EASTERN EPIC

History and Biography

By COMPTON MACKENZIE

*

GALLIPOLI MEMORIES
ATHENIAN MEMORIES
GREEK MEMORIES
AEGEAN MEMORIES
WIND OF FREEDOM
MR ROOSEVELT
DR BENES

COMPTON MACKENZIE

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These maps, together with all those inset in the text, have been prepared by K. C. Jordan, F.R.G.S.

FOREWORD

ON October 23rd 1945, a few days before I was due to go into hospital I received from Captain J. L. Shaw of the Historical Section of the War Department, Delhi, the following invitation written from the India Office in Whitehall:

'The Government of India wish to publish the story of India's efforts during the war in the form of a popular novel, but strictly accurate as to detail. For this purpose they wish to secure the services of an author of repute in the historical field, and would be grateful if you would consider the proposition.

'A book of 90–100,000 words is envisaged with approximately 32 pages of illustrations. All material available with the Government of India would be placed at your disposal, and you would have a completely free hand in what was selected. The War Historical Section in Delhi is now engaged on the co-ordination of material.

'It would be necessary to do a certain amount of preliminary work in Delhi, and the Government of India would secure air priorities both ways. The amount of research needed there, or whether the book was completed there, will be at the discretion of the author.'

I replied on the same day:

'I should have been proud and happy to undertake the task suggested, but I fear that my health will not allow me to make the journey to India. It's most disappointing for me to have to refuse, but I fear it is inevitable.'

Captain Shaw was not prepared to take 'no' for an answer for which I shall always be grateful to him, and, after an interview, asked his chief, Lieut.-General T. W. Corbett, to decide whether my visit to India could be postponed until the end of the summer next year.

The reply came in a telegram from G.H.Q., India:

'Commander-in-Chief hopes you will accept writing of Indian Popular History. Every facility and consideration will be given.'

By the time I sailed for Bombay in October 1946, Lieut.-General Corbett had retired and his place had been taken by Brigadier W. E. H. Condon, the work of the Historical Section of the War Department having been for some time centred in Simla. Meanwhile, the scope of my task had been much widened. An intensive tour had been planned to take me all over India, to Iraq and Syria and Egypt, to the Western Desert and Tunis, to Khartoum and Eritrea,

to Assam, Burma and Arakan, to Malaya, Java, Hong Kong and Japan, to the North-West Frontier and Nepal. I failed to reach Japan in April 1947 owing to an acute attack of influenza; I failed to reach Java owing to political difficulties; and I failed to get further west in North Africa than Tobruk owing to the problem of transport. However, I was able to visit the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, thanks to the co-operation of the Indian Naval Authorities. In June 1947, after a fortnight's rest at Simla, I flew back to England, enjoyed the advantage of talks with various generals no longer in the East, visited most of the battlefields of Italy and Tunis on which troops of the Indian Army had fought and returned to Simla toward the end of July 1947.

On August 15th India and Pakistan became Dominions within the Commonwealth and free to declare their sovereign independence a year later. What affected my task immediately was the division of the old Indian Army into the Army of India and the Army of Pakistan as well as the division of the Indian Navy and the Indian Air Force. The 'Popular History' planned for the autumn of 1947 was no longer a feasible operation, and after discussion it was decided that I should write a much more comprehensive history of the glorious part played by the old Indian Army in the Second World War and the inestimable contribution to victory made by the old India. It was further decided that I should publish the diary of my wanderings over the East; this volume has been published under the title *All Over the Place*.

I devoted the last months of 1947 to an intensive study of the records of the Historical Section at Simla, and in January 1948 I enjoyed three months' holiday in the Seychelles Islands before going on to visit Kenya, where I was able to learn a great deal about the Indian Army and the campaigns in North Africa from Lieut.-General Corbett and about the Eritrean and Malayan campaigns from Lieut.-General Sir Lewis Heath. I was back in England by the end of May 1948.

As soon as I started to write *Eastern Epic* I realised that the more comprehensive history planned at Simla would be a much more formidable task than it had sounded in conversation. Indeed, I soon came to the conclusion that it would require two volumes of at least 275,000 words each. I now offer the first volume and I hope that the second volume will be published next year.

It is difficult, indeed it is impossible, for me to express adequately the obligation under which I rest toward those officers, British, Indian and Pakistani, who by their frankness, their informativeness

and their sympathy have helped me continuously from the time I landed in Bombay over four years ago.

Few sexagenarians are granted the felicity of making a number of new intimate friends on the edge of the allotted span, and I can but pray devoutly that when *Eastern Epic* is finished I shall not be judged to have disappointed those friends.

My first thanks are owed to Field-Marshal Sir Claude Auchinleck and Lieut.-General T. W. Corbett who were responsible for the original idea of a short popular history to be published before the fruit of the labour and research in the Historical Section of the War Department could be made visible. With them I must couple Brigadier W. E. H. Condon, who succeeded Lieut.-General Corbett and was responsible for making the extremely complicated arrangements for the thousands of miles I travelled to visit the battlefields and cantonments of the Indian Army. To his constant efforts *Eastern Epic* owes much more than these few words of acknowledgement can express. When in due course Brigadier Condon handed over what became the Combined Inter-Services Historical Section of the Ministry of Defence (India and Pakistan) to the direction of Dr. Bisheshwar Prasad I received from this distinguished scholar every sympathetic courtesy and all unstinted help for which I record my thanks. I am equally indebted to Major-General Wadalia and Brigadier Harnarain Singh of the High Commission of India and to Major-General Hayaud Din and Brigadier Syed Ghawas of the High Commission of Pakistan for help over military matters.

It is a grief to me that Field-Marshal Lord Wavell cannot read this volume, for he gave me much encouragement and he is one of the heroes of this epic. Great Britain, India and Pakistan owe him much more than has always been made apparent by some chroniclers of the Second World War. Vice-Admiral Lord Mountbatten was as encouraging as his predecessor at Viceroy's House, and I hope to celebrate worthily in the second volume the great part he played with Field-Marshal Sir Claude Auchinleck in restoring British prestige in the East.

General Sir Mosley Mayne and General Sir Geoffry Scoones afforded me invaluable help during their terms as Military Secretary at the India Office: I express my gratitude. Field-Marshal Sir William Slim, too, has put me deep in his debt, and will, I hope, let me put myself deeper during the writing of the second volume.

I have been privileged to enjoy personal talks with Field-Marshal Lord Alexander, General Sir George Giffard, General Sir Rob Lockhart, General Sir Neil Ritchie, General Sir Montagu Stopford, General Sir Philip Christison, Bt., General Sir Archibald Nye,

General Sir Frank Messervy, General Sir Miles Dempsey, Lieut.-General Sir Francis Tuker, Lieut.-General Sir Douglas Gracey, Lieut.-General N. M. Irwin, Lieut.-General A. E. Percival, Lieut.-General Sir H. R. Briggs, Lieut.-General Sir Roy Bucher, Lieut.-General Ross McCay, Lieut.-General Dudley Russell, Lieut.-General Sir Frederick Browning, Lieut.-General Sir Alexander Galloway, Major-General Ouvry Roberts, Major-General Denys Reid, Major-General T. W. Rees, Major-General Sir Eric Goddard, Major-General W. D. Lentaigne, Major-General B. W. Key, Major-General D. T. Cowan, Major-General Cyril Curtis, Major-General Maurice Chambers, Major-General S. Greeves, Major-General Bruce Scott, Major-General J. G. Bruce, Major-General C. H. Boucher, Major-General Sir Robert Mansergh, Major-General C. M. Maltby, Major-General J. N. Chaudhuri, Major-General C. G. Nicholson, Major-General W. A. Crowther, Major-General G. W. Erskine, Major-General Sir Treffry Thompson, Major-General C. Pert, Major-General W. D. Stamer, Major-General H. Stable, Brigadier J. C. Martin, and Brigadier J. G. Smyth, V.C.

If I try to name all the other Indian Army officers and members of the Indian Civil Service and Malay Civil Service and officials of the Colonial Office who devoted time and trouble to making my 60,000 miles of touring in Asia and Africa a mentally profitable experience this foreword will look like a directory. Let me express my warm gratitude to them as a great company.

I must, however, thank by name several to whom I am under a particular obligation—Brigadier Kenneth Bayley, Brigadier A. E. Cumming, V.C., Lieut.-Colonel W. W. Stewart, Major P. Petit, Major P. Poonoose and Major-General Mohammed Yousuf who were my conducting officers through Burma, Malaya, Tunis, Italy, North Africa, Eritrea, Syria, Southern India and the North-West Frontier; to Brigadier Michael Roberts who made it possible for me to explore Arakan and Assam; to Sir Charles Pawsey who gave me an opportunity to grasp the Kohima fighting and to Brigadier Miles Smeeton who drove me from the Irrawaddy to Meiktila by the same road he had taken in command of Probyn's Horse in February 1945; to Brigadier C. I. Jerrard who gave me an illuminating visit to the scene of the Mawchi Road fighting; and to Lieut.-Colonel C. C. Dykes who gave me an equally illuminating visit to the scene of the Mandalay fighting. Nor must I omit to thank Admiral Sir Geoffrey Miles for letting H.M.I.S. *Narbada* (now H.M.P.S. *Jhelum*) take me to Arakan and to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands during a fortnight's unforgettable cruise.

I wish to thank H.H. the Maharaja of Nepal for granting me the privilege of visiting Nepal and Lieut.-Colonel Sir George Falconer for the trouble he took to make that visit such a valuable experience.

I owe much to Lieut.-Colonel A. E. Cocksedge and all the British and Indian officers at the Historical Section in Simla for the trouble they took to plan my movements and provide me with information, and a special word of gratitude to Mr. Philip Woodruff Mason, I.C.S., in Delhi.

Finally, I must record the devoted help of Lieut.-Colonel J. G. Thomson, I.A.M.C., and Major Peter Goodwin in helping to make many arduous journeys so comfortable.

This tale of the effort by India and the Indian Army in the Second World War is *not* an official history. The Government of India gave me the opportunity to reach places many of which would have been impossible for the ordinary traveller to reach. What I made of that opportunity was to be my own affair. I have tried to repay that generosity and trust, but I am only too sharply conscious how far my work falls short of the ideal military history. Nevertheless, I humbly venture to hope that those of my own countrymen who read *Eastern Epic* will apprehend by the time the second volume is concluded that in the Second World War the old Indian Army played as vital a part as the old British Regular Army played in the First World War. That wonderful old Indian Army no longer exists, but its traditions survive and will survive in the new Armies of India and Pakistan. I have heard from every observer qualified to judge nothing but enthusiastic praise for the spirit and discipline of those new Armies. I have been particularly moved by Field-Marshal Sir Claude Auchinleck's recognition of that spirit and discipline because his devotion was an inspiration to the old Indian Army, and the Armies of India and Pakistan are still proud of his example.

The great act of statesmanship which secured the good will of both India and Pakistan by an Imperial abdication unmatched in the world's history has not even yet been appreciated in all its virtue except in Asia. If these pages should contribute so much as a mite toward a keener appreciation throughout the British Commonwealth they will not have been written in vain.

In that hope and with deep reverence I dedicate *Eastern Epic* to the noble memory of the old Indian Army and to the glorious future of the young Armies of India and Pakistan.

COMPTON MACKENZIE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

FOR their kind permission to quote extracts from the undermentioned works, I am indebted to: His Majesty's Stationery Office (Despatches, Orders and Directives, Telegrams, Reports and War Diaries); the Rt. Hon. Winston S. Churchill, P.C., O.M., M.P., Messrs. Cassell and Co. Ltd. and The Houghton Mifflin Company (*Their Finest Hour*); Lieut.-General A. E. Percival, C.B., O.B.E., D.S.O., and Messrs. Eyre and Spottiswoode Ltd. (*The War in Malaya*); Lieut.-General H. Gordon Bennett, C.M.G., C.B., D.S.O., and Messrs. Angus and Robertson (*Why Singapore Fell*); Messrs. Macdonald & Co. Ltd. and William Sloane Associates Inc. (*The Stilwell Papers*, copyright 1948 by Winifred A. Stilwell); Mr. Geoffrey W. Tyson, C. I. E. (*Forgotten Frontier*); Mr. Antony Brett-James and Messrs. Gale and Polden Ltd. (*Ball of Fire*); Lieut.-Colonel G. R. Stevens, O.B.E. (*History of the Fourth Indian Division*); and the Armed Forces Information Officer (Successor to the late Director of Public Relations), Ministry of Defence, Government of India (*The Tiger Strikes* and *The Tiger Kills*).

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THE following bibliography records only a fraction of the material at my disposition for writing the first volume of *Eastern Epic*. Many regimental histories and war diaries could be added to the list, and on top of them a mass of information provided by individuals. Although I believe I have read every book published about the campaigns described in this volume, I failed to keep a record of those I read without acquiring them—deliberately, I may add—because I was anxious to concentrate exclusively upon the Indian Army, and did not want to be tempted by the feats of other troops.

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PROLOGUE

THE beginnings of the Indian Army may be traced to the Indian watch-keepers who served the East India Company as guards for their trading-stations. Gradually as the Company expanded battalions were formed and ultimately these became the nucleus of the three armies of the Presidency of Madras, the Presidency of Bombay and the Presidency of Bengal. These armies were separate establishments, but in 1748 they all came under one Commander-in-Chief, Major Stringer Lawrence, who may be considered the first of that long line which ended with General Sir Claude Auchinleck a few months from exactly two centuries later.

Stringer Lawrence gave a chance to the genius of Robert Clive ıo in Bengal in 1757 was the first to organise sepoy battalions with uropean uniform, training and arms and commanded by British ficers. Until then the Indian troops of the Company had used their vn weapons and dress and had been commanded by Indian ,fficers. Madras adopted Clive's system in Bengal with six battalions, raised in 1759; Bombay followed suit in 1767.

After the Great Mutiny, which it should be realised, was closely bound up with a revolt in parts of India against British dominion, all the troops of the Company were transferred to the Crown and in 1861 there was a general reorganisation of the Army in India in the course of which the regular cavalry regiments, except three of the Madras cavalry, were abolished, and the rest of the cavalry was based on the *sillidar* system by which for a sum down and a maintenance grant, every man provided his own horse, his own arms and his own military attire. British officers in such irregular regiments were very few, and in infantry battalions they were reduced from 22 for a battalion to six. The Indian artillery was abolished at the same time. The Presidency armies remained and the units of the Indian Army as a whole, including the Punjab Frontier Force and the Hyderabad contingent, amounted to 42 cavalry regiments, 142 infantry battalions and three corps of engineers, about 135,000 men in all.

In 1886 the Punjab Frontier Force, hitherto controlled by the civil authority, was placed under the Commander-in-Chief, and in 1895 the Presidency armies were abolished in favour of geographical area commands. Regiments descended from the old P.P.F. were called 'Piffers,' and that famous nickname is still affectionately preserved in the Pakistan Army of to-day.

the cost of organising the Army in India. The net recognition of those 'distinctly ponderable' advantages was an annual contribution by His Majesty's Government of £1,500,000. That was in 1933. In 1943 it was costing £1,500,000 to keep the war going for three hours.

It had already been recognised in 1928 that India was behind in rearmament and re-equipment, and whatever was saved every year on the Defence Budget had been carried forward to what was known as the Defence Reserve Fund. Then came that ambiguous financial crisis which brought in the National Government of 1931, after which such drastic cuts were made in the India Defence Budget that it was impossible to save anything and indeed barely possible to avoid falling still farther behind.

By 1936 the international situation had become so menacing that a review of defence policy was imperative; but by then political and financial opposition in India itself had hardened, and in India the Defence Budget was reduced, although India had now undertaken the organisation of her own naval defence with the help of an annual contribution by H.M. Government.

A long correspondence concluded with a telegram from India to the Secretary of State which began:

> *We think definitely that best contribution we could make towards security of the Empire as a whole is to bring our armed forces in the shortest possible time to a state of most possible complete readiness for war.*

After long discussions it was decided in September 1938 to increase the annual grant from the British Exchequer toward Indian defence to £2,000,000 and to make a special grant of £5,000,000 for the re-equipment of certain British and Indian units. Meanwhile, the Commander-in-Chief had appointed a Committee under the chairmanship of Major-General C. J. Auchinleck[1] to consider the modernisation, composition and re-equipment of the Army in India.

This Committee found that rapid modernisation was immediately necessary if the Army in India was to perform its allotted tasks in war in co-operation with Empire forces.

> The Army in India . . . is showing a tendency to fall behind the forces of such minor states as Egypt, Iraq and Afghanistan. Judged by modern standards the Army in India is relatively immobile and underarmed and unfit to take the field against land or air forces equipped with up-to-date weapons.

[1] Field-Marshal Sir Claude Auchinleck, G.C.B., G.C.I.E., C.S.I., D.S.O., O.B.E. (1st Punjab Regt.).

The Committee went on to say:

> Already drafts from the British Army from the United Kingdom on arrival in India have to be retrained in the use of obsolete weapons and outworn tactical methods, while British units on leaving India have to be taught afresh before they can take their place in British field formations.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> All high explosive has, at present, to be imported, and there is no production of motor vehicles, wireless sets, power tools or machinery in general.

The conclusions reached by the Auchinleck Committee formed the basis for the recommendations made by the Expert Committee on the Defence of India under the chairmanship of Admiral of the Fleet Lord Chatfield which were published on September 5th 1939 and in which it was announced that H.M. Government were prepared to provide a total net capital cost of £34,330,000, three-quarters of it as a free gift, for the modernisation of India's defences under a five years' plan.

So rapidly was this five years' plan put into motion for fighting a war which had already begun that a first instalment of £200,000 for cavalry reorganisation had already been paid by the War Office when the Committee's findings were published.

It should be noted at this point that plans for the modernisation of the Army in India were all based on the defence of the North-West Frontier and the equipment of one division for service overseas—one division.

The Modernisation Committee had said in 1938:

> The amount of mechanical transport which it is suggested should be provided for the modernised army has been based on the maintenance of a force approximately one cavalry light tank brigade and 10 infantry brigades with artillery and other troops attached, as well as the necessary protective troops for the lines of communication, up to a distance of 100 miles from the nearest railhead. It is also proposed to keep a future reserve of six mechanical transport sections in the General Reserve to meet unforeseen emergencies. Field ambulances will be required on the scale of one for each war brigade in the Army. Ambulances serving mechanised formations or formations with mechanised first-line troops must also be mechanised.

Yet even that one light tank brigade could not be equipped until the third year of the war.

In April 1939 the Indian Army Ordnance Corps took over the workshop services of the Royal Indian Army Service Corps and assumed responsibility for the maintenance and repair of all mechanised vehicles. This transfer involved trebling the I.A.O.C. and entering upon an extensive building programme of repair shops and training establishments which heavily handicapped the corps at the outbreak of war.

Transportation services did not exist before May 1940. The Movements Organisation was in a rudimentary stage represented by a second grade staff officer in the Directorate of Movements and Quartering. There were embryo embarkation staffs at Bombay, Madras, Calcutta and Karachi, but there was no control staff for internal railway movement.

The munition factories of India, some of which went back to the days of the East India Company, were administered by the Master-General of Ordnance. They were few in number and, although most of the basic metallic ores for armament existed in India or adjacent territories, there was no means of converting them to use and all vital raw material had to be imported. There was no factory for motor vehicles; only vehicle bodies could be produced, and these on a very small scale. The aircraft industry did not exist, and anti-aircraft defence was not contemplated as even a contingent necessity.

The oil needs of India could be partially met by the fields at Attock and Digboi, but petrol was imported from Abadan. There was no tankage for strategic reserves of petrol and aviation spirit, and there were not enough tank wagons to ensure the rapid transport of such supplies from the ports.

The shortage of supply in every direction had been appreciated by 1938. No attempt was made to assess the needs of essential civil industries. H.M. Government was consulted in 1938 about priorities of supply to and from India and other parts of the Empire, but no practical scheme had been fixed when the war started.

The principle of Indianisation for officers of the Army in India had been accepted in 1918, but it was a slow process. The first step was to provide for a small quota of Indian cadets at Sandhurst which was increased a few years later. The choice was skilfully made and many of the high-ranking officers of the present armies of India and Pakistan began their brilliant careers under this scheme. In 1922 eight units of cavalry and infantry were chosen for complete Indianisation and at last in October 1932 the Indian Military Academy at Dehra Dun was opened. From there Indian commissioned officers passed directly into the Army, and Indianisation

was extended to provide for a division of all arms with the ancillary services and a cavalry brigade.

At this time it was proposed to eliminate the Viceroy's commissioned officers who had been a unique feature of the Indian Army since its reorganisation in 1857–8. This remarkable body of men, promoted from the ranks and for the most part sons of small landlords and peasant farmers, had formed an indispensable link between the British officer and the ranks, and it was generally considered that the elimination of such experienced material would be a profound mistake. The question was still being deliberated when the onset of war made it vital to speed up the process of Indianisation, and provide the British and Indian officers necessary for the expansion now envisaged. The scheme for an all Indian division was laid aside and the proposed elimination of Viceroy's commissioned officers was abandoned. The risaldars and jemadars of the Indian cavalry and the subadars and jemadars of the Indian infantry stand beside the warrant officers of the Royal Navy and of the British Army—paragons all of arms and the man. Without them the bright pages of this history would be less bright and the sombre pages more sombre still.

