial Army in Burma and signalled the beginning of the end of the war in the far east.

Much of the war in Burma was fought around a series of towns, villages and junctions on the all-important Lines of Communication - roads - running through the jungle between Burma and India. In 1944, The Japanese Army launched a 15,000 man offensive to take India from the hands of its Imperial masters and one of the battles focussed on Kohima, a tiny town in the Naga hills that was defended by a paltry 1,500 men of the British and Indian Armies. The perimeter was barely a mile in circumference and in places only a hundred yards across. The battle was fought, as are all sieges, with great savagery and persistence on both sides, but the level of that savagery is remarkable. One of the most hotly contested areas in the town was the District Commissioner's tennis court, and it's sobering to read the description of this part of the battle which sounds more like something from The Somme, thirty years before...

"Lance Corporal Dennis Wykes was also dug in with A Company at the tennis court, In old age his heart would quicken as he described the Japanese attack. 'They came howling and screaming and full of go. It was terrifying but the only good thing was the screaming let you know where they were coming from and so we got our lines of fire right and mowed them down. Wave after wave, we cut them down with machine guns. I

didn't know if I was killing one or a dozen. I just swept the machinegun through 'em and that was it."

Keane's account may not be the first and perhaps it says nothing new, but it brings the story of this terrible battle to a new generation of readers. It is very very well written; as good as any other military history I have ever read. It not only provides a clear and comprehensive account of the battle itself but also describes the political situation in the Far East and the wider campaigns leading up to the moment. There are plenty of maps (although they are distributed rather randomly through the paperback version) and a nice mix of tactical description and personal account. There are some fine pen pictures of the leading personalities of the battle, including Slim and Generals Sato and Mutagachi, and also of the humble squaddies. Importantly, Keane has looked to both sides of the line and has gathered accounts from the Japanese, Indian, Gurkha and Naga combatants as well as the British. Indeed, the description of the operations by the Naga hill men (led by the indomitable Ursula Graham Bower) are a fascinating addition to the story.

"An (Assam Regt) officer moving into his position at the tennis court found several (West Kent Regt) men leaning on the parapet in firing positions. He ordered them to move and then he pushed one. There was no response. They were all dead."

Highly recommended

Tony says

As you would expect from Fergal Keane, solid, well-researched, balanced and entertaining. This is how history should be written.

Michael says

This is a superb account on one of WWIIs forgotten battles. The siege of Kohima in India by the Japanese Imperial army against basically one British/Indian division.

This is one of those rare history books that takes you to the heart of the battle and makes you feel the story as much as read it.

An amazing account of mans endurance and the devastation of battle.

Pauline Hayton says

A gripping, true story. A historical event few people know about and yet probably one of the most important battles of WWII. Detailed, factual and sometimes downright gory.

Dom Parker says

It is enough to say that this book moved me to tears on several occasions. "When you go home tell them of us and say for their tomorrow we gave our today"

Dipanjana says

War is savage, war is madness, war is demon, war is macabre, war is tragedy. Fergal Keane's "Road of Bones: The siege of Kohima" is in general terms yet another tale of brutal madness and utter savagery which was very common all around the world in the turbulent days of World War 2. But in broader sense the book depicts the epic battle of struggle for survival of the two mighty empires from the pre-war world dominated by imperial powers. The sun of the British empire was already about to set in the eastern horizon while on the other hand the megalomaniac dream of imperial Japan to be the imperial master of the Asiatic empire was already turning into a nightmare of defeat, doom and destruction. While the British empire was desperately trying to restore its prestige as the mightiest empire of the world by inflicting a major blow to the invading Japanese army, the empire of the sun was frantically playing one of its last gambles by invading India and crushing the British-Indian army on the way in the hope of turning the tide of the war in their favour. Indeed Kohima Imphal battle, from this perspective was not merely a battle but a struggle for survival for both the empires.