During the First World War the Royal Indian Marine had done much good service, but it was not until 1928 that it was restored to combatant status, and not until 1934 that it was raised to the status of the Royal Indian Navy. A policy of Indianisation was introduced in 1929 and recruitment was extended to the Punjab. In the same year India assumed responsibility for coastal defence and the annual subvention of £120,000 paid by India for such defence to the Royal Navy was no longer demanded. An expansion of the Royal Indian Navy was planned in anticipation and completed by June 1937; but the subvention was paid until April 1938. Late in 1939 regulations for the Royal Indian Naval Reserve, the Royal Indian Fleet Reserve, and the Royal Indian Naval Volunteer Reserve were approved; but at the outbreak of war there were no R.I.N.R. officers, no R.I.F.R. ratings, and recruitment for the R.I.N.V.R. had only just begun. There were two fairly modern sloops—H.M.I.S. *Indus* and H.M.I.S. *Hindustan*, four old sloops H.M.I.S. *Cornwallis*, *Investigator*, *Lawrence* and *Clive*, and one fast patrol boat H.M.I.S. *Pathan*.

The Indian Air Force was formally constituted on October 10th 1932, and it came into operation in April 1933 with a single flight. A second flight was formed in 1938. In July 1939 there were 16 officers and 662 airmen in the Indian Air Force, and three Indian

cadets were training at Cranwell. On the recommendation of the Chatfield Committee the Indian Air Force Volunteer Reserve was formed in that year and consisted of five flights for coastal defence. It was based on the organisation of civil flying clubs, and about three-quarters of the officers and ground staff were Indians.

Allusion has been made to the Chatfield Committee. This Committee under the chairmanship of Admiral of the Fleet Lord Chatfield came to India in November 1938 and submitted its report at the end of January 1939. The findings were approved by H.M. Government in due course and the publication of them coincided almost exactly with the outbreak of war. They are of considerable interest, tinged with melancholy, as an expression of expert opinion on the brink of the greatest war in history.

The Committee found that India's defence plans must provide not only for the contingency of aggression from the North-West coupled with widespread tribal disturbances, but also to an increasing extent for the protection of sea communications in eastern waters and the strategic points vital to their security.

The definition of the rôle of the forces laid down by the Garran Tribunal was no longer accepted:

> The general principle that we would put forward in its place is that the forces maintained in India should be adequate not merely for the narrower purposes of purely local defence, but also to assist in ensuring her security against the external threats that we have described; and further, that India should acknowledge that her responsibility cannot in her own interests be safely limited to the local defence of her own land frontiers and coasts. . . . The principle on which the financial arrangements between the two Governments should be based is that India should bear some share in the joint responsibility for her external security.

The Committee rejected the plan to form an Imperial Reserve Division:

> The forces that can be made available from India to assist in the protection of her external interests should, in our opinion, form an integral part of the forces in India as a whole. We assume that India would normally have, over and above the forces regarded as the minimum necessity for keeping her frontiers and coasts intact and ensuring internal order, forces available for what we have called the external defence of India, which we regard as a matter of common and direct concern to both Governments. That being so, the 'obligation' on the Government of India is no longer a contract to perform something outside the sphere of their normal

duties; it becomes an integral part of those duties. We assume further that both Governments would collaborate in preparing plans which, as regards India, would take account not only of India's local defence and internal security, but also of the threats to, and perhaps not even localised near, her frontiers and coasts, instead of treating them in isolation.

The Committee recommended that all forces provided for such external defence purposes should be called 'External Defence Forces' and so far as the Army alone was concerned 'External Defence Troops.' Modernisation should be on a uniform scale both on general grounds and to ensure that the British forces in India were interchangeable with those on the Imperial establishment.

The allotment of troops in four categories, namely, Frontier Defence troops, Internal Security troops, Coast Defence troops, and a General Reserve (including Air Defence troops) with the numbers suggested by the Commander-in-Chief for each category was accepted, and from the surplus units were to be drawn to form the External Defence troops. Such troops should consist of one British cavalry regiment, three British infantry battalions, and seven Indian infantry battalions.

Under this allotment one cavalry regiment, three Royal Horse Artillery batteries, one field artillery regiment, one medium artillery regiment, and two infantry battalions of the British troops in India should be withdrawn. The three Indian cavalry regiments, four companies of sappers and miners, and 14 infantry battalions surplus to requirements should be disbanded unless they could be employed at Imperial stations or otherwise. To anticipate any hostile criticism of these recommendations the Committee expressly stated that it had weighed the serious strategic considerations then existing.

External Defence troops were to be somewhat more highly and expeditiously equipped than the remaining forces, and the process of modernisation was to be completed in five years. Of the policy of Indianisation the Committee observed:

> The crucial stage will not be reached until 1945, when the British officers (in Indianised units) will begin to disappear entirely. When that stage is reached, the whole experiment may have to be reviewed, and it would be unwise to forecast the result.

For the reorganisation of the Royal Indian Navy the plans drawn up by the Flag Officer Commanding were accepted in general, and the construction of four escort vessels and four trawlers was recommended together with the rearming of *Indus* and *Hindustan*.

There was some divergence of opinion among the members of the Committee about the air force necessary for adequate defence, and in the end the Committee recommended the provision of four bomber squadrons, three army co-operation squadrons and one bomber transport squadron, two of the bomber squadrons to have a primary rôle of coastal defence. Two additional bomber squadrons were recommended as India's share of joint responsibility for external defence. It was expected that the first squadron of the Indian Air Force would be ready by the end of 1940 and if it was considered efficient it would form one of the approved total of squadrons to be maintained in India. The re-equipment of the Air Force, which at the moment consisted of six squadrons of single-engined Wapitis, two squadrons of Hart bombers and two bomber transport aircraft without defence armament, was to be spread over five years. It sounds like a discussion about an exhibit in a geological museum.

The Committee assumed that the main danger to the ports would have disappeared when commerce raiders had been rounded up in the first two months of the war. The only defended port at that date was Bombay. This was to be re-equipped with modern defences and anti-aircraft guns. The two 6-inch guns then in Bombay were to be installed for the defence of Calcutta. Karachi was in process of being equipped. Cochin and Madras were to be given guns when these became available. Anti-aircraft guns were to be supplied with the same proviso. No defence measures were considered necessary for Vizagapatam.

The Committee accepted the policy to make India as far as possible self-sufficient in the manufacture of munitions, but suggested that any proposals in this direction should be co-ordinated with similar plans in other parts of the Empire.

The capital cost of the recommendations made was estimated at over £30,000,000 and it was thought that if help was given to meet this the maintenance charges during the first five years, after deducting the annual contribution of £2,000,000 from H.M. Government, could be within the level of India's existing provision for defence.

The Committee regarded it:

> as axiomatic that with the help of such reasonable contribution as H.M. Government may make towards the cost of India's defence force, so far as they are satisfying what we look upon as a joint responsibility of the two Governments, India should meet the whole maintenance of her forces out of her own resources.

It will be clear from the facts given above that not only was India entirely unprepared for a major war when war came, but that there did not exist any glimmering notion of what India's part would be when war did come. The bright spot in a prospect of almost unmitigated gloom was the existence of a highly trained army, many units of which had had practical experience of warfare on the North-West Frontier, commanded by probably the best regimental officers in the world. Like the British Army in 1914 it was a small and extremely efficient army of professional volunteers; but it was not equipped for modern war, and therefore it could not match its efficiency with its effectiveness.

Although H.M. Government's approval of the Chatfield Report was not received in India until the outbreak of war, preparatory steps to modernise the Army in accord with the recommendations began early in 1939. Orders for necessary vehicles and equipment were given and plans for the redistribution of the Army were prepared; but without the modern weapons and equipment little could be done to train troops in the new way of warfare. The Army consisted almost entirely of horsed cavalry, unmechanised infantry, and horsed artillery. There were no anti-tank units, and in the whole of India there were only eight anti-aircraft guns. There were some motor transport companies in the Royal Indian Army Service Corps, but most of the transport still depended on animals—mules, camels and horses. The division of External Defence troops had not been formed, and in the event the troops sent overseas before the outbreak of war were mostly those which had not been allocated for external defence. So far as the future was concerned the Indian Army was at an awkward stage of transition. Indianisation as regards officers affected comparatively few units. The Army was still dependent on British personnel. There was no Indian artillery except the volunteer batteries and one experimental Indian field regiment. There were no Indian engineer units except the sappers and miners. A proportion of Indians were included in brigade signal sections, but signals as a whole was entirely British. Supply and transport, medical and ordnance services were all dependent on British warrant officers and non-commissioned officers, and those were already too few for the needs of the pre-war Army.

No approved plan for a general expansion of the forces existed, and even when war came there was no idea of how great that expansion would be. The Chatfield Committee, under the depressing influence of the financial bromide which the National Government had been administering since 1931, never came within measurable

distance of realities. That is evident from the proposal to disband surplus units of the Army. There was strong opposition in India to this proposed disbandment and fortunately the Commander-in-Chief decided not to take any steps to put this recommendation into effect.

On August 1st 1939 the 12th Indian Infantry Brigade Group sailed for Malaya. It consisted of the 2nd Bn Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, the 5th Bn 2nd Punjab Regt, and the 4th Bn 19th Hyderabad Regt. Two days later the 11th Indian Infantry Brigade Group sailed for Egypt. It consisted of the 2nd Bn Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders, 1st Bn 6th Rajputana Rifles (Wellesley's) and 4th Bn 7th Rajput Regt. On September 23rd the 5th Indian Infantry Brigade Group with a Divisional Headquarters was sent to Egypt. These troops which included the 4th Bn 6th Rajputana Rifles (Outram's) and the 3rd Bn 1st Punjab Regt were given weapons and vehicles on reaching their destination. These last two brigades were originally called Deccan Force and became components of the famous 4th Indian Infantry Division—the Red Eagles.

To Aden went the 1st Bn 2nd Punjab Regt and the 3rd Bn 15th Punjab Regt. To East Africa went an Indian mountain battery, to France four mule companies.

The departure of those first three brigades left the Army in India with barely any modern weapons or vehicles, and the prospect of obtaining them was not favourable. The concentration of supply in Great Britain which had been accepted before the war turned the modernisation scheme into a phantom, and it was replaced by what amounted to a monthly improvisation. Great Britain was hard pressed to supply herself and could spare nothing for India, while the problem of dollar exchange seriously restricted demands upon America.

The active minds of the Indian Army were the prey of frustration: the less active minds took refuge in a lethargic optimism. General mobilisation was not ordered; there was no general call up even of reservists because of, in official words, 'lack of accommodation at most training units, unlikelihood of units at that time incurring heavy casualties, lack of equipment.'

The shortage of officers was tackled by training 50 Indian cadets at a time at the Indian Military Academy for emergency commissions and 300 British cadets at Belgaum. Reserve officers of the Army in India were called up only for specific tasks; 'but it was decided not to call up the remainder until either the Army in India or a proportion

of it might commence active operations or until some degree of expansion was undertaken.'

Thousands of Indians who tried to enlist were turned away with tokens for a call-up if the need should ever arise; there was no replacement of troops sent overseas because 'in addition to a dearth of vehicles and weapons the extent to which H.M. Government was likely to call on India for further units was uncertain.'

It was not to be wondered at that the prevailing mood among Indians was a sense of remoteness from the war and that opposition to any expenditure except for measures of local defence was constant. At the same time, there was nowhere in India the least sympathy with Germanic aggression. Mahatma Gandhi asked what would India's deliverance be worth if England and France fell. The Congress Working Committee advocated co-operation to destroy Fascism and Imperialism, but before it called on Congress to implement this it invited the British Government, 'to declare in unequivocal terms what their war aims were in regard to democracy and imperialism, and in particular how these aims are going to apply to India. Do they include the elimination of imperialism and the treatment of India as a free nation?'

This question was answered evasively, and the Congress Ministries in eight provinces resigned, whereupon the Muslim League authorised its President 'to give an assurance of support and co-operation on behalf of the Mussalmans of India to the British Government for the purpose of the prosecution of the war.'

The disastrous events in Europe which ended in the fall of France blew up complacency about the likely course of war all over the world, and in India it was recognised that the military situation rendered it 'most desirable to build up a field army in India for use either for the defence of her frontiers or for employment overseas as the situation might demand.'

In 1940 it was planned to train and equip a field army of one armoured division, three infantry divisions and one extra brigade, with force troops and line-of-communication troops including a large amount of mechanical transport. Units were withdrawn from frontier defence and internal security and replaced by new units from India State Forces and the Nepalese contingent offered in the earliest days of the war by the Maharaja of Nepal. Four existing brigades were used and 12 new brigades were to be formed. Units of the Mobile Division, later the 1st Armoured Division, already existed, as part of the General Reserve. The running of this field army involved much administrative expansion, the recruiting of

ancillary troops and a great deal of building construction. It was made clear that this new army must depend entirely for equipment and for essential British personnel, particularly technical, on Great Britain.

Two more infantry brigade groups were offered for service overseas during 1940, and several infantry divisions and armoured forces were promised for 1941, but it was pointed out that these offers of troops were worthless and misleading unless H.M. Government could produce the equipment.

The centralisation of production in Great Britain prevented any productive effort in India, and when in June the Mediterranean was closed by the entry of Italy into the war the very small quantity of armament that was being sent to India shrank to almost nothing. India was driven to produce for herself and the slightly increased output which had been, it seemed grudgingly, accepted by H.M. Government in August 1939 in the event of war in Europe was now to be as widely expanded as possible. The Department of Supply, a new organisation set up at the outbreak of war, took over the ordnance factories, medical stores, mathematical instruments and the capacity of several railway workshops.

India invited representatives from Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, East Africa, Southern Rhodesia, Ceylon, Burma, Malaya and Hong Kong to take part in a conference in the autumn of 1940 in New Delhi at which the co-ordination of the existing and potential capacity for war supply could be discussed with a view to meet the needs of each as far as possible and make surpluses available to Great Britain.

The sequel to this conference was the establishment of the Eastern Group Supply Council, and the resultant steps which India took toward industrialisation made at this conference marked a turning point in the history of India's economic development.

By the end of 1940 the existing five sloops under the command of C.-in-C. East Indies were stationed in the Persian Gulf, Aden and the Red Sea, the cost being borne by India. A survey ship and a trawler were incorporated in the local defence forces. H.M.I.S. *Bahadur*, a training establishment for 600 boys, was opened at Manora. New naval barracks were being constructed in Bombay; 34 minesweepers and anti-submarine vessels were requisitioned, manned and equipped. A new construction programme had been started and every available building slip in India had been occupied with keels of fast sea-going motor coastal patrol boats, corvettes and mine-sweepers. Orders had been placed for more of such vessels

in the United Kingdom and Australia. The personnel had been increased by over 2,000.

The patrol-vessel H.M.I.S. *Pathan* was lost as the result of an explosion off Bombay on June 23rd 1940. The enquiry could not establish whether *Pathan* was lost by enemy action or internal explosion.

The Army at the end of 1940 was still woefully short of the armoured forces and anti-aircraft weapons which the operations in Europe had proved to be of paramount importance.

The troops that went overseas at the beginning of the war were followed to the Sudan in the autumn of 1940 by the 5th Indian Division—the Ball of Fire—consisting of the 9th, 10th and 29th Brigades; the 7th Indian Brigade reached Egypt to complete the 4th Indian Division. The 6th and 8th Indian Brigades went to Malaya.

In India the 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th and 10th Infantry Divisions were forming, and also the 1st and 2nd Armoured Divisions with their ancillary troops and administrative services.

One armoured division and four infantry divisions were offered for service overseas; but H.M. Government could not accept the armoured division, being unable to supply the tanks required by the British armament programme, and India was notified that no armoured fighting vehicles could be provided before 1942. Instead of the armoured division India was asked to prepare one motor brigade and to have four infantry divisions ready for overseas in 1941. Plans were made to raise formations to take the place of these in 1941.

Between May and December 1940 the strength of the Indian Army was increased by 165,000.

By the beginning of that year the Indian Air Force had grown from its original flight to a full squadron of aircraft with a strength of over 200 officers and men. This does not include the growing Volunteer Reserve. Unfortunately the limited supply even of obsolete aircraft, the shortage of skilled ground staff and the lack of senior non-commissioned officers as instructors made this expansion largely illusory.

A temporary training school for the Indian Air Force was started in Lahore with an annual turn-over of 150 pilots. From this school 24 Indian pilots went to the United Kingdom for advanced training and operational experience. In October 1940 No 1 (Indian) Flying Training School was formed in Ambala to complete the training begun at Lahore. Two technical training schools for ground staff were opened, one at Ambala for the Indian Air Force, the other at Karachi for the R.A.F., each taking 350 men at a time.

Negotiations were started with the U.S.A. to supply supervision for an aircraft factory in Southern India, after permission to release American aircraft components had been won with difficulty from H.M. Government.

Future policy was stated in these terms:

> There is no intention to expand the Royal Air Force in India, but the Indian Air Force is to have an additional two squadrons by the end of 1941 and a further squadron by the end of 1942. In the event of the war spreading eastwards, so that aircraft can operate from and against India, it is anticipated that air reinforcements will be provided by H.M. Government. Aerodromes, petrol, and bomb stores for such a contingency are at present under consideration.

The gradual increase of the Air Force in India to 21 squadrons was accepted by H.M. Government; but as H.M. Government was unable to contribute any help towards the air defence of India these 21 squadrons remained prints in the blue.

Meanwhile, the meagre air forces in India equipped with completely obsolete aircraft carried on as best they could, and the troops of Nippon moved into Indo-China without opposition from the French.

During 1940 24 Indian pilots, who had completed their training for the Indian Air Force, were seconded for service with the Royal Air Force in the defence of Great Britain.

And now before we follow the 4th and 5th Indian Divisions along the path of glory overseas a glance must be taken at the North-West Frontier.

Wise after the event we are inclined to wonder how it was possible for the military imagination of India to preoccupy itself so much with the North-West Frontier and practically to ignore the North-East Frontier. If we look back to that August day in 1939 when we heard of the agreement reached between the Germans and the Russians and remember the shock to our nervous system in Great Britain we shall hardly blame the Army in India for their apprehension. If we remember the effect produced at home by the Russian invasions of Poland and Finland we shall hardly blame the Army in India for concentrating upon the defence of India against an attempt by Russia to exploit the situation. It was a menace almost a century old.

The North-West Frontier is a mountainous strip of country along the boundary line between Afghanistan and India except in the

north where it touches Russian Turkestan. It stretches for about 1,200 miles from the Pamirs to the shores of the Arabian Sea and has a total area of 26,000 square miles inhabited by about 3,500,000 tribesmen whose only allegiance is to their rifles. Russian influence had been predominant in Kabul since the Third Afghan War in 1919 which cost the Army in India such heavy casualties. In 1939 and 1940, German, Italian and Japanese agents were fomenting ill-feeling between Afghanistan and Britain; Russian agents were more actively mischievous. The attitude of Afghanistan, the state of the tribes, and the prospect of invasion were all factors in planning for the defence of India, and no criticism can be levelled against the determination of the High Command in India to make and keep the Frontier ready for the worst. Only an insensate optimism would have adopted another course.

In Waziristan, under the inspiration of the Faqir of Ipi, raiding gangs had been active all through 1939. With the outbreak of the war special measures had to be put in hand for the protection of military traffic on roads within the administrative district of Bannu hitherto considered safe. In Waziristan convoys demanded close escorts of armoured cars and lorried infantry with the co-operation of the South Waziristan Scouts and aircraft. At the beginning of 1940 air action against the Shabi Khel Mahsuds discouraged the Mahsuds from further hostile activities, and the general situation in South Waziristan improved. However, on the administrative borders of the Bannu and Kohat districts it deteriorated owing to active raiding from the Ahmedzai Salient, and operations against the tribes had to be carried out between February and May 1940. Before they were concluded at the time of the German invasion of France these operations involved three R.A.F. squadrons, 16 Indian infantry battalions and two mechanised cavalry regiments with equivalent artillery, engineers, signals and supply services. The 8th Cavalry and the 16th Cavalry were still horsed.

By September 1940 Frontier Defence troops and their reserves amounted to three armoured regiments, four mountain artillery regiments, nine engineer units and 60 infantry battalions. An observer corps had also been formed.

In December 1940 operations in Waziristan were on a fairly large scale; but in the words of the General Staff: 'the Mahsuds thought better of it when they saw the number of troops we had concentrated to deal with them and gave in. We can never afford to neglect our Frontier problem and we doubt if it is realised at home, how low our reserves have fallen in trying to meet all the demands made upon us.'

This state of affairs was liable to grow worse all the while because anti-British propaganda was persistent, and malcontents like the Faqir of Ipi were now being subsidised by Germany and Italy, and continuously encouraged by Russian and Japanese agents.

It will be seen from the quotation above that the Frontier always meant the North-West Frontier. The Eastern Frontier was accepted as something perfectly secure and at this date did not enter into India's military preparations and defence organisation.

Perhaps it was as well. If a vision of what was to happen at the end of 1941 had been granted to the General Staff in Delhi there might have been no Indian divisions sent overseas in the first year of the war, and Egypt and the Sudan might have been lost.

Chapter 2

1940. Mule companies in France—the campaign in Somaliland—4th Indian Division in the Western Desert—Italians occupy Sidi Barrani—5th Indian Division take the offensive in the Sudan.

THE 11th Indian Infantry Brigade sailed from Bombay on August 1939 to arrive in Egypt before the dark cloud over Europe was riven by the lightning of war.

It was joined early in October by the 5th Indian Infantry Brigade and a Force Headquarters under command of which the two brigades were combined to form the 4th Indian Infantry Division. Neither of the brigades had any modern equipment. They were without motor vehicles and trained drivers. The men had never seen a mortar or an anti-tank rifle; the officers had never handled them. In Egypt training started for each unit when weapons and vehicles were issued to them, and the rapidity with which they adapted themselves to novel tactics, the use of modern weapons, and the driving and maintenance of modern vehicles justified the confidence, the pride and the affection of their officers. 'No wonder these Indian Army officers are so cocky about their men,' wrote a subaltern in a British battalion.

Early in October 1939 the British Army in France lacked animal transport and asked the Government of India to help. A formation of mule transport companies was immediately mobilised complete with its own supply unit, reinforcement unit, remount unit and hospital. This force was known as Force K6 and was almost entirely composed of Punjabi Mussalmans. Colonel R. Hills was the commander, and Force K6 disembarked at Marseilles on December 25th 1939. It is worth recording that these Indian troops were the first soldiers ever to make a donation to the Royal Naval Benevolent Fund as an expression of gratitude for their safe escort in convoy by the Royal Navy.

One transport company was allotted to I Corps, one to II Corps, one to the Lines of Communication, and later one to the French Third Army in the Maginot Line. The remaining units were based at Hautot near Dieppe.

These troops had been trained only in mountain warfare, and they now had to be trained as urgently as possible for European warfare.

They were not allowed to approach within 100 yards of any building or crossroads marked on a map because experience of the First World War had taught that such places were liable to be heavily shelled when operations began. The result of this was that during the withdrawal in 1940 Force K6 suffered only 12 casualties, and of these four were the result of a direct hit from a bomb on a train carrying reinforcements to the Maginot Line. When operations began in May 1940, units were ordered to act independently. Two of them came out through Dunkirk, the hospital came out through La Baule, and the rest under the command of Colonel Hills came out through St Nazaire on June 15th. When those troops landed at Plymouth they were almost the only troops who had lost no equipment and almost the only troops who formed up on their markers on disembarkation. The camp at Hautot had been ringed by German planes two nights before the troops withdrew from it, and fifteen minutes after the departure of the last man 'the camp was obliterated by a concentration of bombs from German aircraft.'

The unit with the French Third Army could not be evacuated, and when that army disintegrated the commanding officer of the transport company had to make the best of a bad job. He was so successful in dodging the enemy that for three weeks the unit was at large in a country which had been overrun by the enemy. In the end it was impossible to obtain water for the mules and the commanding officer was driven to surrender. The local German commander accepted the surrender with scrupulously correct formality at 9 a.m. The commanding officer was told to bring his unit in at 8 p.m., the enemy being busy with French prisoners. The day was spent in polishing everything that could be polished, and when the German commander saw the unit as far as possible in ceremonial order he was so much impressed by the bearing of the troops that he allowed the unit to remain itself until it was put into a prisoner of war camp some weeks later.

All the British officers had been removed on the surrender, except the quartermaster—a warrant officer who passed himself off as a white Indian, pretending he could not understand English. When the men were in the prisoner of war camp they were anxious that news of what had happened to them should reach Colonel Hills, and it was decided that the quartermaster must try to escape. He collected some bits of French workmen's clothing, borrowed the bicycle of the German commandant, and went to the gate at the time the workmen left. There, being unable to produce his workman's pass, he was thrown out of the camp and forbidden to show

his face near it again. Eventually the quartermaster managed to reach England and in due course became a lieutenant-colonel and a student at the Staff College. One of the V.C.O.'s also escaped and got to England.

When the rest of Force K6 came to England it was renamed the Indian Contingent, and the Star of India became its formation sign. Two more transport units were sent from India and two British transport units were placed under command.

The men were not allowed to leave camp until they could read and write both Hindustani and English, which they were all able to do in an extraordinarily short time. After this the men travelled all over Great Britain and everywhere made a profound impression on the people with whom they came into contact. One of the units was stationed at Lairg in Sutherland for several weeks before it was ordered to move for the pre-invasion of France. The commanding officer received a letter from prominent citizens asking for the move to be cancelled because the people of Lairg were so much enjoying the presence of the Indian troops. It was explained that a military order had to be obeyed, whereupon a letter signed by a large number of people was received in which it was said that they understood the position but they wished it to be put on record that there would be an empty chair in every house in Lairg when the unit departed.

Let the story conclude with these words written by one of the British officers of the Indian contingent about an incident in August 1940:

> His Majesty ordered a parade, and it was felt that every man possible who was in hospital should be present at the parade, even though taking no part; one man was so seriously ill that the civilian doctor who was looking after him refused permission for him to attend. The man demanded that his Commander should come to him and the rather frightened civilian doctor telephoned on the subject. He did not know India of course and the family tradition which is so strong, he was much surprised to find the Commander at once motoring twelve miles to see the man. The man, a saddler, said 'I have eaten the King's salt and it is my right to see him; when I have seen the King there is only left for me to see the Almighty.' Arrangements were made for this man to come to the parade, but to remain in the coach. At the conclusion of the parade His Majesty was informed and immediately turned to Her Majesty the Queen, told her the story and said 'I must talk to this man,' which he did for five minutes. The sequel to this story occurred nine months later when the Victoria League

arranged a reception for Empire troops. A small party from the Indian contingent attended under the senior V.C.O.—Risaldar-Major Mohd. Ashraf. Her Majesty the Queen graced this reception with her presence and on arrival went straight to the Risaldar-Major, asking after the soldier's health about which His Majesty had been worried. The contingent also had the honour to be invited by the Naval Commander-in-Chief, Plymouth, to provide a guard of honour for His Majesty on the occasion of his inspection of the Naval Establishments there; this occurred on the first day of the Plymouth blitz.

Finally, it is worthy of record that the Risaldar-Major is the only Indian who has been decorated personally by His Majesty, with the Indian Order of Merit, a worthy honour for a very great man on whom so much depended and who carried out the wonderful traditions of the Indian Army in an outstanding manner.

And here is an impression of that landing at Plymouth from a letter to a distinguished British general of the Army in India from a British soldier at an O.C.T.U. awaiting appointment to the Indian Army. He was 23 years old and he had had three years nine months of service:

> My reasons for applying for the Indian Army are rather unorthodox. I have no relations whatsoever with India nor have any of my forbears as far as I know. Firstly I think that my career will be on more solid foundations there and secondly admiration for the Indian soldiers in France made me think that I should like to soldier with them.
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> I used to see the Indian troops often in Lille and their conduct in comparison with my own people, who I was sorry to find rather let the side down pretty badly at the week-ends, was absolutely first class.
>
> On arrival in England we were all very tired, and I had more of a sailor's uniform than a soldier's, having been machine-gunned out of a rowing-boat and bombed out of an armed trawler that picked a few of us up, but the conduct of a big majority of our troops was unspeakable. One would have thought the war was over instead of having suffered one of the greatest defeats our Army had ever experienced. Most had been ferried straight from ports in France to ports in England and the lack of personal arms and equipment evident and the devil-may-care attitude was one that I would have accredited perhaps to the training and temperament of Italians but not to our troops.
>
> I saw a group of Indian troops arriving at my port and before going to the trains lined up, were dressed off, and marched from the docks. It did my heart good to see that at least some could

stand on their own feet and not be intent on enlisting the sympathy of the folks at home by idle slackness and bloodthirsty tales.

From my papers I read how well those same troops are carrying on the good work as quietly and efficiently as ever in all theatres in the Near East. They are soldiers and that's whom I want to soldier with.

Mussolini's conviction that Hitler had won the war and would presently be the sole victor of an imposed peace unless he pushed himself into a prominent place beside him led to the declaration of war by Italy on June 10th 1940. This action by Mussolini, who bears the prime and almost the sole responsibility for it, has been likened to the behaviour of a jackal, but that is to insult the animal world by comparing Hitler to a lion. Europe had been terrorised by gangster methods. The Munich surrender had encouraged the gangsters to believe that Britain and France were fundamentally weak and their belief seemed confirmed by the course of military events. It would have taken a major prophet to avoid the mistake Mussolini made, and on the evidence before his eyes, if the proposition of sacred egoism was a valid one in 1915, it was his duty to do what he did just a month over 25 years later.

A week after Mussolini's decision Marshal Pétain asked for an armistice. Fortunately, as is now clear, General Weygand, the Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in the Middle East, obeyed the Marshal and did not encourage General Nogues commanding the French forces in North Africa or General Mittelhauser commanding them in Syria to refuse capitulation. At the moment it seemed a disastrous surrender; but if the French had stood firm Hitler would have been compelled to employ the full strength of Germany to secure Africa and the Levant. As it was, the capitulation of the French made the British position appear hopeless: it was not an unreasonable supposition.

In the Western Desert of Egypt General Sir Archibald Wavell had a light British armoured division, a light Indian infantry division, and a small number of British, Australian and New Zealand troops lately arrived and untrained for desert warfare. In Libya Marshal Graziani was believed to have some 300,000 Italian and Colonial troops. In the Sudan was the Sudan Defence Force and three British battalions. In Kenya were the King's African Rifles and some detachments from South Africa. In British Somaliland was the Somaliland Camel Corps equipped for police duties. The Italians had over 250,000 troops in their Ethiopian empire.

Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham had comparatively few warships in the Mediterranean and could not be reinforced. Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Longmore lacked aircraft and none could be spared from Britain where every one was needed.

However, communications with the East were clear, which meant the prospect of reinforcements from India, Australia and New Zealand; and the Italians were cut off from East Africa except by air.

The Indian infantry battalions which fired the first shots against the enemy in the Second World War were the 1st Bn 2nd Punjab Regt[1] and the 3rd Bn 15th Punjab Regt. The latter entered British Somaliland from Aden on July 1st, the former on August 7th. With them was a battalion of the Black Watch, the Somaliland Camel Corps, a locally recruited police force, units of the 1st Northern Rhodesian Regt and 2nd King's African Rifles, and the 1st East African Light Battery. They were ill-equipped and too few to hold a continuous line. All troops in French Somaliland were 'Vichyated.' Against this small force the Italians brought more than two divisions, with aircraft, tanks and heavy artillery in support.

In this August of 1940 the 3/15th Punjab Regt added a noble page to the battalion's long martial history.

The Italians crossed the frontier of British Somaliland on August 4th with an army of 25,000. They advanced in three columns, the

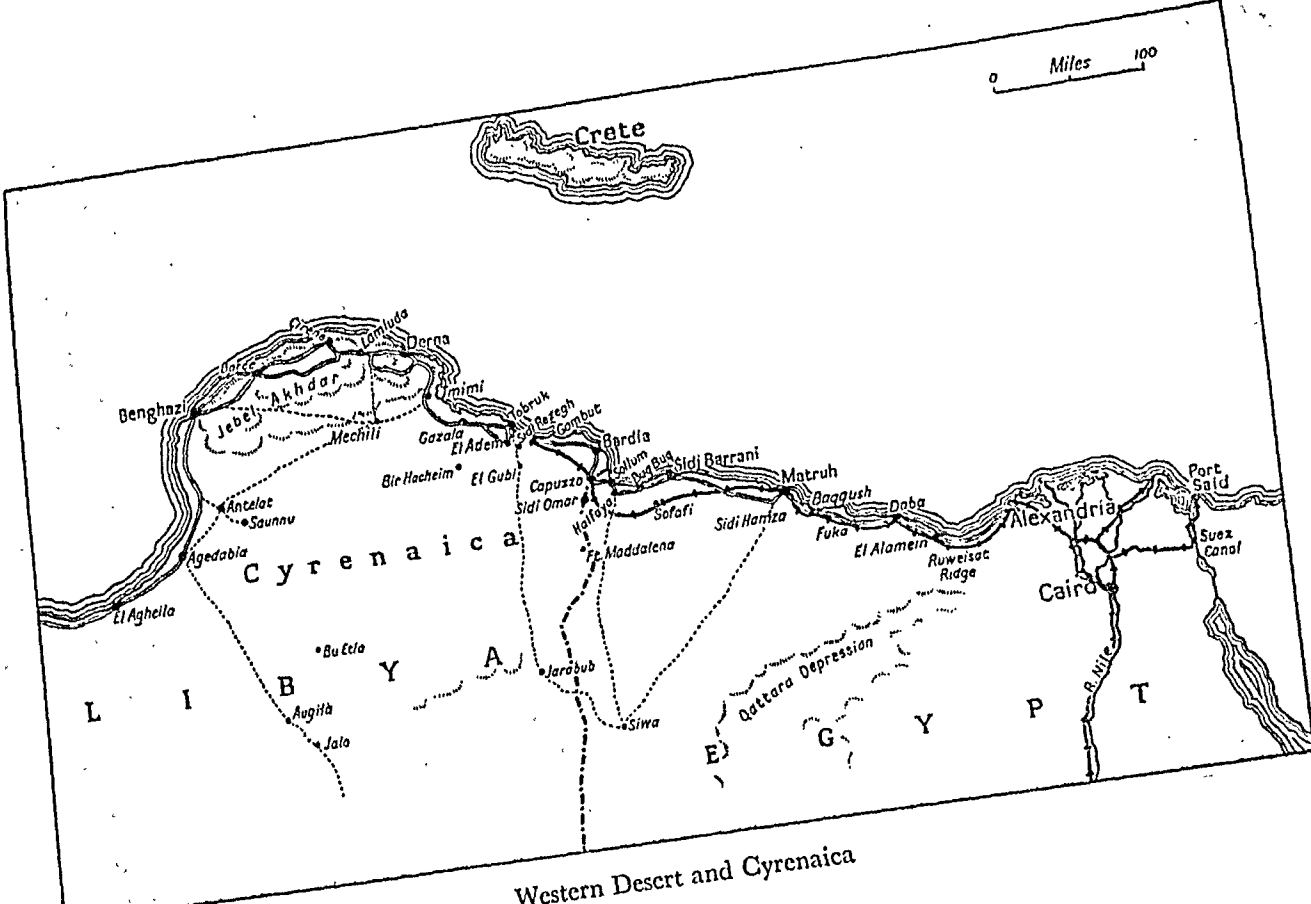
[1] The 1/2nd Punjab Regt was originally the 7th Madras Infantry and later the 67th Punjabis. In the First World War it had been one of those unfortunate battalions taken prisoner at Kut. The 3/15th Punjab Regt was originally the 27th Punjab Infantry—the Rawalpindi battalion of the irregular corps raised by Sir John Lawrence. The 27th volunteered for oversea service in China in 1860, returning to India in 1861. In the summer of that year there was a severe outbreak of cholera among the British troops in Lahore cantonment, and when a panic scared away all the hospital attendants the men of the 27th volunteered as 'nurses,' for which they were thanked by Her Majesty's Government in a special despatch and granted by Queen Victoria the honour of wearing on their appointments the Royal and Imperial Cypher within the Garter. The battalion fought in the Second Afghan War. They lost their commanding officer and adjutant at Ali Masjid in the Khyber, helped to put the Bazar Valley in order, and were for some time in Kabul. In 1886 the 27th Punjabis were among the first troops sent to garrison Upper Burma after annexation, and suffered heavy casualties from sickness. The 3/15th Punjab Regt had fought before in Somaliland. This was in 1903 when they formed part of Manning's force in that tough little campaign against the Mullah. On that occasion the Italians had given all possible help. In the First World War the 27th Punjabis went from the North-West Frontier to fight on the Suez Canal in February 1915. In September of that year they took part in the Loos offensive after which they were sent from France to join the relief of Kut. From Baghdad the battalion went to Palestine and fought under Allenby at the Battle of Sharon.

main attack being directed from Jijiga in Abyssinia along the road to Berbera, the port and capital. Two days later Hargeisa, the Government hill station, had fallen and by August 11th five Colonial brigades, three Blackshirt battalions, three Banda groups, and 100 armoured vehicles including 27 tanks and 20 guns were streaming down the slopes toward the plain 60 miles from Berbera.

The small force, outnumbered by ten to one, entrusted with the task of making the conquest of British Somaliland as costly as possible for the enemy, had taken up positions in the hills that ring Berbera in order to cover the passes, the chief of which is the wide sandy river-bed known as Tug Argan. In the exhilaration of their much superior strength the Italians repeatedly attacked the thinly defended posts in close formation under cover of artillery, tanks and air support and, fighting with courage and resolution, sustained heavy casualties. During the darkness the Imperial troops would retire from one position to another and the enemy losing contact would find himself faced with stiff opposition from an unexpected quarter. However, numbers were bound to tell in the end, and though the advance was an expensive business for the enemy it was steady. During that fighting retreat the Indian troops came under dive bombing for the first time; they were naturally shaken by the infernal experience at the beginning, but once they had discovered the protection of a slit trench dive bombing seemed less terrific.

Meanwhile, the Navy had erected an all-tide jetty at Berbera and the evacuation of the civilians and administrative officials from that shimmering, rust-red, sunstruck coast was carried through until the embarkation of the troops began at 1 p.m. on August 16th, lasting all through the night and completed by the afternoon of the following day. A bayonet charge by the Black Watch at Barkasan had finally taken the heart out of the Italians, who had already suffered heavy casualties, for any attempt to harass the operation. During the withdrawal to the port, one company of the 3/15th Punjab Regt holding out against a particularly heavy enemy assault was cut off from the main body and believed to be lost. However, it eluded the enemy by a skilful night march and was able to rejoin the rearguard two days later.

Our total casualties were 38 killed, 71 wounded and 49 missing. The Italian casualties were estimated at ten times as large; when Berbera was re-entered on March 16th 1941 by the same troops who had made that transitory conquest of British Somaliland such a barren and costly victory for the enemy, the large number of graves found suggested that the Italian casualties were nearer twenty



Western Desert and Cyrenaica

times those of the defenders. The 1/2nd Punjab Regt remained in Somaliland only a fortnight before returning to Aden. The 3/15th Punjab Regt remained there until June 1941.

On the same August day as a jubilant Italian press and radio were proclaiming the end of the British Empire in East Africa the 4th Indian Division,[1] still one brigade short, moved out of the Nile

[1] The division at this date was commanded by Major-General N. M. de la P. Beresford-Peirse,* a distinguished Gunner officer in the First World War. The 5th Indian Infantry Brigade was commanded by Brigadier W. L. Lloyd of the Kumaon Rifles. The 11th Indian Infantry Brigade was commanded by Brigadier R. A. Savory, who had been one of the six British and Indian officers and 134 men out of 29 officers and 514 men of the 14th King George's Own Sikhs (now 1st Bn Sikh Regt.) who survived the bloody Battle of the Fourth of June at Gallipoli.

The British battalion in the 5th Brigade was the 1st Royal Fusiliers, the City of London's Own. The Indian battalions were the 3/1st Punjab Regt and 4th Rajputana Rifles.

The 3/1st was originally the 16th Madras Infantry and later the 76th Punjabis before it became the 3rd Bn of the 1st Punjab Regt. At Ctesiphon in 1915 they stemmed the Turkish advance. Later they were besieged in Kut and endured that horrible captivity. The 4th Rajputana Rifles (Outram's) was originally the 23rd Bombay Rifles. Later they became 123rd Outram's Rifles. Sir James Outram was posted to them as a seventeen-year-old subaltern and they fought under him in the Persian War of 1856. In 1885–7 they served in the Upper Burma Field Force. In 1916 they were prominent in the storming of Nebi Samwil, the key to Jerusalem.

The British battalion in the 11th Brigade was the 2nd Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders. The Indian battalions were the 1st Rajputana Rifles (Wellesley's) and the 4th Rajput Regt. Wellesley's had been commended by the Iron Duke himself when as the 4th Bombay Infantry they had served in his flying column in 1800 for the suppression of Dhoondia, and after being known as the 4th Bombay Rifles became the 104th Wellesley's Rifles a century later. Wellesley's made the forced march to Multan in 1848, served in the Persian War, were a part of the besieged garrison in Kandahar, and fought under Roberts in the final battle for the city. In 1914 they watched the Turk from Bahrein and when he threw in his lot with Germany Wellesley's landed on the mainland and fought in the first actions which led to the fall of Basra. Later Wellesley's were in Kut.

The 4th Bn Rajput Regt, formerly the 8th Rajputs was in the 1815 war with Nepal which ended in a friendship between Britain and Nepal that brought the first Gurkhas into the Indian Army and has lasted ever since. In the First World War the 4th Rajput Regt was for a long time on the North-West Frontier, but later was in South Persia and took a hand in dealing with refractory Kurds and Arabs.

The gunners of the 4th Division were British, but the sappers were Indian, with companies from all three corps—Queen Victoria's Own Madras Sappers and Miners, King George's Own Bengal Sappers and Miners and the Royal Bombay Sappers and Miners. To select records from the past history of these superlative corps would be to write the history of the Indian Army everywhere. The Madras

* Lieut.-General Sir Noel Beresford-Peirse, K.B.E., C.B., D.S.O.

Delta to become a part of Western Defence Force and to prepare defensive positions at Naghamish and Baqqush, 10 and 25 miles respectively east of Mersa Matruh.

It is difficult to write without emotion of that defiant gesture against hostile armies estimated to be 300,000 strong.

> It was proper that we should have worn eagles upon our shoulders, for only birds could have visited so many lands, or could have soared to some of the places where we fought. We went first, and armies sprang up behind us. The tally of those whom we slew was likewise that of an army. We captured many lakhs of prisoners, and as they marched away, their columns stretched over the horizon. Of our men, we left the strength of two divisions upon our battlefields. Jo Hukam.
>
> So will run the tale in a hundred villages, to the circles of elders and wide-eyed children in the shade. Nor like many veterans' tales, will it have grown unreasonably in stature. It is a matter of record that at one time 4 Ind. Div. was the only Allied Infantry formation in the Mediterranean theatre. The 'Game Book' of the Division, which kept the score of men, tanks, guns and aircraft, shows what a multiple toll it took; yet this one Division suffered over 25,000 casualties. It captured more than 100,000 prisoners, and in nine campaigns, travelled more than 15,000 miles. Nevertheless, such figures reveal less of the achievement of 4 Ind. Div. than their proud phrase, 'Jo Hukam.' Whatever was ordered, that thing we did.