The Battle of Kohima is also quite enigmatic and confusing from the Indian point of view. If an Indian is asked which side would he have taken had he been offered the option to choose a side, I am sure he would be confused to answer the question. The tale of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose and his Indian National Army had become a legend in independent India despite several attempts by the British imperialists to brand him as 'the Quisling of India'. Even Soheva Angami, the Naga Havildar who devotedly fought for the Britishers in the Battle of Kohima admitted to the author of the book that he respected Subhash Bose as a person ("I think his ideas were good. Even though we were opponents I came to respect him and what he was fighting for"). Let alone millions of Indian people both in India and abroad, who regard Bose as one of the most selfless patriots of India (Even Gandhi referred Bose as "the patriot of patriots"). The point is the battle of Kohima and Imphal was unique in the sense that apart from the Britishers against the Japanese, the battlefield of Kohima and Imphal witnessed the savage clashes between Indians who were loyal to British and Indians who were loyal to Bose's ideals and to the noble cause of India's independence. Indians fighting along with their British comrades were struggling to save India from Japanese imperialism while on the other hand Indians loyal to Bose were fighting to liberate India from British imperialism. Really such a battle is an exception in itself.

Now come to the point. What impress me most after reading this book are the selfless bravery and sacrifice of John Harman in the battle of Kohima, the guerrilla fight of Ursula Graham Bower along with her Naga subordinates, the personality of Charles Pawsey (The deputy commissioner of Naga region) who refused to leave the Naga people to the doom and destruction in the hands of the Japanese invaders and instead stayed with and assisted them throughout the war and last but not least the fellow-feeling and sympathy of Japanese commander Kotoku Sato for the ordinary Japanese soldiers who fought under him and were battered and devastated by thirst, hunger and diseases.

In nutshell Fergal Keane's account of Kohima battle is an honest attempt by the author to present before the posterity the horrors of war and the selfless sacrifice of thousands and thousands of soldiers from both sides who gave their lives for the causes of the respective empires which they represented.

Michael Griffin says

Excellent book and very well written.

Chris Mallows says

Max Hastings/Sunday Times April 2010

The men of Britain's wartime 14th Army in Burma bitterly resented the fact that nobody at home took much notice of what they were doing. By 1944, Churchill knew that the Americans were heading for victory in the Pacific. The British had suffered repeated jungle defeats at Japanese hands, even in 1943 when they enjoyed superiority of numbers.

Only with the utmost reluctance did the prime minister agree to prepare for a new offensive, to meet insistent American demands to open the land route to China through north Burma. But, even as British and Indian forces assembled in northeast India, the Japanese launched three divisions on their own spoiling operation.

The armies collided at two Assamese road junctions, separated by less than 100 miles, which passed into the legend of the British Army. Between April and June 1944, Imphal and Kohima witnessed some of the fiercest fighting of the eastern war. Fergal Keane focuses on the siege of Kohima, telling a brilliant story of human endeavour and suffering from both sides.

The speed of the Japanese advance caught 14th Army's commander, Bill Slim, by surprise. Until the last moment, the British failed to identify Kohima as the objective of General Kotoku Sato's 31st Division. When the Japanese advance guard met Imperial army pickets outside the little town, many of the Indian soldiers fled.

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Keane recognises that the Indian army's legend is overblown. Some of its units did wonderful things, but some were poor soldiers. Though the British cherished romantic delusions about Indian loyalties, it is unsurprising that some changed sides as prisoners, joining the so-called Indian National Army to fight (unimpressively, as the book recounts) for the Japanese.

Colonel Hugh Richards, charged with commanding the defence, had to improvise positions with a ragtag garrison, of which the most coherent element was a battalion of the Royal West Kents. "Chaos and low morale reigned supreme," in the words of a British officer. Much of Keane's tale relates how the Kents, initially 444 men, held the low hills of Kohima with a medley of Indian soldiers through days of relentless Japanese mortaring, sniping, shelling and day and night assaults by screaming infantry. The district commissioner's bungalow and tennis court became scenes of ghastly carnage.