Those words are taken from a pamphlet story of the 4th Indian Division published under the authority of the Director of Public Relations, War Department, Government of India and dedicated by the Red Eagles 'To 7th British Armoured Division and 2nd New Zealand Division . . . our oldest comrades.'

Sappers bore the honour of the Sphinx for their service when pioneers in helping Abercromby put the French out of Egypt in 1801–2. The medical, supply and ordnance services of the division were Indian, and in that August 1939 they were joined by the Central India Horse (21st King George's Own Horse) which remained the divisional cavalry throughout the war. As the 38th Central India Horse they were badly cut up at Cambrai while preventing the 2nd Lancers (Gardner's Horse) from being surrounded, and later they were in the van of the cavalry during Allenby's mighty drive through Palestine. When the C.I.H. left India in July 1940, the first Indian cavalry regiment to go overseas in the Second World War, they had given up their horses only six months previously; they arrived in Egypt equipped only with trucks, and the Bren carriers with which they trained in the desert were a novelty. Finally there were the units of the Royal Indian Army Service Corps who had already gained much experience from working with the 7th British Armoured Division.

The move from the delta to the desert was made partly by rail, partly by vehicles. It was a tribute to the skill of the Indian drivers that only 1 per cent. of these vehicles broke down even temporarily on that 250-mile drive first across the sandy desert and then across the stony desert. As soon as the troops arrived at their positions they were all set to work digging trenches out of the solid rock, work which lasted for two months. In September the division was joined by the 16th British Infantry Brigade commanded by Brigadier C. E. N. Lomax[1] who later in the war commanded the 26th Indian Division for two years. This brigade consisted of the 2nd Queen's (Royal West Surrey Regt), the 2nd Leicestershire Regt and the 1st Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders.

On September 13th 1940 two Italian divisions crossed the Egyptian frontier and three days later halted at Sidi Barrani, the small British force having withdrawn from Sollum eastward along the coast. Instead of attempting to advance farther the Italians got busy with the construction of a series of fortified camps round Sidi Barrani, which ran from Maktila 15 miles east on the coast, and southward through the Tummars and Nibeiwa to Sofafi on the escarpment south-west. These camps were strongly defended with mines, anti-tank obstacles, trenches and barbed wire, the largest of them being Maktila, garrisoned by the 1st Libyan Division with many guns and some tanks. Tummar East and Tummar West sheltered the 2nd Libyan Division. Nibeiwa, the strongest of all, was held by the Maletti Mobile Group of 4,000 men with a battalion of medium tanks, and many motor vehicles. The Sofafi group of camps comprised four strong positions on top of the escarpment well supplied with tanks and held by a division of Italian regulars. Behind this outer line of defences there were Blackshirt divisions at Sidi Barrani and Sollum and a regular division at Buq Buq. The Italians built a good road from Fort Capuzzo through Sollum and Buq Buq nearly as far as Sidi Barrani and laid a pipe-line for water from Bardia.

Western Desert Force commanded by Lieut.-General R. N. O'Connor[2] was presently reinforced by the 7th Royal Tank Regt with Infantry tanks, or 'I' tanks as they were always called. At the end of September the 7th Indian Infantry Brigade commanded by Brigadier H. R. Briggs arrived in Egypt and after some preliminary training went up into Divisional Reserve at the end of November.

[1] Major-General C. E. N. Lomax, C.B., C.B.E., D.S.O., M.C.
[2] General Sir Richard O'Connor, G.C.B., D.S.O., M.C.

The British battalion was the 1st Royal Sussex Regt. The Indian battalions were the 4th Bn Sikh Regt[1] and the 4/16th Punjab Regt.

During those months after the Italians crossed the frontier the 7th Armoured Division harried them almost continuously and the feats of the 11th Hussars were worthy of their predecessors in the Charge of the Light Brigade at Balaclava. They swayed the desert as once upon a time 'Busiris and his Memphian chivalry.' Graziani fought this part of the Western Desert campaign over Radio Roma in the spirit of Mr Snodgrass at Ipswich when he took off his coat with the utmost deliberation and announced that he was going to begin.

And now while Western Desert Force prepares itself for the day it is necessary to see what is happening in the Sudan. The term 'Western Desert' originated in the First World War when we were fighting the Senussi who, ewe lambs of Britain though they now be, were in those days pestilential goats. The Western Desert was so called to distinguish it from the Eastern Desert of Sinai. It may be hazarded that the stupid use of the term Middle East for General Wavell's Supreme Command in this theatre of war originated at the War Office with some young staff-officer's misinterpretation of M.E.F. in the First World War as Middle East Force instead of Mediterranean Expeditionary Force. The use of Middle East to cover Tunis to

[1] The 4th Bn Sikh Regt was originally the 36th Sikhs, heroes of one of the greatest stories in the history of the Army in India. In September 1897 during the Afridi campaign two companies of the 36th Sikhs held Fort Gulistan on the Samana range against tremendous odds and added Samana to the regimental honours. Between Fort Gulistan and Fort Lockhart stood, and still stands, Saragarhi, a small blockhouse of mudbrick high above the savage hills of the Tirah. Here 19 men and two cook-boys of the battalion defended the post for six and a half hours against 7,000 Orakzais. One Sikh held the guardroom single-handed until he was burnt alive at his post. The names of these 21 warriors are inscribed upon a memorial tablet where they fell and the Government of India erected another memorial to them at Amritsar. In 1914 Tsingtao was added to the regimental honours when half of the battalion with the South Wales Borderers and Japanese troops captured the German treaty port.

The 4/16th Punjab Regt was formerly the 9th Bhopal Infantry, affectionately known as the Bo Peeps. They were in Flanders in 1914, and saved the line at Neuve Chapelle when they went to the aid of what was left of a British battalion. It was their first time under fire, and in cotton drill through the chill of a late October dusk they moved into the line to fight for three days in the mud without food. Eleven officers and 262 Bo Peeps were killed, but the gap was closed and the line was held. A few days later they lost another 200 men in a bayonet fight at Festubert. In spite of their losses the battalion remained in France till May 1915, helping to restore the line after the first German gas-attack. Later they fought in Mesopotamia. Of the Bo Peeps who left India in 1914 only 15 returned.

Cairo, Syria to Abyssinia, and the true Middle East of Iran and Iraq, undoubtedly caused much confusion in strategic thought from time to time.

When in that fateful June of 1940 Mussolini put his black shirt on Germany's victory the Imperial forces in the Sudan were as inadequate as elsewhere. To be precise, there were three battalions of British troops and the Sudan Defence Force numbering 4,500 men without tanks or guns, except two fixed 6-inch coastal guns at Port Sudan and four small obsolete howitzers at the Governor-General's palace in Khartoum used for firing salutes. Seven ancient aircraft were at the disposal of this force for the reconnaissance of 1,200 miles of frontier. The Italians had at least 250,000 men with 400 guns and 200 aircraft. 100,000 troops with powerful artillery were available along the frontier with many points of entry by which an invasion of the Sudan could have been made with reasonable ease. Fortunately the enemy lacked transport for the grandiose operation he supposed an invasion of the Sudan would entail. There is one advantage in starting a major war with almost nothing; the enemy cannot believe that there is almost nothing. Hence the failure of the Italians to strike boldly both in Cyrenaica and Eritrea. The Kaid, Major-General W. Platt[1] lost no time in trying to suggest that greater strength, and the motor machine-gun companies of the S.D.F. started offensive patrolling over the frontier beyond Kassala with such vigour that the Italians took no offensive action for three weeks. Then, heavily reinforced, the enemy attacked Kassala and Gallabat simultaneously. Kassala lies about 250 miles east of Khartoum where the fantastic mountains of Eritrea throw isolated rocky hills before them into the desert in which they stand, so much like titanic monsters of the past that the fanciful observer would hardly be surprised if one of them were to stalk ponderously across the plain to another position. This chimerian landscape seemed to affect the enemy, who employed 8,000 troops, 18 tanks and many guns (not to mention a preliminary air bombardment which lasted for 12 hours) in order to drive back two Sudanese motor machine-gun companies and a mounted infantry company, on which he inflicted hardly 20 casualties before he occupied Kassala. On the same day the British fort at Gallabat, garrisoned by a single platoon, was captured by 2,000 men, guns and aircraft. Four days later, further south, Kurmuk was taken by a battalion from a District Commissioner and 70 Sudanese police. The bloodiest fighting occurred over Radio Roma in the course of which a British

[1] General Sir William Platt, G.B.E., K.C.B., D.S.O.

division was wiped out at Bunbodi where there was no action at all. This mythical division indicated how little the enemy appreciated our real weakness. Lack of transport for the force he believed necessary to invade the Sudan successfully coupled with the onset of the rainy season deterred him from adventure.

Still, the prospect was gloomy enough when suddenly one day the 2nd Mahratta Light Infantry came marching into Khartoum, having arrived from Aden by way of Port Sudan, an earnest of help from India. So light and confident was their step, so bright and jaunty were their green hosetops and the red hackles in their bonnets, that merely to see them was to feel the spirits rise. Their commanding officer was Lieut.-Colonel Maurice Chambers[1] who five years hence would lead the 26th Indian Division to the recapture of Rangoon.

No warriors gave more trouble to the British in the old days than the Mahrattas,[2] and they made a great general of the Iron Duke whose service in India was mostly against them. Of all Indian troops they are the nearest to the Highlander, and Bombay is to them what Glasgow is to the Highlander. They have, too, their Bonny Prince Charlie in Sivaji who nearly won an empire from the Great Mogul in the seventeenth century about the time that the Braganza dowry brought Bombay to the Stuart crown.

In the middle of September the Indian aid foreshadowed by the arrival of the 2nd Mahratta Light Infantry reached Port Sudan in the 32 troop-ships that conveyed the 5th Indian Division commanded by Major-General Lewis Heath.[3] They were short by a brigade, but the three British battalions in the Sudan were absorbed and a third complete brigade formed. The 9th Brigade, commanded by Brigadier

[1] Major-General H. M. Chambers.

[2] The 2nd Mahratta Light Infantry was originally the 5th Bombay Sepoys, and they with the 3rd Bombay Sepoys (now the 1st Mahratta L.I.) and the old Bombay Pioneers fought a famous battle on March 6th 1799 against Tippu Sultan's army on the hill of Seedaseer, 50 miles from Seringapatam. There they held out for six hours against desperate assaults, and when their ammunition was exhausted they counter-attacked with such dash that the great Mysore army was scattered. Later on in that year both battalions played their part in the storming of Seringapatam on that blazing noon of May—a victory won by Highland regiments, Bombay and Madras Sepoys, with the Old Dozen, the 12th Foot now the Suffolk Regt, and the 33rd Foot (1st Duke of Wellington's).

For many years, on account of the preference shown to the Punjab by the Army in India, the Mahratta Light Infantry suffered an eclipse. In the First World War, however, their reputation as fighting soldiers was second to none. The 2nd Mahratta Light Infantry was then known as the 105th.

[3] Lieut.-General Sir Lewis Heath, K.B.E., C.B., C.I.E. D.S.O. M.C. (14th Punjab Regt and Sikh Regt).

A. G. O. M. Mayne,[1] was made up of the 2nd West Yorkshire Regt, the 3rd Mahratta Light Infantry and the 3rd Frontier Force Regt. The 10th Brigade was commanded by Brigadier W. J. Slim.[2] The British battalion was the 1st Essex Regt, but before the offensive started the 2nd Highland Light Infantry took its place. The Indian battalions were the 4th Baluch Regt and the 3rd Royal Garhwal Rifles. The 29th Brigade, commanded by Brigadier J. C. O. Marriott[3] was composed of the 1st Worcestershire Regt, the 3/2nd Punjab Regt, and the 6th Royal Bn Frontier Force Rifles.

The Divisional Reconnaissance Regt was the 1st Duke of York's Own Cavalry, Skinner's Horse.[4]

[1] General Sir Mosley Mayne, G.C.B., C.B.E., D.S.O., A.D.C. (6th Duke of Connaught's Own Lancers and Royal Deccan Horse).

[2] Field-Marshal Sir William Slim, G.C.B., G.B.E., D.S.O., M.C., A.D.C. (6th and 7th Gurkha Rifles).

[3] Major-General J. C. O. Marriott, C.B., C.V.O., D.S.O., M.C.

[4] The 3rd Mahratta Light Infantry (formerly 110th) had won the distinction of becoming Light Infantry by their valour in Abyssinia in 1867–8 under Napier, and had been particularly conspicuous at the storming of Magdala; now they were on active service in this part of the world again. The 3rd Frontier Force Regt was originally the 3rd Sikh Infantry and later the 53rd Sikhs (Frontier Force). The Punjab Frontier Force as such was dissolved in 1903, but the Frontier Force Regt and Frontier Force Rifles are still 'Piffers' and have played a proud part in the history of the Indian Army.

The 6th Frontier Force Rifles, formerly 59th Scinde Rifles (Frontier Force) were created 'Royal' in 1921 in recognition of their magnificent service in France during the First World War. At Givenchy half a dozen Sikhs and Punjabi Mussalmans had held a trench against immense odds until Bruce the subaltern was killed (he was awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross) and his gallant six comrades were at last overwhelmed by numbers.

The 4th Baluch Regt, formerly 129th Duke of Connaught's Own Baluchis, had fought in Africa before with Wolseley's Expeditionary Force in 1882. It was the first Indian battalion to attack the Germans and the only one to bring its corps the honour 'Ypres 1914.' On that night of October 30th/31st the Prussian Guard flung itself against the meagre earthworks thrown up hastily in the desperate hope of saving the Channel ports from the enemy. A tired thin force of cavalry was holding Hollebeke and with them were the 129th Baluchis. The Prussian Guard never broke through in those hours during which the fate of Britain was at stake. One machine-gunner was left alive—Sepoy Khudadad Khan who fought his gun until he fell severely wounded. He survived, however, and was the first Indian soldier to be awarded the Victoria Cross. After France the 129th Baluchis went on to East Africa and there earned the praise of von Lettow himself.

The 3/2nd Punjab Regt (formerly 72nd Punjabis) was another battalion with a mighty past. It was a small detachment of the 3/2nd Punjab Regt, mostly recruits of eight months' service, who in 1890 under Lieutenant Grant tried to relieve Imphal when several British officers had been murdered by the Manipuris. They held the fort of Thobal for 13 days against heavy odds. Grant was awarded the Victoria Cross and every one of the 80 men the Order of Merit. As recently

After its arrival in the Sudan the Ball of Fire[1] Division was spread out between Port Sudan and Sennar on the Blue Nile. Marriott's 29th Brigade was on the Red Sea coast. Mayne's 9th Brigade was based south-west of Kassala where the Atbara is spanned by the Butana bridge. Slim's 10th Brigade was at Yedaref where Major-General Heath had his Divisional H.Q. equally convenient for an offensive against Kassala and Eritrea or Gallabat and the Amhara province of Abyssinia. Three motor machine-gun companies of the Sudan Defence Force were allotted to the 9th Brigade; the other three with some mobile artillery and Skinner's Horse formed Gazelle Force which was commanded by the dashing Colonel Frank Messervy[2] and employed as a fast reconnaissance and fighting formation for harrying the Italian posts along the frontier. At this date much attention was being given to raising an Abyssinian revolt and all operations of the 5th Indian Division were planned to stimulate this. It was not yet supposed that even the Indian troops, highly trained as they were for mountain warfare, would be able to storm the fearful ramparts that guarded the inner highlands of Eritrea and Abyssinia. Moreover, they were equipped for desert warfare.

The Italian troops were of good quality and with high hopes of an advance from Graziani in Libya they dreamed of invading the Sudan when the malarial rainy season was past. With this in view the enemy began to move reinforcements toward his frontier. In October the 8th, 12th and 42nd Colonial Brigades in the Kassala-Sabdarat-Tessenei triangle were joined by the 16th and 41st reserve Colonial Brigades; the 156th and 170th Blackshirt Bns went to

as April 1936 a small party of 3/2nd Punjab Regt defended the Kila Hari post against a thousand Shanozais in a hand to hand fight lasting three hours, a feat of the North-West Frontier which could vie with any of the many famous Frontier occasions.

The Royal Garhwal Rifles were a bridge between the Gurkhas and the rest of the Indian Army, being Rajput hillmen of the Himalaya west of Nepal. The 3rd Bn of the old 39th Garhwal Rifles was raised rather later than the first two, both of which fought in France and Flanders and elsewhere with such distinction that they were made 'Royal.' However, the 3rd Bn did fine work in the Third Afghan War.

The divisional cavalry was Skinner's Horse, the 1st Bengal Lancers of once upon a time, whose unique yellow uniform was famous for a century and a quarter in so many desperate encounters.

[1] The 5th Indian Division had for its renowned badge a ball of fire on a black ground.

[2] General Sir Frank Messervy, K.C.S.I., K.B.E., C.B., D.S.O. (Hodson's Horse and 13th Duke of Connaught's Own Lancers).

Kassala. The fiery Lorenzini's Eritrean 2nd Brigade was brought back from British Somaliland to Asmara in reserve, and was later joined by the 11th Brigade from Shoa. The 43rd Brigade was at Um Hagar, but weakened by sickness. Metemma was reinforced by five battalions, and the 6th Brigade was waiting in reserve to move forward.

At 5.30 a.m. on November 6th 1940 Slim's 10th Indian Brigade with a field regiment of artillery, and a squadron of the Royal Tank Regt (six cruiser and six light tanks), supported by the R.A.F., launched the first British offensive of the Second World War, for the advance into Belgium in May can hardly be called an offensive. The initial objective was Gallabat, and Slim's brigade had been assembled within a mile or two of the Italian lines without Lieut.-Colonel Castagnuola's being aware of anything amiss until the R.A.F. bombed the fort and destroyed the wireless station. Simultaneously the Royal Artillery started to rake Gallabat for nearly an hour, after which the barrage was turned on Metemma. The 4th Baluch Regt which during the night had seized a hill overlooking the fort covered the flank of the advance when the 3rd Royal Garhwal Rifles followed up the tanks at 6.40 a.m. and fought hand to hand for the fort itself, which was dourly defended by some Savoia Grenadiers and Eritrean troops. One enemy machine-gunner, bombed away from his gun three times, always came back to it and was crushed at his post by a tank. By 8 a.m. a counter-attack of the 25th and 77th Colonial Bns had been broken and Gallabat was ours.

The main objective, however, was Metemma, another village and fort, lying opposite to Gallabat across a ravine known as the Boundary Khor, the steep craggy sides of which were covered with long grass. Unfortunately nine of our tanks were out of action, three from mines, the rest from track pins bent or broken on the rocky ground. The enemy was holding strong prepared positions behind thickets of barbed wire round the Boundary Khor. Castagnuola had signalled to General Martini for air action from Gondar, and the Italian commander had responded generously. Bombers and fighters descended all day long and made hell of the Gallabat ridge, destroying the tank spares in the course of their raids, during which we lost seven Gladiators in exchange for five C.R. 42's. Unfortunately elements of a British line battalion holding the fort came rushing out in a panic and shouting that a retreat had been ordered. A few of the Garhwalis joined in but were quickly brought under control. Many men of the British battalion jumped into their 1st line transport and driving helter-skelter down the road panicked the drivers of other vehicles,

some of them reaching as far as Doka before they were stopped. The morale of the battalion was so badly shaken that Slim had to recommend its withdrawal from a fighting area and in due course the 2nd Highland Light Infantry replaced it in the 10th Brigade. Six months later that line battalion fought with distinction in Syria and Iraq.

On the following day the Italian bombers came back screened by the fighters and the Gallabat ridge had to be abandoned. It was reoccupied three days later, but the operation against Metemma was not continued. For the next two months the area was a threat to Italian nerves and powers of reinforcement, the slouch hats of the Garhwalis having persuaded their intelligence that an Australian division was on the move. This wasted the enemy's reserves, and although Metemma was not captured and the caravan routes it controlled were not opened for support of the revolting Abyssinians, which was the main objective of the operation, the patriot movement was stimulated throughout Gojjam.

While the Gallabat-Metemma action was being fought, some 30 miles north-east of Kassala Messervy with Gazelle Force was fighting a tough little battle near Jebel Serobatib in the rocky desert. Two companies of the 3/2nd Punjab Regt and one company of the 3rd Frontier Force Regt were with Skinner's Horse in this action, in which 862 prisoners were taken. Throughout November and December similar actions were keeping the enemy on his toes. The Tessenei garrison was continually being harassed by the motor machine-gun companies. The plan of merely defending the frontier of the Sudan and supplying the Abyssinians with arms and material for a formidable revolt began to glow with the colours of an ambitious dream, the fulfilment of which would depend on the success of the operations in Libya.

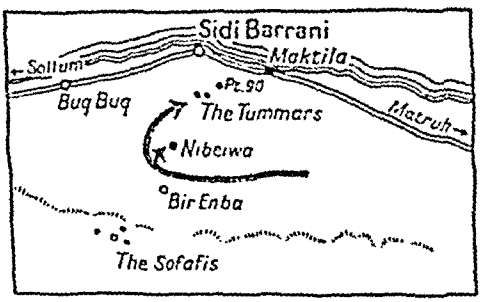
Chapter 3

December, 1940. The first offensive in the Western Desert—assault on the camps at Nibeiwa and the Tummars—capture of Sidi Barrani and destruction of Italian army.

ON October 28th 1940 Mussolini had aspired to show Hitler how to run a war in the Mediterranean by sending the forces of Italy in Albania against Greece. On the night of November 9/10th the Giulia Division, the crack division of Alpini, was driven back along the valley of the Sarandoporos by two battalions of Evzones, and the invaders failed to reach Metsovo and break through into the Thessalian plain. On the night of November 11/12th, Admiral Cunningham's Fleet Air Arm crippled the Italian Navy in the harbour of Taranto.

As early as October 20th General Wavell had instructed General Wilson to consider the possibility of an attack on the enemy forward camps in Libya with the intention of exploiting such an attack if successful with the 7th Armoured Division northward toward the coast and with the 4th Indian Division westward. At that date Mr Eden, the Secretary of State for War, was on a visit to Egypt, according to Radio Roma in order to organise a last desperate attempt to defend that country. Wavell told him of his plans on condition that he would say nothing about them until he could communicate them to Mr Churchill by word of mouth. Thanks to Mr Eden's support, reinforcements of aircraft were promised to make good those which had been sent from Egypt to Greece. The despatch of those precious squadrons, as well as troops, armament and transport to occupy Crete, had made it look as if the plan to attack the Sidi Barrani forts would have to be abandoned: in the event it was only postponed from the last week of November to the first week in December. Secrecy was so strict that hardly a detail of the plan was put on paper and scarcely a dozen senior commanders and staff officers knew of the plan until just before it was put into execution. The strength of the enemy was believed to amount to 80,000 troops with 250 guns and 120 tanks against which the force to be disposed was 31,000 men, 120 guns, 275 tanks (of which more than half were light tanks, 50 were Infantry tanks, and the rest cruisers) and 60 armoured cars.

The resistance put up by the Greeks and the blow to the Italian fleet had seemed a challenge to the defenders of Egypt to give the enemy a like lesson, and morale was at the peak. On November 25th and 26th a training exercise was held near Mersa Matruh in which entrenched camps marked out on the model of the enemy camps round Sidi Barrani were attacked. The troops were told that a similar exercise would be held on some date early in December; they did not know that they had already had a dress rehearsal and that the next exercise would be the first night. For this the performers were the 7th Armoured Division, the 4th Indian Infantry Division to which was attached the 16th British Infantry Brigade, the 7th Bn Royal Tank Regt, and the Matruh Garrison Force of the 3rd Coldstream Guards and a battery of the South Notts Hussars. The



7th Indian Brigade which had arrived in Egypt toward the end of November, was to be in reserve, protecting the lines of communication and taking charge of prisoners. Dumps of ammunition, petrol and water were moved in the desert as far as 30 miles forward from our lines at Matruh without being observed by the enemy. He was confident. On the day the advance began a leading German military correspondent wrote:

> Neither of the parties can carry out a surprise attack in the Egyptian Western Desert because of the natural obstacles in the desert, and because the preparation of mechanised forces for a big offensive on a large scale cannot be concealed.

It was early in the morning of a cold grey Friday that on December 6th the 4th Indian Division moved out from its defensive positions to repeat that exercise. With the rising of the icy wind the dust rose too, veiling the dispersed groups of vehicles that moved slowly across the desert. By afternoon the division was concentrated in the area of

Bir Kenayis, some 30 miles south of Matruh. Fifty miles of desert had been covered, and when they had dug slit trenches the troops turned in early to sleep. Throughout Saturday, December 7th they rested without the cover of so much as sparse low scrub yet unobserved by the enemy's reconnaissance planes. That evening the troops were told that this was not an exercise and that they had come so far to strike at the enemy. O'Connor, the Corps Commander, came along to read a Special Order from the Commander-in-Chief with a message of good cheer from Mr Churchill, and the men went to sleep that night, the last long sleep they would have for several nights, determined to complete the hat-trick which had been started by the Greeks and the Royal Navy. The general plan of attack in Wavell's own words was as follows:

> The Support Group of the 7th Armoured Division was to observe the group of enemy camps round Sofafi and prevent the enemy from these camps intervening in the battle. The remainder of the Armoured Division and the 4th Indian Division were to pass through the gap between the Sofafi camps and Nibeiwa. A brigade of the 4th Indian Division with the 7th Battalion R.T.R. (Infantry tanks) was then to attack Nibeiwa camp from the west, while the Armoured Division covered the attack and prevented any intervention from the enemy to the north.
>
> After the capture of Nibeiwa, another brigade of the 4th Indian Division, again supported by 7th R.T.R., was to attack the Tummar groups of camps from the west. It was intended that their capture should conclude the first day's operation. Meanwhile, the Matruh Garrison force was to observe and contain the enemy camp at Maktila.
>
> If the attacks on Nibeiwa and Tummar were successful, it was intended to attack and capture Sidi Barrani on the following day, and thereafter exploit success as far westward as possible.[1]

Early on the morning of December 8th the advance continued. It was a bright cold windless day and as the lorries, trucks and guns moved forward at hardly more than eight miles an hour it seemed impossible that they would not soon be attacked by the Regia Aeronautica. Yet not a single enemy plane appeared. It was a double holiday of obligation for Italians: it was Sunday and it was also the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. The dust storm of the previous day had obscured the preliminary move and there was no reason for spoiling a good day with what would have seemed unnecessary activity. It is improbable that the influence of this holiday of

[1] Despatch of General Sir Archibald Wavell.

obligation was realised by those responsible for the plan of attack and to that extent the absence of hostile reconnaissance may be attributed to luck. By 5 p.m. that afternoon the 4th Indian Division was 15 miles south-east of Nibeiwa, having covered 100 miles since it left its original positions on the morning of December 6th.

That moonless night march of the Camerons and 1st Rajputana Rifles (Wellesley's) with the Infantry tanks over unreconnoitred country to their rendezvous was a feat of leadership. During that night of December 8/9th ships of the Royal Navy had been shelling Maktila from 15-inch guns with such effect that the Libyan troops refused to stay in the camp and fell back in confusion to Sidi Barrani, which in turn was bombarded both by the Royal Navy and the R.A.F.

At dusk Savory's 11th Brigade (less one battalion) and the I tanks of the 7th R.T.R. had moved to a rendezvous six miles south-west of Nibeiwa. From these before dawn on Monday December 9th the brigade with its tanks advanced to its forming up place 4,000 yards north-west of Nibeiwa.

The 4th Rajputs moved forward in lorries to within three miles of the east face of Nibeiwa camp which, stretching over a bare plateau with a shallow valley in front, was surrounded by a double stone wall with shelters every 50 yards for the Libyan troops who held the perimeter. At about 3 a.m. the Rajputs who had worked forward on foot to the perimeter encountered enemy listening posts and opened fire. At once the night was a blaze of flares and flashes as the enemy replied. When the illumination faded, the Rajputs worked forward to new positions and opened fire again. The pyrotechnics started up at once, and the noise of them covered the roar and rattle of the tanks and vehicles moving round the west side of Nibeiwa. The task of the Rajputs was accomplished and at 6 a.m. the battalion withdrew.

On the west side a heavy volume of artillery fire was put down on the camp soon after 7 a.m.; at 7.30 the 11th Brigade and its tanks attacked. The Infantry tanks caught 28 Italian tanks in harbour and knocked every one of them out before the crews were ready. Then they mounted the wall and roared down into the camp. General Maletti and his officers had just sat down to breakfast. The General rushed out of the dug-out with a machine-gun and as he opened fire on the advancing forces was shot dead with a bullet through the lung. The Italian and Libyan gunners fought well, but even field-guns fired at 30 yards range were impotent against the tanks. Armoured carriers followed up the tanks to hold the ground which had been

won. Close behind them were the lorries of the infantry. They halted about 700 yards from the camp. The Camerons charged first with the bayonet to clear the first half of the camp. Wellesley's went through them to deal with the other half. By 8.25 all resistance was at an end, and the Italian garrison numbering about 3,000 had been killed or captured.

At 8.30 Beresford-Peirse ordered Lloyd's 5th Brigade to move to the west of the Tummar camps and be ready to attack, and Lomax's 16th British Brigade moved into the area vacated by the 5th, whose attack on Tummar West was delayed until 1.35 p.m. by dust storms which had been making their advance extremely difficult. Indeed, Lloyd himself had had to drive to within 400 yards of the camp walls before its exact position was ascertained.

After a heavy artillery concentration the 7th R.T.R., now reduced to 22 tanks, entered Tummar West from the north, followed by the infantry carriers, which met with strong resistance from the enemy and were gallantly fought. Havildar Kalyan Singh, a Sikh of the 3/1st Punjab Regt, had his carrier set on fire by a hand grenade. He was badly burnt in wrenching his gun from its mounting but immediately opened fire with it and silenced the enemy post. When his last round was expended he saw his men safely into another carrier in which he finally found room for himself. And there was many a deed as gallant on that day.

The infantry now alighted from lorries driven to within 150 yards of the walls by New Zealanders, some of whom went forward with the troops to the assault. The 1st Royal Fusiliers led the way and the 3/1st Punjab Regt passed through them in the same pattern of attack as at Nibeiwa, though the opposition met by the 3/1st was much tougher than any so far. By 4 p.m. Tummar West was ours and at least another 3,000 prisoners had been taken.

The 4th Rajputana Rifles (Outram's) went round the south side of the camp in lorries to attack Tummar East. They were engaged and halted on the way by an Italian force advancing to counter-attack. The enemy counter-attack got into the south-east corner of the camp, but was driven back by fire from Battalion H.Q. of the 3/1st Punjab Regt. By 5.30 p.m. when darkness fell, the counter-attack had been smashed with over 200 Italians killed and 900 prisoners taken. The attack on Tummar East was postponed until morning and at dawn Outram's entered the camp without opposition, the garrison having retired to Point 90, a strongly fortified camp.

While the 5th Indian Brigade had been occupied with the

Tummars the 16th British Brigade was sent from divisional reserve to push forward as far as possible before darkness towards Sidi Barrani. Two regiments of artillery were to join the brigade during the night, and the 7th R.T.R. was to refit as far as possible for operations next day. The 16th Brigade advanced boldly northwards and harboured for the night only five miles south of Sidi Barrani.

At dawn on Tuesday December 10th the advance continued and by 7 a.m. the Queen's on the left and the Leicesters on the right were heavily engaged. The 11th Indian Brigade and a field regiment were closed up south of the 16th Brigade and a divisional reserve was formed by withdrawing one battalion from the 5th and 11th Brigades. A violent sand storm which reduced visibility to 150 yards hampered operations, but by 1.30 p.m. the 16th Brigade was astride the two roads leading west from Sidi Barrani. Beresford-Peirse was at Brigade H.Q. and after placing part of the 11th Indian Brigade under Lomax he ordered an attack on Sidi Barrani. The attack was launched at 4.15 p.m. by the Queen's on the right and the Camerons on the left supported by artillery fire and some tanks of the 7th R.T.R. At the shutting in of dusk Sidi Barrani was ours and many more prisoners had been captured.

During December 10th the Regia Aeronautica made some heavy raids including a dive bombing attack on the 11th Brigade in the morning, but the casualties were light. The situation at nightfall was satisfactory. The 2nd Libyan Division and most of the 4th Blackshirt Division had been destroyed. There remained the 1st Libyan Division which had withdrawn westward from Maktila with what was left of the Blackshirts after a frontal attack by Selby's Matruh Garrison force. On December 11th the 1st Libyan Division and the garrison of Point 90 Camp were dealt with. The 16th Brigade held Sidi Barrani facing east, with the 11th Brigade to the south facing south-east. The Central India Horse were on the flank making touch with Selby's force advancing westward to close the circle. A flag of truce carried by two prisoners was sent to the commander of Point 90 Camp, demanding the unconditional surrender of the garrison. The commander refused, but when the envoys came back they declared that such a refusal had only been made to spare his family in Italy from reprisals and that strong resistance was not to be expected. So an attack was started with a heavy bombardment, after which the tanks went into action followed by the 3/1st Punjab Regt. The enemy's guns replied with much emphasis, but when the tanks mounted the walls of the camp the garrison was formed up with white flags, some of them with their kitbags packed beside them. 2,000 more prisoners, and that

was the end of Point 90. It was also the end for some months of the Red Eagles in the Western Desert.

Wavell had for some time been planning to send the 4th Indian Division to the Sudan for a possible offensive against the enemy, and to relieve it in the Western Desert by the 6th Australian Division as soon as this was ready. While the battle of Sidi Barrani was in progress he had had to make up his mind whether or not to transfer the Red Eagles because owing to the shipping problem he had to do it at once or wait perhaps for many weeks for another opportunity. On December 10th he gave the fateful order that two days later the 4th Indian Division would move back to its old positions. The ultimate destination of the Red Eagles was a secret, and their withdrawal from what now seemed certain to be a glorious campaign caused a good deal of depression. It was hard to know that their best-loved and most admired comrades of the incomparable 7th Armoured Division were westward bound without them—the 7th Armoured Division which, after three days of continuous movement and fighting in a heavy dust storm, had filled up with petrol, food and water and on its own initiative gone off into the dark over unknown country to pursue and capture the garrisons of the Sofafi camps and put many more thousands of prisoners into the bag. Still, the Red Eagles could flap their wings. In three days the division had taken over 20,000 prisoners with many guns, tanks and stores. Three enemy divisions and the Maletti group had been destroyed. The cost had been less than 700 casualties. The Red Eagles had achieved something larger than that: they had set the hopes of the British Commonwealth soaring with themselves. They had handed to the people of Britain jeroboams of champagne at a time when they were growing tired of flat ale, even when the Prime Minister from time to time put a head on it with his inspiring words. Sollum, Bardia, Tobruk, Derna and Benghazi were still to come, but Sidi Barrani made them possible. And what made Sidi Barrani possible? The defiance of Churchill when in that desperate June he ordered the reinforcements for North Africa to go on, the transports to head southward to the Cape of Good Hope at a moment when Britain herself was almost disarmed; the defiance of Wavell when with Savory's 11th Indian Infantry Brigade, Lloyd's 5th Indian Infantry Brigade, the 7th Armoured Division, and nothing else he went forward to meet Graziani's 300,000.

Chapter 4

January, 1941. Attack on Eritrea by 4th and 5th Indian Divisions—pursuit of the Italians—battles of Agordat and Barentu—first Indian V.C. of the war.

THE 4th Indian Division moved down to the Sudan by two routes, the Red Sea and the Nile Valley. It was followed by the I tanks of the 7th R.T.R. and a battery of 6-inch howitzers, one of which would in some months' time fire as decisive a shell as howitzer ever fired.

On January 7th part of the division had disembarked at Port Sudan and by the 14th Beresford-Peirse with Divisional H.Q. and Savory's 11th Brigade short of a battalion were established with Gazelle Force, screened by the palms and thick bush of the Gash Delta, about 10 miles north of Kassala.

The original plan had been only to drive the Italians out of the Sudan, but the dazzling success of Wavell's operations in Libya and Cyrenaica had changed the military situation.

General Frusci, who had commanded an Italian division in the Spanish Civil War and now commanded the enemy forces on the Eritrean northern front, had been so much harried by Gazelle that he began to be anxious about his communications with Kassala from the north. On December 31st he had withdrawn his forces on this flank along the sandy track east of Sabdaret, leaving patrols out at Serobatib and Adardet and concentrated a mobile force in Sabdaret itself to meet any serious threat. In Rome early in December, the new Chief of the General Staff, General Ugo Cavallero, after the disaster in Libya, had convinced the High Command that it was time to abandon any notion of invading the Sudan and to concentrate on defending the Empire of Ethiopia. Nor did the Greek victories along the Albanian frontier make for optimism. So orders were sent to Frusci to withdraw from the lowlands of Kassala and Metemma and to hold the mountain passes from Agordat to Gondar. Frusci argued that such a withdrawal would involve loss of prestige: he had issued a proclamation to inform his troops that the English were on the point of attacking Kassala and that he intended to scatter them like chaff.

The original date for the operation against Kassala was February

8th, but the Kaid put it forward to January 18th. When Kassala had been recaptured all units as yet available of the 4th Indian Division, with Gazelle Force under its command, were to chase the enemy along the dry-weather northerly track toward Keru, and the 5th Indian Division, less Mayne's 9th Brigade which had replaced Slim's 10th Brigade at Gallabat, was to move along the southerly motor-road, capture Tessenei and Aicota, and exploit the situation toward Barentu. The 9th Brigade's job was to masquerade as a division further south and make the Italian Intelligence suppose that our main thrust would be toward Gondar in Abyssinia, and that the operations beyond Kassala were a bluff.

All through December the 9th Brigade, which until January included the 6th Royal Frontier Force Rifles from the 29th Brigade, was busy blazing line of communication trails through the 80 miles of bush and forest from the base at Gedaref to its forward positions; dummy landing grounds and depots of stores were laid out; and along this imaginary line of communication the activity of ants was simulated. In the forward area the brigade was spread out on a divisional front.

By Christmas they were starting to be as aggressive and inquisitive as their resources would let them, but when active preparations began for the Kassala offensive even the two old Lysanders which had paid them occasional visits never came again. The Royal Frontier Force Rifles left them. Ammunition expenditure was severely restricted. Their maintenance transport was removed; they had nothing but unit tactical trucks of the 8 cwt and 15 cwt type with which to keep themselves supplied from Gedaref.

Nevertheless, aggressive tactics during the latter part of December and in January continued. The 3rd Mahratta Light Infantry in the centre retook Gallabat in a night attack, but the village could not be held, situated as it was on bare ground sloping down towards concealed enemy positions across the Boundary Khor a few hundred yards away. So the Mahrattas dug themselves in to the west of the village and harassed the enemy every day for six weeks.

On the Mahratta left the 2nd West Yorkshire Regt dominated a no man's land two miles deep and convinced the Italians that their carriers were light tanks. One afternoon two companies got across the Boundary Khor unobserved, established contact with the gunners of the Surrey and Sussex Yeomanry by heliograph, caught the enemy at his siesta and did him a lot of damage. Two simultaneous raids followed—one by a commando with the brigade on the enemy's line of communication on the Wahni road, the other by

the 3rd F.F. Regt to upset his aerodrome close to Metemma. The commando raid was a failure because the raiders made too much noise and were lost in the bush, with the result that the commandos suffered more casualties than they inflicted, and following the commando law they left their wounded casualties behind them which shocked the tradition of the Indian Army. Later this commando was replaced by the 52nd Middle East Commando consisting of Jews and Arabs, which in the battle for Keru and afterwards in the operations round Amba Alagi did excellent work.

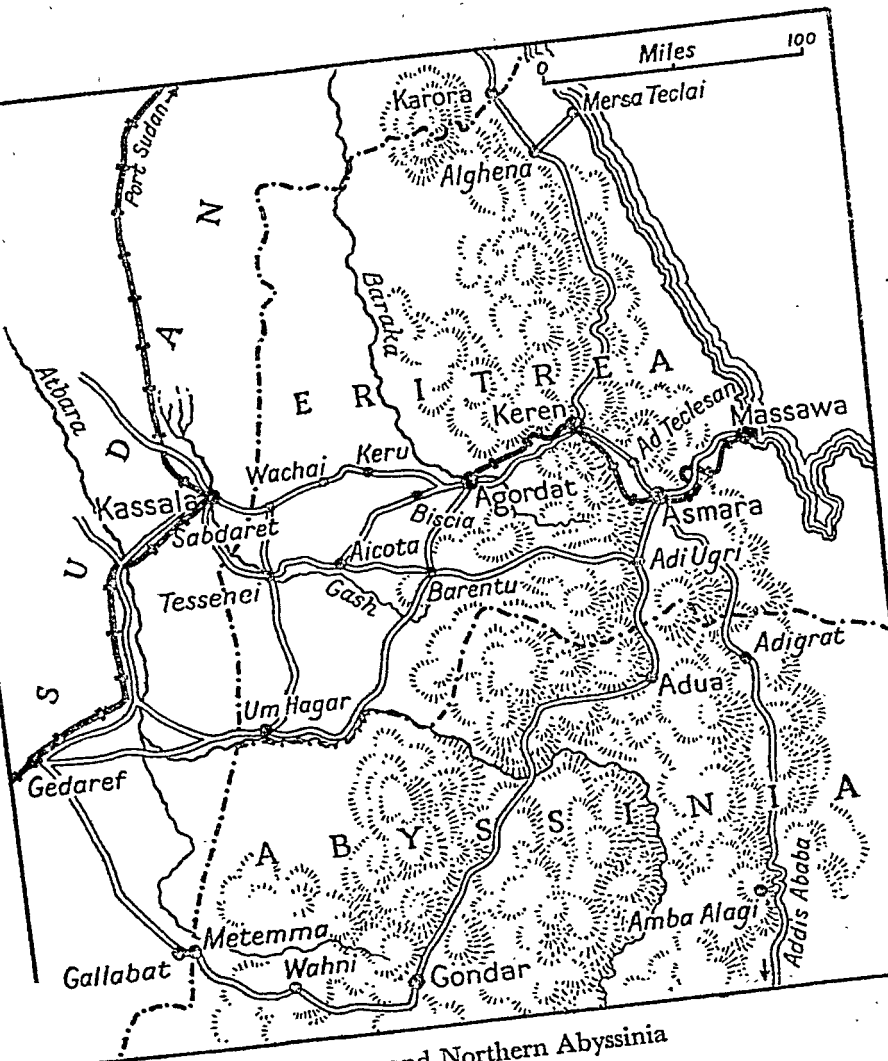
The raid on the aerodrome was a complete success. Much damage was done, and Lieutenant Singh Bhagat of the Royal Bombay Sappers and Miners who was presently to win the first Indian V.C. of the war, distinguished himself in carrying out demolitions regardless of personal danger. After this raid the 3rd F.F. Regt, in co-operation with some hundreds of Sudanese irregulars, harassed the enemy's left continuously. We shall hear more of the 9th Indian Brigade soon.