The author paints a host of vivid pen portraits: of Lieutenant Colonel John Laverty, the harsh, unlovable Kents' commanding officer, who despised Richards and sought to ignore his authority; of district commissioner Charles Pawsey, who insisted on staying through the siege to protect the interests of his beloved Naga tribesmen. Corporal John Harman was a misfit, embittered by growing up with a millionaire father who was eventually jailed for embezzlement. On the battlefield he displayed suicidal courage, seeming to think himself unkillable. When at last he was hit and lay dying in the arms of his company commander, who called for stretcher-bearers, Harman said: "Don't bother, sir...I got the lot. It was worth it." He received a posthumous VC.

At the outset, the British held a ridge a mile long. After nine days cut off, the West Kents had lost more than a third of their strength, and the perimeter had shrunk to a 400-yard square. The trees on Garrison Hill, where the British made their final stand, were stripped of foliage by shellfire and grenades, which both sides used in

thousands. A mortally wounded Welsh soldier named Williams pleaded pathetically with Lance Corporal Dennis Wykes: "Don't let me die!" But Wykes murmured grimly to himself: "I can't stop you dying, mate." Nobody could, at Kohima. Water was chronically short, and the local Naga people suffered terribly.

Keane has taken immense pains to gather accounts of the Japanese experience. Their general had recklessly overextended his supply lines, and within weeks his soldiers began to starve. Some of their attacks were designed simply to seize "Churchill supplies" (British rations), as they called them. Japanese courage was as great as ever, but the British were bemused by the manner in which Sato continued to batter headlong at Kohima, instead of bypassing it. On April 20, a relief column broke through, enabling the West Kents' ragged, filthy, bearded survivors to withdraw amid cries from Indian soldiers they passed of "Shabash!" ("Well done!")

Other British units thereafter endured more weeks of costly fighting to push back the Japanese. Men fought from room to room of Pawsey's shattered bungalow. But the tide had turned. The Japanese, always short of artillery, were reduced to six rounds a gun a day. Not only were Sato's men starving, but they were also wracked by every kind of tropical disease.

Their retreat from Kohima, which began on May 13, created the road of bones that gives Keane his title. While British and Indian forces lost about 1,200 dead and 3,000 wounded in the battle, the Japanese suffered 7,315 casualties, mostly dead.

The defence of Kohima, and the larger battle further south at Imphal, decided the campaign. Though hard fighting lay ahead when Slim, in his turn, advanced across the Chindwin river into Burma, the 1944 actions had smashed the best Japanese forces in the region. The British and Indian armies restored their self-respect, after years of failures and humiliations.

Slim won chiefly because he displayed good generalship — after some initial mistakes — and possessed formidable US air supply-dropping resources, command of the skies, armour and much more artillery than the attackers. But British infantry also performed a remarkable feat of arms, and Keane's masterly narrative does full justice to their achievement.

Road of Bones by Fergal Keane
HarperPress £25 pp576

Tarn Richardson says

Fergal Keane is an incredibly talent writer, an artist with words and the ability to bring the horror and the panic of armed conflict to life in the reader's mind. It details the story of Kohima, and the Burmese conflict where a small force of British and Indian soldiers took on the might of the Japanese army and won. As brilliant as it is horrifying, Keane captures in 500 short pages the magnificence of man and the cruel folly of leaders who will do anything to achieve their dream of power. Without doubt one of the best books of WW2 I have read.

Ranjan BASu says

One of the very few "GOOD" books depicting WW2 on Indian Soil

James says

I recommend this book to anyone with an interest of the war with Japan. The writing style Fergal Keane uses flows and he presents some very good information which is greatly enhanced by his interviews with the participants.

Adiel Simick lepcha says

great book!gives a chilling account of the Japanese retreat from Burma after their debacle at Kohima.

Robert Hepple says

I have read a little about the battles around Kohima, but never before a book entirely devoted to it, and quite a long one at that. The detail is incredible, and the supporting references numerous. There is a strong emphasis on the background of a declining British Empire, the end of British influence in India and Burma, and the terrible cost in human misery. The progress of the battle is described often in terms of incompetent leadership by both the British and the Japanese, with victory going to the side making the fewest mistakes. A balanced account is provided of both British and Japanese actions, with bone-crunching detail of sacrifices on both sides. Very gritty, and quite amazing.