On the night of January 17th 1941 the enemy evacuated Kassala and Tessenei, falling back to concentrate in the Keru-Biscia-Aicota triangle where the sharp fantastic foothills of those serrated mountains begin: that wild lunar mass of granite which guards the plateau of Eritrea and makes invasion look like a bad joke.

Zero hour, which had been fixed for January 18th had to be postponed for 24 hours at the request of Major-General Beresford-Peirse whose division was still far from established. The 3/14th Punjab Regt which was to take the place of the 4th Rajput Regt in the 11th Brigade had not arrived, but the 4th Sikh Regt from Brigg's 7th Brigade was available and it joined Gazelle Force which had been placed under the 4th Indian Division and was mounted in lorries to give it the necessary mobility. The 5th Brigade was beginning to reach Gedaref, but could not be ready for a fortnight.

The postponement of zero hour gave the enemy time to get well clear of Kassala, Sabdaret and Tessenei; but the two Indian divisions went forward in pursuit, the 4th making for Keru, the 5th for Barentu. Both roads were sown with land-mines, four-pronged caltrops designed to maim tyres instead of horses' heels, and other obstructions and demolitions which included the blowing up of the bridge over the Gash. Heart-stirring work was done by the Indian sappers and the Royal Indian Army Service Corps in contending with these difficulties.

That afternoon Messervy with his fierce and active Gazelle caught



Eritrea and Northern Abyssinia

up with the enemy at Wachai, 40 miles east of Kassala, where the 4th Sikh Regt (the old 36th) was blooded. That night the enemy retired from Wachai to take up what he believed to be an impregnable position in the narrow Keru gorge which ran for a mile between walls of crags 1,200 feet high. At break of dawn heavy fire halted Gazelle. At 7 a.m. the Royal Artillery battery was settling into position when 60 Eritrean cavalry led by an Italian officer on a white horse came round the hills on the northern flank and charged the guns, firing from the saddle and flinging grenades. The guns swung round and fired point blank, some shells piercing the horses' chests, others mowing down the low scrub without exploding. The gunners had to use their small arms supported by the revolvers of Gazelle Headquarters, the members of which had dived into their slit trenches, before the charge was stopped. It was like an incident on the old North-West Frontier. Of the 60 men who made that gallant charge 25 dead and 16 wounded were left when the survivors turned and galloped back, pursued by an armoured car.

Before dawn on January 22nd the 4th Sikh Regt scaled the hill south of the Keru Gorge and after some tough fighting gained the summit by daylight, only to find that the hill was separated from the main ridge by another gorge the opposite side of which was strongly held by the enemy. Later in the day the Camerons and Wellesley's caught up with Gazelle. They had had a long, dry, hot march through the thin acacias and Christ's thorns, in the faint shade of which they had had to find scanty cover from the bombing attacks of the Italian air force. The Camerons went on to support the Sikhs, and by nightfall in spite of a stout resistance the enemy's forward defences had been driven back. It looked as if he was beginning to abandon the whole position. In the morning our patrols ascertained that this was the case. Skinner's Horse on entering the gorge found the road and the river bed heavily mined. The sappers and miners worked hard to clear a way, and by 3 p.m. Wellesley's had passed through the Keru Gorge in pursuit of the retreating enemy, with whom contact was re-established at dusk in the hills eastward.

This surprising retreat was caused by the forceful initiative of Major-General Heath who when the 5th Division had occupied Aicota on January 21st had sent the 2nd Highland Light Infantry and two M.M.G. companies of the Sudan Defence Force ahead of the 10th Brigade, at top speed along a side track running north-east from Aicota to the road behind the Italian position, which they reached after bayoneting their way through one pass on the same day as the Sikhs made their attack. Cut off from Agordat, part of the Italian

41st Brigade escaped across country in disorder that night and the remainder with the commander, his staff and upward of 1,200 men were caught at Keru between the advancing 4th Division and the 10th Brigade. After heavy fighting all day of the 24th, the H.L.I. and 4th Baluch Regt captured 700 prisoners including General Fongoli and his staff, to which Gazelle and Wellesley's added another 300 prisoners. Unfortunately on January 21st Brigadier Slim was wounded in the only successful low dive attack by an enemy fighter against traffic along the line of advance. It was not a severe wound, but it put him out of action for the rest of the Eritrean campaign and Lieut.-Colonel B. C. Fletcher of the Highland Light Infantry took over command of the 10th Brigade until succeeded by Brigadier T. W. Rees.[1] In April Brigadier Fletcher would be given the 9th Brigade.

By 10 a.m. on January 26th Gazelle Force reached Biscia, which was evacuated by the enemy, and by 1 p.m. next day was in contact with the main defences covering Agordat. At nightfall Wellesley's caught up with them. The 1st Rajputana Rifles had marched 60 miles in three days and covered 120 miles in seven days with some fighting thrown in. On January 27th the Camerons and the 3/14th Punjab Regt, who had been bombed in the train from Port Sudan to Kassala, arrived and took over the rest of the front from Gazelle. Messervy's advance had been so rapid that, besides being bombed by the Italian air force, Gazelle had also been attacked by the R.A.F., being an hour ahead of its time-table. It is good to be able to record that the R.A.F., which included squadrons from South Africa and Southern Rhodesia, gave the greatest help possible to the troops all the time. They were commanded by Air Commodore Slatter[2] whose co-operation with the soldiers and brilliant handling of his resources are still spoken of with gratitude and respect by those who benefited from them. A few Hurricanes had reached East Africa, and these were at once launched against the Asmara and Gura aerodromes to put out of action 50 grounded enemy aircraft. General Lorenzini, the fair 'lion of the Sahara,' was now in command at Agordat with orders to hold it to the last man because the future of Italy's Ethiopian Empire depended upon Agordat's resistance. Lorenzini had been promised full air support, and 10 Savoia bombers an hour might have tested the attack. However, that hope vanished when the Hurricanes raided the two Eritrean aerodromes.

Agordat was a dreary little town of mostly off-white rectangles of

[1] Major-General T. W. Rees, C.B., C.I.E., D.S.O., M.C. (Rajputana Rifles).
[2] Air Marshal Sir Leonard Slatter, K.B.E., C.B., D.S.O., D.F.C.

buildings, interspersed with a few dirty pink ones, lying along the south bank of the River Baraka, which except in the rainy season was a wide strip of sand bordered beyond the town by dense groves of palms. South-west was the long steep ridge called Laquetat with a fort at either end and protected by wire and a strong concrete wall; south-east were four strongly fortified tors and beyond them the mass of Mount Cochen rising 2,000 feet from the scrubby plain. Northward and eastward these outlying monstrous hills huddled together more and more closely in savage defiance. The road to Barentu southward ran between Laquetat and the dark bulk of Cochen. The garrison numbered over 12,000 with 76 guns and a company each of medium and light tanks.

On January 27th the 4th Division was joined by Lloyd's 5th Brigade coming in lorries from Kassala, but still without the 4th Rajputana Rifles (Outram's). The original date for the concentration of the 5th Brigade had been February 5th and the place Gedaref. The concentration was completed at Agordat five days earlier and 250 miles farther forward. This was one of innumerable feats achieved by the R.I.A.S.C., and the fighting troops will not resent the assertion that the decisive factor in the defeat of the Italians in Eritrea was the skill, daring, energy and devotion of the Royal Indian Army Service Corps and Indian Ordnance Corps.

On January 28th the 4th Sikh Regt and 3/1st Punjab Regt approached Laquetat without opposition and the 3/14th Punjab Regt, after a cautious dispersed move across the plain, reached the wide scrubby summit of Cochen soon after dusk without being fired upon. Wellesley's and the Camerons followed the 3/14th across the plain. By nightfall they were established on the flank of the enemy's position, and during the night the 4th Sikh Regt and 3/1st Punjab Regt made an attempt to seize Laquetat. The ridge was found to be too strongly held. Both battalions were moved across to join the others below Cochen, and Gazelle took over this section. That day four of the 7th R.T.R.'s I tanks arrived.

The enemy was also busy during the night, and had reinforced the summit of Cochen with two battalions, so that all through January 29th confused fighting went on. Wellesley's was sent up to join the 3/14th and Savory himself took command on the peak. Next day, reinforced by three more battalions, the enemy counter-attacked in force and the Indian troops were driven back. Each battalion was fighting a company short because of lack of mules; ammunition, food and water had to be carried up by hand, in which arduous job the Bengal Sappers and Miners helped. At one moment the sappers

had to throw their water buckets away, fix bayonets and charge to fill a gap in the hard pressed line, thus foreshadowing many an occasion during the next four years when the Indian Corps of Engineers would fight like infantry. A low steep ridge named Gibraltar stood out into the plain and this was taken after a tough fight by the Camerons, who beat off several counter-attacks during the afternoon. That same afternoon the enemy brought up pack-guns in the rear of our position on Cochen. Savory was compelled to withdraw a short distance and reorganise his two battalions which had been broken up into local scraps in the tangle of ridges and ravines. Before dawn Wellesley's, the 3/14th Punjab Regt and the Bengal Sappers and Miners attacked again, drove the enemy back through the mist of the morning, and advanced toward the main road.

Down in the plain the fight for Agordat went on victoriously. After the Camerons had subdued 'Gibraltar' the 1st Royal Fusiliers followed through on the left in the plain between Laquetat and Cochen, with the four I tanks leading. Then the Camerons went forward again and by noon their Bren carriers and three of the I tanks were in the middle of the enemy's tanks and artillery. Within a few minutes six medium and five light tanks were knocked out, several of them manned by German crews from the ships which had taken refuge in Massowa. The 3/1st Punjab Regt passed through the Royal Fusiliers to seize the four small fortified hills known as Tinker, Tailor, Soldier and Sailor. By dusk it had cleared the first two and was preparing for the counter-attacks it expected during the night. These never came. The Agordat garrison, dreading lest they should find the Keren road cut, streamed up it. 1,000 prisoners were taken in the town, 43 guns were captured and 14 tanks were destroyed. In pursuing the enemy's retreat our troops took another 1,000 prisoners. The Italian Colonial battalions fought well, but Lorenzini was out-generalled. He kept his 42nd Brigade south of the Baraka throughout the battle without making any attempt to turn Beresford-Peirse's somewhat exiguous left. Agordat was occupied in the morning of February 1st. Next day Barentu fell to the 5th Division, but not before some of the toughest fighting yet.

Barentu was a rather smaller town than Agordat, situated on a little plain and almost surrounded by steep scrubby hills. It was defended by 8,000 men and 32 guns. Neither Fletcher's 10th Brigade nor Marriott's 29th Brigade had any of the I tanks which contributed so much to the fall of Agordat.

Marriott's 29th Brigade moved forward from Aicota on January

21st to encounter one of the enemy's Colonial brigades astride the road, a position from which it was driven by a flanking movement of 6th Royal Bn F.F. Rifles (the old 59th Scinde Rifles) .On January 25th the enemy was encountered in the evening in a still stronger position. An attack before dawn failed. The 3/2nd Punjab Regt reached its objective, but the 1st Worcestershire Regt lost its way in the dark, and the 3/2nd, its flank exposed, was heavily counter-attacked. Another attack was put in next day which was only partially successful, but the enemy fell back that night. On January 28th the Piffers and the 3/2nd fought a hard action and again the enemy fell back, to occupy another powerful position six miles from Barentu which held up the 29th Brigade for three days.

About eight miles from Barentu the 10th Brigade found the road from Agordat blocked for a considerable length by great boulders and masses of rock rolled down from the hills on either side, and it took stiff fighting to get within three miles of Barentu. In fact both brigades of the 5th Division were exhausted when on the night of February 1st the enemy evacuated the town and fled east along the mountain tracks toward Adi Ugri and the Asmara-Adua motor-road.

Back at Um Hagar, where the 43rd Colonial Brigade had been holding the last bridgehead left of the Italian invasion of the Sudan, the enemy, attacked by the 2nd Mahratta Light Infantry with a force of unvitiated Spahis who had arrived from French Equatorial Africa, and fearful for his communications, had withdrawn on January 25th, pursued and harried by the Mahrattas who on the way captured a gold mine in full working order.

Down by Gallabat Mayne's 9th Brigade had been doing some good work hampered by lack of transport and the difficulty of maintaining what they had. Early in February, it being now certain that our main thrust would not come from the Gallabat direction, General Martini slipped away, leaving most of his stores and ammunition behind and laying mines in profusion at the crossings of Boundary Khor and along the narrow dry-weather road to Gondar.

Mayne sent the 3rd Mahratta L.I. and 3rd F.F. Regt after him; but it was near dusk, and though they kept contact with the enemy's rearguard for some time the minefields were too much for them in the dark and contact was lost. At first light a motorised column with all the transport available, the brigade carriers, two companies of the 2nd West Yorkshire Regt, a battery of the 144th Field Regt R.A. and a section of sappers and miners set out in pursuit. Progress

was slow through the minefields, and it was during this advance that 2nd Lieut. Premindra Singh Bhagat of the Royal Bombay Sappers and Miners won the first V.C. for the Indian Army in the Second World War and the first V.C. ever won by an Indian commissioned officer. Lieut. Bhagat by a 'continuous feat of sheer cold courage' cleared 15 minefields and 55 miles of road in the course of 48 hours of unbroken toil and peril. Twice his carrier was blown up and many of his men were killed, but he did not stop until he collapsed from exhaustion and shock with both eardrums damaged by explosions. It was meet that the first V.C. should have been awarded to the Corps of Indian Engineers, for it may be asserted that some dozens of V.C.'s were earned, if not awarded, by them in Africa, Asia and Europe. Lieut. Bhagat's bronze cross so gloriously won honoured not merely the Royal Bombay Sappers and Miners but equally Queen Victoria's Madras and King George V's Bengal Sappers and Miners.

That small motorised column regained contact with the enemy at Wahni some 20 miles beyond Metemma and fought there a lively and successful engagement which was repeated 25 miles farther on. Some hundreds of prisoners were taken. After the second engagement the brigadier had to call a halt and immobilise the column to build up a forward supply dump after which contact was never regained. At last, over 200 miles from Gedaref, Brigadier Mosley Mayne gazed at Gondar as Moses upon Canaan, but although he was far from being at the end of his own tether his transport was, and he could not maintain a single platoon for a single mile farther. So back the 9th Indian Brigade had to turn. It had carried out one task and now faced another.

Chapter 5

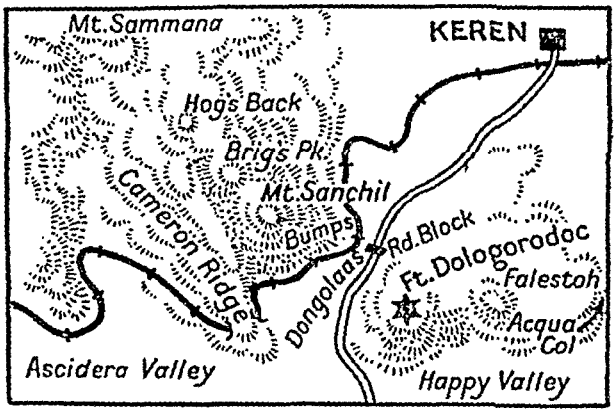
nuary–March, 1941. The Italians stand at Keren—initial assault pulsed—desperate fighting in the hills—the final attack—one of the ecisive victories of the war.

IT was late on the evening of January 31st that Gazelle Force moved up for the pursuit at dawn of the fleeing enemy along the road to Keren, east-north-east some 60 miles away. At 8 a.m. Skinner's Horse reached the Baraka to find that the Mussolini Bridge of four steel spans had been blown and that the approaches to it on both sides, and the dry sandy bed of the river, had been heavily mined. Eight hours of desperate work in the heat enabled the mobile troops to cross the Baraka and by noon on February 2nd Gazelle was winding up the Ascidera Valley, savage mountains on either side drawing closer all the while until in the narrow Dongolaas Gorge the road ended abruptly in the blown down rocks, boulders and crags which closed the way up the gorge to the Keren Plateau.

It had been a close call for the Italians. Their last strategic reserve, the 11th Regt of the Savoia Grenadiers and the Alpini battalion of the 10th Regt, troops of the highest quality, had been driven at top speed from Addis Ababa to Asmara in three days without stopping

sea-sick cheek, amid which here and there bursts from the sun-poisoned earth a dark smooth dome of basalt like a monstrous fungus, offers a nightmare scene to an invader; the Italians must have supposed they ran no risk of complacency in believing Keren thus guarded to be impregnable.

On the west the road across the Dongolaas Gorge, which wound north before it turned east into Keren after reaching the plateau, was dominated by the forbidding mass of Mt Sanchil, the long saddle of the summit holding a cluster of crags set out like the crown and stars that mark a brigadier and therefore called Brig's Peak. On the east it was commanded by the bastion of Mt Zeban and Mt Falestoh, on which stood Fort Dologorodoc.



The 11th Indian Brigade followed Gazelle Force, leaving the 5th Brigade to clear up round Agordat. On Monday, February 3rd, the brigade arrived. On Tuesday reconnaissances were made. On Wednesday the Camerons fought their way up to a ridge below the main bulk of Sanchil, and this ridge throughout the bloody fight for Keren remained Cameron Ridge and is for ever a ridge of Lochaber granite where ghostly pipes skirl above the barking of the grim baboons. On the following night, February 6th, the 3/14th Punjab Regt passed through the Highlanders to scramble up to Brig's Peak, whence they looked down upon the white town of Keren and the orange-groves of the fertile dale beyond. All too soon they were blasted from their position by the mortars and grenades of the Savoia Grenadiers, and driven back to the valley. Wellesley's on their way up to help them hung on to the ridge beside the Camerons. This had

to be held at all costs, and it was held against repeated attacks during the next ten days. Cameron Ridge was commanded from above, from the front, from the flanks, and even from the rear. Food, water and ammunitions had to be carried up 1,500 feet of these steep craggy slopes. Wellesley's and the Camerons performed the impossible, and that comradeship of valour was to be commemorated by a pibroch composed by a Cameron piper *With Wellesley's Rifles at Keren*. A young lance-naik of Wellesley's, Bhaira Ram, after a day of shell fire and constant attack found himself commanding seven men, all that was left of a platoon. That night the fiercest assault yet was launched. The next platoon was overrun. The full force of the attack fell upon Bhaira Ram's little post. The attack was repulsed, and another which followed it, and then with his remaining two men Bhaira Ram went after the retreating enemy with the bayonet. Eleven dead lay round his post and many more lay among the rocks below. And these were picked Italian troops whose own valour throughout the fight for Keren was unimpeachable.

By February 6th the 5th Brigade of the 4th Indian Division had reached the area, and preparations were made for an attack up the Scescilembi Valley. This fairly wide strath was a continuation of the lower ground upon which our troops were encamped, here and there shallowly ploughed for unrewarding cultivation, but mostly a waste of fast-withering herbage dotted with flat-topped thorn acacias and the zizyphus called Christ's-thorn with an occasional baobab whose bulging trunk stored precious water and whose scanty branches made it resemble some old pachydermatous beast rather than a tree. The Happy Valley, as this strath was named by our humorists, seemed to offer a way to turn the enemy's defences by the ridge known as Acqua Col, which joined Mt Zelele to Mt Falestoh. On the night of February 7th the 4th Rajputana Rifles (Outram's) led the 5th Brigade up the Happy Valley, carrying machine-guns, munitions, signal-equipment and three days' rations to storm the Acqua Col and scale the hills on either side of it. Gazelle Force and I tanks moved up the Happy Valley at the same time, and were able to pass under the guns of Fort Dologorodoc without interference thanks to the heavy shelling of the Royal Artillery throughout the day.

Subadar Richpal Ram, a 43-year-old Jat from Patiala, the second in command of his company of the 4th Rajputana Rifles, led the forward platoon to the first objective. When the company commander was wounded the subadar took command and with the 30 men left stormed the topmost ridge at the bayonet's point. Six

fierce counter-attacks were repulsed between midnight and 4.30 a.m. when the ammunition ran out. Then the survivors charged back through the surrounding enemy and rejoined their battalion on Rajputana Ridge, a hill below the Acqua Col, where Outram's held on through the day under heavy artillery and mortar fire, before withdrawing.

The next attack on the Acqua Col was planned for February 12th. It was considered vital for the success of the operation to have artillery observation posts overlooking Fort Dologorodoc and Keren itself. So on the afternoon of February 10th the 3/1st Punjab Regt attacked Brig's Peak and by next morning had reached Sanchil. There were only two platoons to hold it, the rest of the battalion being compelled to handle the supplies of food, water and ammunition and to carry the wounded down that steep of burning grey rock. After enduring intensive shelling with mortar and machine-gun fire all day the 3/1st Punjab Regt was at last forced to abandon Sanchil and Brig's Peak by an overwhelming counter-attack of the Savioa Grenadiers. The casualties were very heavy. The commanding officer had been severely wounded in the first assault. Now the acting commanding officer was killed. Wellesley's and the Camerons managed to hold on to Cameron Ridge, being supported by the 2nd Mahrattas who had relieved the 3/14th Punjab Regt.

The failure to secure observation posts did not lead to the abandonment of the attack on the Acqua Col, and the 29th Brigade of the 5th Division was lent to the 4th Division for exploitation of the action if it went well through Acqua Col to the Keren-Asmara road. At 5.30 a.m. Outram's led the way again to scale the steeps on the left of the ridge under cover of our artillery fire. When the attackers were 200 feet from the top the artillery had to stop, and the enemy from the reverse slopes came up to shower grenades on the troops climbing up. Subadar Richpal Ram was attacking the same position he had attacked five days before. This time as he reached the top his right foot was blown off and he suffered more wounds soon afterwards. As he lay dying on the battlefield he found strength to wave on his men. 'We will capture the objective.' With these words the soul of Subadar Richpal Ram went forward to an objective in eternity. He was awarded a posthumous V.C.

While a few of the 4th Rajputana Rifles clung to the objective they had won so hardly the 4th Sikhs on the other side of the Acqua Col were attacking the feature known as the Sphinx. Unfortunately the 2nd Mahrattas had had to be diverted to the support of the two hard pressed battalions on Cameron Ridge. Could they

have followed Outram's and the Sikhs it is possible that the enemy might have broken and the way into Keren been opened.

It was decided to wait for a while before a final assault was delivered against Keren. The 5th Division, now joined by the 9th Brigade from Gallabat, went back from Barentu to the railhead at Kassala, which freed their trucks for the daily concentration of ammunition and material while they trained intensively for this mountain warfare. Gazelle Force was disbanded, and the mobile elements were assembled to tie down any attempt to reinforce Keren by way of Arresa and Adi Ugri. The Air Force under the splendidly co-operative Slatter, after much destruction on enemy aerodromes, was able to concentrate with less and less interference on the enemy's lines and batteries at Keren. Two Cypriot mule companies were an invaluable addition to our mountain transport.

In the north the two battalions of the 7th Brigade—the 1st Royal Sussex Regt and the 4/16th Punjab Regt, grouped with a Senegalese battalion and a battalion of the Foreign Legion from Lake Chad—under the command of Brigadier H. R. Briggs and operating under the direct orders of the Kaid, crossed the Eritrean frontier on the Red Sea coast and took Karora. Advancing by tracks of great difficulty and fighting several minor actions, Briggs Force reached the Mescelit Pass only 15 miles north-east of Keren. On March 1st the 4/16th Punjab Regt assaulted the precipitous hills on either side so successfully that the old Bo Peeps were able to push on until they were held up by the northern defences of Keren. Briggs Force lacked the artillery for a full-scale attack, but it drew off a considerable part of the Keren garrison and was a most unpleasant threat not only to Keren but also to Massowa, thereby compelling Frusci to maintain a reserve on the coast. Briggs Force, which was 340 miles of vile tracks from its base at Port Sudan, supplied itself partly by impressing a fleet of Red Sea dhows after it captured the little harbour of Mersa Taclai on the way down. It also collected 600 camels. In every aspect the operations of Briggs Force were a reflection of the lively and ingenious brigadier who commanded it.

The enemy had been reinforced by the 6th Colonial Brigade from Metemma and the best Blackshirt Legion, the 11th. He was about 23,000 strong in rifles with 120 guns. Against him were the two Indian divisions 13,000 strong supported by British gunners with 6-inch and 3·7-inch howitzers and 25-pounders.

General Wavell came down to watch for a few hours the fateful attack against a courageous and determined enemy occupying as

formidable a position as ever faced the Army in India—or for that matter the British Army itself.

That attack, which would destroy the brief life of the Italian Empire, was launched upon the morning of the Ides of March, and as the British guns crashed forth their preliminary bombardment thunderstorms in the hills crashed in answer.

Then the Camerons passed through their wire on Cameron Ridge and managed to climb Brig's Peak against desperate opposition, but with such heavy losses that there were not enough men left to clear the enemy from the pinnacles which had given their name to the feature. They could not climb through the uncut dense wire, though when at last the feature was taken the bodies of three Highlanders were found dead upon the very top. The Royal Fusiliers went up from Cameron Ridge toward Sanchil held by Savoia Grenadiers, who amid the great boulders that strew the wide area of the summit inflicted heavy casualties on London's regiment. One company had only eight men left. West of Brig's Peak, Wellesley's captured Hog's Back at the cost of half their strength, but nevertheless held on to the ground captured and repulsed all enemy counter-attacks. Farther still to the left the 2nd Mahrattas, with heavy casualties, succeeded in carrying Flat Top, and holding it.

The 4th Sikh Regt attacked the three peaks of Mt Sammana. Left Bump was taken in the first rush, but Middle and Right Bump defied them. Three times the Sikhs got within 40 yards of the top of Middle Bump only to be baffled by the showers of grenades flung down on them as they tried to force their way through the wire. 2nd Lieut. Mohammed Siddiq, who had led the company which captured Left Bump, took over the company assaulting Middle Bump when its commander was wounded and led a night attack. Although he was himself twice wounded he got right up to the enemy's breastworks.

All that night of March 15/16th the Italians launched counter-attacks against our tired troops, using a fresh brigade recently arrived. The Camerons and the Fusiliers somehow managed to hold on to their positions, the Camerons with only 30 men left in the morning to hold the crest. One company of each battalion was continuously occupied in carrying up water, food and ammunition through the blazing heat and always under fire. The 2nd Mahrattas held Flat Top. Once the enemy gained a footing, but Captain A. J. Oldham, the adjutant, collected some odd men and led a bayonet charge which cleared the hill and killed over a hundred of the enemy. The 1st Rajputana Rifles held Hog's Back driving back

one of three determined counter-attacks at the point of the bayonet. Nevertheless, the situation was extremely critical for Beresford-Peirse's dauntless Red Eagles.

Major-General Heath had been convinced that Fort Dologorodoc was the key to Keren, and at 10.30 a.m. on March 15th the 2nd Highland Light Infantry, lent from the 10th Brigade of the 5th Division, had started to attack two lower features of Dologorodoc known as Pinnacle and Pimple. Heavy fire from the slopes of Sanchil and from the fort itself prevented their crossing the road, and the attack was given up in favour of a moonlight attack by the 9th Brigade, which was now commanded by the dashing Messervy. Shortly after dark the 3rd Mahrattas crossed the road and in spite of a stubborn defence were on top of Pinnacle by 8 p.m. and across the ridge leading to Pimple. Subadar Shrirang Sawand led his men like Sivaji himself and down in the valley the Mahratta war-cry could be heard as they cleared up Pinnacle while a company of the 3rd Frontier Force Regt passed through them to capture Pimple. That storming of Pinnacle in the moonlight by Denys Reid's Mahrattas was one of the outstanding small actions of the Second World War, decisive in its results and formidable in its achievement. Next morning Messervy scrambled up Pinnacle to congratulate Reid and his Mahrattas and wondered how they had been able to scramble up with their equipment against fierce opposition, when he was finding it a pretty tough job without equipment or opposition. At the top, when he saw the victors, he was overcome by the splendour of their feat and his combative amber eyes filled with tears. Then he thanked the 3rd Mahratta Light Infantry which three-quarters of a century before Napier had thanked for its outstanding gallantry in the storming of Magdala. In addressing the 1st and 3rd Mahratta Light Infantry Lord Napier said:

> You traversed, often under a tropical sun, or amidst storms of rain and sleet, 400 miles of mountainous and rugged country. You have crossed ranges of mountains (many steep and precipitous) more than 10,000 feet in altitude, where your supplies could not keep pace with you. In four days you passed the formidable chasm of Bashilo; and when within reach of your enemy, though with scanty food, and some of you were for many hours without either food or water, you defeated the army of Theodore, which poured down upon you from its lofty fortress in full confidence of victory.

It was for their deeds in that Abyssinian Campaign of 1867–8 that the old 110th Mahrattas were made Light Infantry, and

what Light Infantry they proved themselves when they conquered another formidable chasm of East Africa.

The capture of Pinnacle that night made the attack on Fort Dologorodoc a possible operation. Through the Mahrattas and the Piffers now went the Old and Bold, the 2nd West Yorkshire Regt, scrambling somehow across Razor Ridge which the enemy had deemed impassable. At 2 a.m. the Italians, still supposing the main threat came from Pinnacle and Pimple, counter-attacked the Mahrattas and the Piffers with great determination, and it was only after some hours of violent hand to hand fighting that the enemy was repulsed. When the survivors of the counter-attack climbed back to the fort they found the West Yorkshires in possession after some savage fighting for it.

There is no doubt that the capture of Fort Dologorodoc on that March night sealed the doom of Keren, although so fierce and so costly was the struggle still to be fought that for a while the full value of that bastion was hardly appreciated. The grim grey heights of Sanchil, Zeban and Falestoh towered above it still to be won, but the fort gave us the artillery observation we so much needed and throughout March 16th the Italians repeatedly counter-attacked with fresh troops from their best units. Slatter's air force was magnificent, not only in its bombing of the enemy's guns and counter-attacks, but in dealing with the bombers and fighters of the Regia Aeronautica, which after remaining invisible for three weeks arrived in force on this critical day.

During that night of March 16th the 29th Brigade moved through the troops on Dologorodoc in an attempt to master Zeban and Falestoh—the 1st Worcestershire Regt on the right, the 3/2nd Punjab Regt on the left. At dawn both battalions were some distance from their objectives and held up by heavy mortar and machine-gun fire. Water and food created a problem. All supplies had to be carried up to the fort by hand and from there across fire-swept ground, and by the same deadly route the wounded must be carried back. The advance had to be abandoned and after dark on March 17th the two battalions were withdrawn.

On the other side of the road the 4th Division was no farther forward, and the 10th Brigade of the 5th Division was called in. The 3rd Royal Garhwal Rifles passed through what was left of the Camerons and Royal Fusiliers on the saddle between Brig's Peak and Sanchil to attack the summit. They encountered terrific mortar and machine-gun fire and showers of grenades. Lieut.-Colonel S. E. Tayler was killed and every British officer was *hors de combat*

but the subadar-major took over the command and the fight went on all that night and through the next day until the Garhwalis were pushed back to the line held by the Royal Fusiliers. On the left the 4th Baluch Regt could not achieve the capture of Brig's Peak by 200 yards, and the Highland Light Infantry had to support the Camerons and Fusiliers on the saddle.

So during the night of March 17th our troops were withdrawn from Sanchil and Brig's Peak. The Camerons and Royal Fusiliers returned to Cameron Ridge, but Outram's remained on Hog's Back and the 2nd Mahrattas on Flat Top. The 10th Brigade went back to the 5th Division. During the next three days the enemy continued to counter-attack on both sides of the road with great determination. A single company of the Royal Battalion of the Frontier Force Rifles took the full weight of one counter-attack. The enemy broke into their line, but Captain Anant Singh Pathania, wounded in the face and both legs, collected his Company Headquarters and drove the enemy out again with the bayonet. The 3rd Frontier Force Regt, attacked in the rear of their position below Dologorodoc by four medium tanks and in front by a fresh enemy battalion, repulsed both.

Keren was as hard a soldiers' battle as was ever fought, and let it be said firmly that nowhere in the war did the Germans fight more stubbornly than those Savoia battalions, Alpini, Bersaglieri and Grenadiers. In five days' fight the Italians suffered nearly 5,000 casualties—1,135 of them killed. Lorenzini, the gallant young Italian general, had his head blown off by one of the British guns. He had been a great leader of the Eritrean troops, and after his death there were signs of a mutinous spirit under the continuous bombing from the air and shelling by artillery.

It was decided that the supreme attack on Keren should be made through the Dongolaas Gorge by an effort to clear the blocked road. The sappers and miners had tried hard to achieve this at night, but the road was under mortar and machine-gun fire continuously from the various small features at the head of the gorge, and an attack was planned on them which would allow the sappers the 48 hours they needed to clear the road and let the tanks go through. The railway tunnel below Cameron Ridge, which had been blocked by derailed trucks filled with stores, had been cleared successfully.

At 3 a.m. on the moonless night of March 24/25th, when the hot dusty wind which had been blowing for several days had died away to an absolute calm, the 2nd Highland Light Infantry of the 10th Brigade, which was now commanded by that small dark fire-eating

Welshman T. W. Rees, came out of the tunnel and moved as quietly as possible up the railway line above the gorge. Farther up the heights of Sanchil the enemy's attention was being distracted by a mock attack from Wellesley's and the Royal Fusiliers. On the other side of the gorge the West Yorkshires came down from the fort and secured a small hill above the road. At 4.30 a.m. over a hundred guns shelled the small hills at the head of the gorge while the H.L.I. moved on along the lower steeps of Sanchil, cutting their way through wire and seizing enemy posts until they were on the north side of the mountain. The H.L.I. were followed by the 4th Baluchis who in a series of determined attacks made themselves masters of the small craggy hills below the H.L.I. known as the Railway Bumps.

Simultaneously on the right-hand side of the gorge the 3rd Mahrattas passed through the West Yorkshires and with magnificent dash captured two hills beside the road against desperate opposition by the enemy. In one platoon only three men were left, and they rushed an enemy breastwork with the bayonet, while the wounded who could walk went forward to the support of their comrades instead of back to a dressing-station.

All of the gorge that was still in the enemy's hands was the central railway ridge. The 3/2nd Punjab Regt moved up the dry bed of the torrent beside the road, and deploying between the Baluchis and the West Yorkshires stormed the ridge.

'Piggy' Heath's 5th Indian Division was through the Dongolaas Gorge which had held up Messervy's Gazelle Force at the beginning of February. Throughout that blazing Lady Day the sappers toiled to clear the road, throughout that night too, until noon of March 26th when the road had been remade. And all around them the desperate battle for Keren went on. Communications with the H.L.I. and the Baluchis were through the tunnel, the mouth of which was covered by two enemy machine-guns well dug in and well handled. It was not until late in the afternoon that a direct hit by the Jammu and Kashmir Mountain Battery silenced them.

The 3/2nd Punjab Regt was thrice counter-attacked upon the railway ridge, the first time with tanks which came right up to the position until the crews flinched under the hail of rifle-bullets and retired. A company and a half of Royal Fusiliers got to within 100 yards of Sanchil's peak, but could not take the fort on the summit held by the Bersaglieri. The 3rd Mahratta Light Infantry repulsed three strong counter-attacks. When darkness fell not a foot of the positions won that morning had been yielded.

At 4.30 a.m. on March 27th the artillery was turned on to Zeban

and Falestoh for the Garhwalis and the Worcesters to advance to the final assault; but the enemy was gone, and the 3rd Frontier Force Regt passed through to seize Mt Cannabai and harass the Italians' disorderly retreat. By 7.30 Keren had fallen, and a white flag on the top of Sanchil proclaimed that the Bersaglieri had surrendered to the Royal Fusiliers, worthy foemen of a great regiment which at Keren had matched the valour even of its predecessor on the heights of Albuhera.

The decision of General Wavell on that December night to withdraw the 4th Indian Division from the triumph of Sidi Barrani and send it to wage an offensive campaign in East Africa must rank with any major military decisions which have set the course of history. Such a decision required imagination, faith and a plenitude of moral courage. He dreamed of the impossible: his dream was fulfilled by men who achieved the impossible. And what men they were!

Lieut.-General Platt allowed his two divisional commanders a freedom of initiative which not every corps commander is willing to grant. Major-General Beresford-Peirse and Major-General Heath handled their two great divisions with unfailing resource and determination, and with a comradeship of arms that was never marred by jealous rivalry. The latter was a tactician of quality the whole of whose long career had been spent in the Indian Army, in the course of which he had seen a great deal of active service. It was he who first realised the necessity of capturing Fort Dologorodoc and afterwards of making that supreme effort to drive through the Dongolaas Gorge.

Soon after the fall of Keren Heath was promoted to the command of III Indian Corps in Malaya where we shall meet him again as one of the protagonists of a tragedy played to the ineluctable and bitter end. He was succeeded in the command of the 5th Indian Division by Major-General Mayne who had brilliantly commanded the 9th Indian Brigade until March 1st when Gazelle Force was disbanded and Brigadier Messervy commanded it all through the operations of that critical March. Messervy was promoted to command the 4th Indian Division in April, and in December 1944 he was promoted from the 7th Indian Division to command IV Indian Corps in Burma. Brigadier Slim who commanded the 10th Brigade until he was wounded was succeeded by Brigadier Rees who ultimately commanded the 19th Indian Division, the Dagger Division that captured Mandalay. Slim in May 1941 commanded the 10th Indian Division, later I Burma Corps, then XV Indian

Corps, and finally the glorious Fourteenth Army. Marriott who commanded the 29th Brigade finally commanded the Guards Division in 1945. Colonel Russell[1] of the Frontier Force Rifles, the G.S.O. (i) of the 5th Indian Division, afterwards commanded the 8th Indian Division and Lieut.-Colonel Reid[2] of the 3rd Mahratta Light Infantry the 10th Indian Division in Italy.

Of the 4th Indian Division Lloyd[3] who commanded the 5th Brigade later commanded the 14th Indian Division in Arakan, Briggs[4] of the 7th Brigade afterwards commanded the 5th Indian Division in Arakan and Burma and Savory[5] of the 11th Brigade after commanding the 23rd Indian Division in Assam was G.O.C. in Persia and Iraq. Several battalion commanders were killed, or the list might have been longer. With the exception of Major-General Beresford-Peirse and Brigadier Marriott all these were Indian Army officers. Has any campaign in history lasting two months produced from two divisions a fighting army commander, two fighting corps commanders and seven fighting divisional commanders within four years? It may be doubted.

And the men were worthy of such officers. There was not a battalion in those two brigades Indian or British which did not suffer very heavy casualties, and there was not a battalion which did not add lustre to the glory of its regimental past. Equally did Skinner's Horse and the Central India Horse maintain with their machines the bright traditions of the Indian cavalry. Nor must the great work of the sappers and miners, the Royal Indian Army Service Corps and the Indian Medical Service be passed over without a tribute of admiration for their devotion and their achievement. The Royal Artillery was, as it was everywhere throughout the war, magnificent. The Air Force under Air Commodore Slatter co-operated with the Army to an extent which is still mentioned with awe by the distinguished soldiers who owed so much to that co-operation. Finally the Indian soldiers whose epic these pages strive so hardly to celebrate would wish a tribute to be paid to the dash and skill of the mobile companies of the Sudan Defence Force led by British officers, and last but not least to the two Cypriot mule companies who, late in arriving upon the scene of action plunged into it like veterans.

[1] Lieut.-General Sir Dudley Russell, K.B.E., C.B., D.S.O., M.C.
[2] Major-General D. W. Reid, C.B., C.B.E., D.S.O., M.C.
[3] The late Major-General W. L. Lloyd, C.B.E., D.S.O., M.C.
[4] Lieut.-General Sir H. Rawdon Briggs, K.C.I.E., C.B., C.B.E., D.S.O.
[5] Lieut.-General Sir Reginald Savory, K.C.I.E., C.B., D.S.O., M.C.

The unfortunate licence of wartime propaganda allowed the British Press to represent the Italians almost as comic warriors; but except for the German parachute division in Italy and the Japanese in Burma no enemy with whom the British and Indian troops were matched put up a finer fight than those Savoia battalions at Keren. Moreover, the Colonial troops, until they cracked at the very end, fought with valour and resolution, and their staunchness was a testimony to the excellence of the Italian administration and military training in Eritrea, which made the excesses of Graziani in Abyssinia a blunder as well as a crime.

Furthermore it must be stressed that the Indian and British soldiers who won that tremendous victory against odds won it at a period in the war when equipment was at its lowest, and if the difficulties of the attackers are added to the vital results achieved by overcoming those difficulties at that date, the fall of Keren can claim to be considered one of the truly decisive battles of the world.

Although there was still some hard fighting before the Italian Empire in East Africa finally collapsed, the fall of Keren followed almost immediately by the capture of Massowa freed the Red Sea for the American ships bringing the precious munitions of war to aid the struggle for North Africa. 'If' is an arid conjecture and the speculation it prompts is usually fruitless. Nevertheless, one can affirm that if Keren had held out our position in 1941, desperate enough, would have been disastrous, and the sane world owes an inestimable debt to the men who thwarted that ominous contingency. When Field-Marshal Viscount Wavell of Cyrenaica and of Winchester was created an earl he chose for his second title the viscounty of Keren and of Winchester, and by doing so came as near to wearing his heart upon his sleeve as he ever came except in some anthology of well-loved poetry.

Chapter 6

April–May, 1941. Duke of Aosta capitulates at Amba Alagi—conquest of East Africa completed—German offensive in Western Desert—a gallant stand by Indian Motor Brigade at Mechili.

IT was left to the 5th Indian Division to carry on the pursuit of the enemy and occupy Asmara, racing between the great candelabra cactus trees and the giant spurges up that winding Asmara road which is so remarkable an example even of Italian engineering. The 4th Indian Division remained to clear up in Keren, where the booty was considerable; this task accomplished, it went back to the Western Desert, still without Briggs' 7th Brigade which was to help Rees' 10th Brigade capture Massowa. Beresford-Peirse, promoted Lieut.-General, assumed command of Western Desert Force, now XIII Corps, and Messervy succeeded him in the command of the Red Eagles.

There was occasional fighting by road blocks on the Asmara road and it seemed for a brief moment as if the enemy intended to make a stand at Ad Teclesan, which would have been a formidable position. However, he did not attempt to hold it after the first sharp short struggle, and on April 1st Asmara was declared an open town.

The fighting troops did all that was asked of them during that rapid advance on the Eritrean capital, but the battle for Asmara was won by the administrative staff and services. Supplies had to be brought 200 miles from the railhead at Kassala along roads in a sad condition after that heavy campaign, and the R.I.A.S.C. drivers and the I.A.O.C. mechanics combined endurance with skill in the way vehicles were driven, maintained and repaired, urgent hour after urgent hour.

Three days after 'Pete' Rees' 10th Brigade marched into Asmara, into which the Central India Horse had led the way, it set off down the corkscrew road to Massowa with tanks and guns, dropping over 7,000 feet in 50 miles from the green upland plateau into that gasping sweaty Red Sea port, which has claims to be called the hottest in the world. Contact was made that afternoon with the Free French Legionaries who with the rest of Briggs Force had marched along the coast from Keren by the soft sand at the foot of the escarpment—a tough march in that heat. Admiral Bonnetti enquired our

terms, and when informed that they were unconditional surrender asked instructions from Mussolini who replied that Massowa must be defended to the last man. As there were 10,000 troops and some 100 tanks in the place it looked as if heavy fighting was possible. The seven Italian destroyers steamed out into the Red Sea. One was sunk by the Royal Navy outside Massowa. Four went up to attack the fuel tanks of Port Sudan; of these two were sunk by the Fleet Air Arm and two ran aground near Jedda. The remaining pair of destroyers ordered to attack Suez were sunk.

Soon after dusk on April 7th the Garhwalis occupied several small hills overlooking the town, and the H.L.I. went through them to seize Signal Hill, a key point. At dawn next day I tanks went through the troops approaching Massowa and the enemy's fire slackened. Northward however, the advance of Briggs Force was very strongly opposed until the tanks appeared round the outskirts of the town, when resistance collapsed. There was a race between the troops of Briggs Force and the 10th Brigade to enter the town first, and this was just won by the 4/16th Punjab Regt of the former.

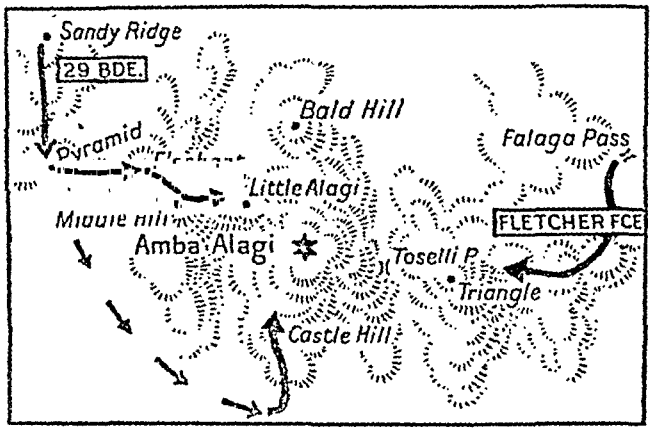
Three days later Major-General Heath left that Ball of Fire Division he had brought from India and started on its blaze across half the world, eastward bound before those men who cheered him on his way that April morning and doomed to be the captive of the remorseless Japanese while his 5th Division was standing in Arakan between them and India and later helping to drive them out of Burma.

When Major-General Mayne took over the command of the 5th Indian Division the plan was to drive the Italian forces from Gondar, which he had sighted with his 9th Brigade last winter; but reconnaissance showed that the road over the Wolchefit Pass, over 10,000 feet high, had been destroyed, and as it had been cut out of a sheer cliff 2,000 feet high, by men suspended from the top by ropes, the re-making of it under fire was considered a task beyond even the Indian sappers and miners and the idea of attacking Gondar from the north was given up.

Moreover, Wavell, now hard pressed in the Western Desert with the effort he had had to make to help the desperate situation in Greece, was anxious to open the road from Asmara to Addis Ababa for South African reinforcements from General Cunningham's troops which had made that wonderful advance from Kenya of 1,725 miles in 53 days to reach the Abyssinian capital on April 6th, where the Negus would presently be back on his throne. Our encouragement of the revolting Abyssinians had played an impor-

tant part in the demoralisation of the Italians and inclined them strongly to surrender in order to avoid massacre accompanied by the hideous mutilations in which their implacable foes specialised.

The fight for Amba Alagi has hardly received the recognition it deserves. The Italian troops, protected by galleries driven into the rock of that mighty mountain nearly 12,000 feet high with ample ammunition and stores and under command of the Viceroy himself, the Duke of Aosta, believed that they occupied an impregnable position. The Strada Imperiale running 244 miles north to Asmara, once the demolitions had been repaired, was good and testified to the skill of the Italian engineers who built it through this tangle o-



mountains, but the mileage placed an extreme strain on the R.I.A.S.C., who were already feeling the effects of a base as far away as Khartoum. The weather had broken with cold thunderstorms of heavy rain and dense mists. No maps were available except one on a small scale which finished at the 10,000 feet Toselli Pass a mile or two short of Amba Alagi. Mapping has never been a forte of British Military Intelligence and the complete absence of good maps at the beginning of the First World War was experienced again in the early years of the Second World War. Finally, owing to the demands upon his forces for internal security and lines of communications, 'Mo' Mayne could employ only Marriott's 29th Brigade, and units from the other two brigades of the 5th Division. This gave him numerical inferiority, and although Brigadier Dan Pienaar's 1st South African Brigade had captured

Dessei on April 20th after a tough little battle there were still 200 miles to go before it could help the 5th Indian Division from the other side of Amba Alagi.

Skinner's Horse, which had relieved the Central India Horse after their dashing pursuit of the enemy without infantry or artillery as far as the Toselli Pass, now took on the job of reconnaissance and discovered that eight miles from the pass a rough track badly damaged in many places led to the Falaga Pass about five miles east of Amba Alagi to finish at last abruptly in an impassable mountain wall. Mayne sent Fletcher Force along this track clearing blocks with the intention of persuading the enemy that his main attack would come from the east. Strong opposition was encountered, counter-attacks were repelled, and many prisoners were taken. Fletcher Force was under the command of Brigadier Fletcher who had just succeeded Messervy in command of the 9th Brigade. It consisted of Skinner's Horse, a company of the 2nd Frontier Force Regt, artillery, sappers, a S.D.F. motor machine-gun company and the 51st Commando which had learnt a lot with experience and was now a formidable unit. During the night of May 3/4th Fletcher Force advanced to within a few hundred yards of the Falaga Pass, and on the evening of May 3rd the 3rd Royal Garhwal Rifles advanced on the line of the main road to Enda Medani Alem and by a display of headlights and vehicular noises convinced the enemy that a brigade attack was impending. These two feints drew off a considerable number of his forces to the east and fixed his attention on the main road.

At 4.15 a.m. on May 4th the real attack was launched over the hills from the north-west by the 29th Brigade which with its guns had been concentrated behind Sandy Ridge. The 3/2nd Punjab Regt and 6th Royal Frontier Force Rifles scaled and occupied four hills in rapid succession—Pyramid, Fin, Whale Back and Elephant as they were called—surprising even their own brigadier by the virtuosity of such aggressive mountaineering. The attack was checked at daylight by a sharp ridge without cover and commanded from the high hills beyond.

Next day before dawn this ridge was crossed and Middle Hill was captured after a sharp engagement with hand grenades. Progress toward Little Alagi had to be effected along another ridge about 160 yards wide, flanked by precipices, wired between them, and under fire from heavy machine-guns on Bald Hill and other prominent features. The Worcesters crossed this ridge, but were baffled by the wire and had to be withdrawn after dark.

On May 7th the Frontier Force Rifles and a company of Worcesters

left the hills and assembled at the Togora Pass at 6 p.m., leaving the Punjabis and the rest of the Worcesters to hold the ground won. All that night they scrambled in heavy rain across difficult country which involved descents and climbs of 1,500 feet until they were within assaulting distance of a spur south of Amba Alagi. An artillery concentration was put down as if a dawn attack were intended on Little Alagi and Bald Hill, and at 4.10 a.m. the Piffers went silently in with the bayonet to capture all their objectives except a small portion of Castle Hill. Then the enemy put up the white flag, but as the Piffers advanced to accept his surrender they were greeted with a shower of grenades and suffered severe casualties. This strange episode has never been explained, but it may be that the Italians suddenly panicked under the impression that the Frontier Force Rifles were the dreaded Abyssinians whose murderous forces were by now swarming in the neighbourhood, completely out of hand. Under cover of a dense mist on the hill tops the Italians were able to assemble for a counter-attack which recaptured Castle Hill, though the other objectives were all held.

In the centre the Garhwalis kept up such a sustained fire that the enemy remained apprehensive of an attack in that direction, and in the East Fletcher Force by tireless and gallant aggressiveness completed the capture of the Falaga Pass by May 9th with many prisoners and much material. Motor transport could not move south. So Mayne gave Fletcher the Garhwalis, replacing them with Skinner's Horse, and sent him across country toward Toselli.

Meanwhile, news came that Dan Pienaar's South African Brigade and Campbell's Scouts were moving up faster than had been expected and had been placed under the command of Major-General Mayne, who on May 11th flew across to have a look at his reinforcements. He was much impressed by the South Africans, though disappointed to find that Campbell's Scouts were not the tough South African unit he had supposed but a band of fierce Abyssinians led by a British officer called Campbell. Mayne, who on his way from the landing ground to Pienaar's headquarters saw those patriots running in the direction of Amba Alagi 20 miles away exhilarated by the prospect of loot and massacre, gave orders that they should be kept out of the battle if possible, but they were all over the place, no more under control than wasps in wall-fruit.

Throughout May 14th the South Africans advanced deliberately against the Triangle feature, refusing help from the artillery of the 5th Division or Fletcher Force. However, by evening when they were within 500 yards of the top after some tough fighting they

decided that Triangle was too formidable a proposition without help. It was decided that during the night of May 14/15th the Garhwalis should blow the enemy wire east of Triangle and that the divisional artillery should bombard the area for an hour next morning before a final assault by the South Africans. However, the enemy thinned out during the night, shaken by the Garhwali threat to his flank, and the position was captured with very few casualties.

The Italians were now completely surrounded, but the final bloody assault was averted by a lucky strike of our 6-inch howitzers when a salvo hit an Italian petrol dump and upset the oil downhill into the last remaining Italian reserve of drinking water. This was why the Duke of Aosta was forced to capitulate before the final assault. Just as Mayne was starting off on his six hours' climb to the joint headquarters of the 1st South African Brigade and Fletcher Force (now called the 9th Indian Infantry Brigade) an emissary arrived from the Duke of Aosta to ask if he would allow a senior officer to come in and discuss terms. Major-General Mayne established wireless touch with the Italian Commander-in-Chief and arranged a rendezvous for Colonel 'Pasha' Russell to meet an envoy, with a truce while the discussions were proceeding. When Russell reached the rendezvous he found a battle going on between the Italians and bands of Abyssinians trying to storm the Italian position to loot and murder. General Volpini, the envoy, was murdered by them on his way to the rendezvous. Mayne arranged for the armistice to be extended and for Russell to go up to the Castle of Amba Alagi. Russell with a strong escort got safely through the brutish Abyssinians who continued to attack the Italian posts for the next 24 hours despite the armistice.

Colonel Russell carried through the negotiations with firmness and tact. The garrison was to surrender with honour the fortress, and all material of war was to be handed over to the 29th Indian Brigade, which would assume the responsibility of clearing the neighbourhood of Abyssinians.

So on May 18th the Italian troops under arms marched down the long winding road, eight abreast, past the saluting point where Major-General Mayne took the salute. A few hundred yards farther a guard of honour composed of a platoon from each of the Indian, British and South African battalions presented arms to what was left of the forces of the fugacious Italian Empire. The pipers of the 1st Transvaal Scottish played *The Flowers of The Forest* while the Italian troops laid down their arms under the louring grey heights they had failed to hold. It was the end of the story except for the

surrender of General Nasi in the old Portuguese citadel of Gondar, which would be made a few months hence. Indian mountain batteries played their part in this final operation.

By June 20th the Ball of Fire Division was under notice to embark and burn wherever it was required in the critical months ahead. The 29th Brigade Group, which now included Skinner's Horse, was left behind for a time because there was a good deal of clearing up to be done, and there were still small isolated detachments of Italians waiting for an opportunity to capitulate to regular troops instead of being massacred by the Abyssinians who were as ravenous as the formidable hyenas of their country. When it was called on for a task in North Africa its place was taken in Eritrea by the 34th Indian States Forces Brigade.

Many melancholy pages must be turned and many bitter moments endured before a tale of victory like that in East Africa can be told again. Indeed, disaster had already overtaken the 3rd Indian Motor Brigade in the Western Desert.

We have heard that the two reconnaissance regiments for the 4th and 5th Indian Divisions went overseas in the summer of 1940 equipped only with trucks. In January 1941 the 2nd Royal Lancers (Gardner's Horse),[1] Prince Albert Victor's Own Cavalry (11th Frontier Force) and the 18th King Edward VII's Own Cavalry which composed the 3rd Indian Motor Brigade went overseas to

[1] Gardner was a Highland officer who early sent in his papers to serve with the Mahratta Princes, having married a thirteen-year old Princess of Cambay. The son of this happy union in turn married into the royal house of Delhi and his descendants still constitute a small Christian community at Khasgunj near Agra. When Gardner found he was expected to fight against the British on pain of death, he escaped to join the East India Company's forces under Lake and in 1809 raised the corps which became the 2nd Lancers and was ultimately amalgamated with another old regiment of the Bengal Army, the 4th Cavalry.

The military history of Gardner's Horse had been long and glorious. This was not their first experience of North Africa: they had fought at Tel-el-Kebir. The 4th Cavalry had been the last reinforcements available at Festubert where beside the 2nd Black Watch in the trenches they had held the line, fighting with their lances. Gardner's were in the tank attack at Cambrai when Lance-Daffadar Gobind Singh had three horses shot under him while carrying messages and was awarded the V.C. In September 1918 during Allenby's great cavalry drive Gardner's led the right advance through the Musmus Pass and knocked out a Turkish battalion over 500 strong for the loss of one sowar and 12 horses.

The P.A.V.O. began in the Punjab Frontier Force in which they did many doughty deeds in the North-West.

The 18th K.E.O. Cavalry (then 6th Bengal Cavalry) were at Tel-el-Kebir, and in the First World War fought at La Bassée and later in Mesopotamia and Palestine.

Libya similarly equipped. They had just over two months to train with new vehicles and weapons in the desert before they had to endure their first ordeal.

On March 31st 1941, four days after the Italian withdrawal from Keren, the enemy counter-offensive in Cyrenaica began. The 6th Australian Division, the 2nd New Zealand Division and a British armoured brigade were in Greece; the 14th British Infantry Brigade was in Crete. They would have been of inestimable value in Africa at that moment to stand against the 5th German Light Armoured Division and two Italian divisions, one armoured and one motorised.

The Imperial troops 100 miles south of Benghazi were driven back toward Derna and Tobruk. The Germans despatched a large armoured force to the south to cut off the troops retreating along the coast road by the same route as the 7th Armoured Division had driven on to cut off the Italians retreating from Derna to Benghazi. The only place on this route with water was Mechili and the 3rd Indian Motor Brigade was ordered out from Tobruk to hold this vital bit of ground long enough to allow the Cyrenaica garrison to reach Tobruk.

> El Mechili lies 100 miles west of Tobruk, right out in the desert; a little stone and mud fort, quite useless for defence, was the only building for many many miles in every direction. Imagine a saucer of sand nine miles in diameter with a rocky uneven edge running up in places to a height of 800 feet. To the west the saucer edge is broken away and there the country is flat and open. The fort is about a couple of miles from the northern rim, while rather more than half-way across is a landing ground, or what passes for one in the desert. The fort itself, which contains the wells, had trenches dug round it by the Italians, but after the winter storms they were silted up with sand. A desolate, forbidding place, it is normally visited only by a few wandering Bedouins, but by a strange chance it now became for a short time the most important spot in North Africa, after which it relapsed once more into its normal loneliness until December 1941.[1]

The move was made on April 4th, the brigade being reinforced by some Australian anti-tank gunners and a few infantry of the Rifle Brigade. There was a night and a day in which to put the four-mile perimeter into a state of defence by clearing old trenches and digging new ones.

April 6th was a day of alarms and excursions with evidence rapidly accumulating of the tight situation in which the 3rd Indian

[1] *The Tiger Strikes*, p. 119.

Motor Brigade was likely to find itself by trying to deny the enemy the water he needed. It was no surprise when early in the morning of April 7th a British plane dropped a message to inform the brigade that it was completely surrounded and that strong enemy columns were converging upon it east and south. Soon after this a German staff officer drove into the position under a white flag in an armoured Mercedes-Benz touring car and courteously demanded immediate and unconditional surrender, pointing out in good English that the brigade was surrounded by greatly superior forces and would be bombarded out of existence if it tried to hold out. Brigadier E. W. D. Vaughan refused to consider surrender, and when the envoy returned again at noon the refusal was repeated. In the course of the afternoon a heavy bombardment was started which lasted until sunset. During the lull which succeeded there were infantry attacks by the enemy which were all beaten off. At 10.30 p.m. the bombardment was renewed, and the position being obviously untenable it was decided to attempt a break out at dawn through the enemy lines southward. Two infantry attacks were repulsed during the night, and at daybreak of April 8th a squadron of the 18th Cavalry in 24 trucks with a cruiser tank commanded by Captain J. M. Barlow charged the enemy's line of guns east of the camp. The tank was immediately knocked out, but the 24 trucks drove down in line on to the guns, and halting half to the right half to the left the sowars jumped out and went for the gun crews with the bayonet. After knocking out three of the five guns the squadron with 27 casualties out of the 100 who charged remounted their trucks and drove on.

The main body tried to break through southward under cover of this gallant diversion.

> It was just daylight, but clouds of dust, pierced only by the glare of bursting shells, the red streak of tracer bullets and the flames of burning trucks, reduced visibility to a few yards, while the crash of gunfire, the rattle of machine-guns, and the howl of fast 'revving' engines deafened and bewildered. To proceed as a formed body was impossible. Soon the trucks were driving though the enemy lines like a herd of stampeding cattle, swerving to the right and left as they ran into obstacles or into the mouths of enemy guns. Many never got through, but many more did.[1]

Gardner's Horse were acting as rearguard, and just before they were free to break out the enemy put in a powerful tank attack

[1] *ibid.*, pp. 124–5.

which overran most of the squadrons. Under command of Major Rajendrasinhji,[1] a cousin of the mighty Ranji, one squadron with a few British riflemen and Australian anti-tank gunners charged the enemy's guns westward and broke out. After a while they turned north into the higher land and after harbouring for the rest of the day in deep wadis they drove south for 40 miles and finally got back to Egypt.

The 3rd Indian Motor Brigade suffered heavy losses including their gallant brigadier, who was taken prisoner, but their resistance had enabled the main forces to reach Tobruk and thus denied to the enemy all he had hoped to gain from his well staged come-back.

[1] Major-General Rajendrasinhji, D.S.O.

Chapter 7

1940–1941. India's concern over frontiers—Defence of India Plan—inadequate supply of equipment from U.K.—expansion of Army and R.I.N.—obstacles to growth of Indian air strength.

ON June 6th 1940 the Prime Minister was complaining to Mr Eden, the Secretary of State for War, that 'a ceaseless stream of Indian units should be passing into Palestine and Egypt' and that India was 'doing nothing worth speaking of at the present time. In the last war . . . an Indian corps fought by Christmas in France. Our weakness, slowness, lack of grip and drive are very apparent on the background of what was done 25 years ago. I really think that you, Lloyd, and Amery ought to be able to lift our affairs in the East and Middle East out of the catalepsy by which they are smitten.'[1]

On June 22nd 1940 the Prime Minister was complaining to Mr Amery, the Secretary of State for India, that there were 'already very large masses of troops in India of which no use is being made for the general purposes of the war. The assistance of India this time is incomparably below that of 1914–18.'

He went on to express the probability of the war's spreading to the Middle East. Although the Prime Minister did not make it clear what exactly he meant by the Middle East, a recommendation of the climates of Iraq, Palestine and Egypt as well suited to Indian troops indicates that he was following the muddled geography of the War Office. 'I recommend their organisation in brigade groups,' he added, 'each with a proportion of artillery on the new British model. I should hope that six or eight of these groups could be ready this winter. They should include some brigades of Gurkhas.'[2]

A perusal of the first chapter of this book may suggest to the reader a truer diagnosis of this catalepsy as the effect of the potent narcotics deliberately administered by His Majesty's Government to the Government of India during the years that preceded the Second World War.

Meanwhile, before continuing the story of that feeble Indian effort which had launched at Gallabat the first offensive undertaken by British and Imperial troops in the Second World War, which had

[1] *The Second World War.* Winston S. Churchill, Vol. ii, p. 146.
[2] *ibid.*, p. 153.

played a prominent, indeed it may be claimed the chief part in the first victory won by those troops, and which by destroying the Italian power of offensive in East Africa had freed the Red Sea for the American ships, it may be serviceable to survey, however superficially, what was done in India during 1941 before Japan entered the war.

On September 24th 1940[1] the Prime Minister was complaining to the Secretary of State for War that two Indian brigades were to be employed in the jungles of Malaya against 'a possible war with Japan and a still more unlikely siege of Singapore.' Nevertheless, in March 1941 the India Command on its own initiative sent the 16th Indian Brigade to Burma in spite of the fact that this meant putting it under the Burma Command which remained independent of India, presumably because war with Japan was still unimaginable in London. In that month a new Defence Plan was prepared in India. The defence of the North-West Frontier was still a preoccupation even after Hitler attacked Russia because little confidence was felt in Russia's ability to prevent a German sweep through the Caucasus and thence eastward. Now with the ever growing malaise about Japanese intentions the defences of the North-East Frontier had to be considered. Besides North-West Frontier defence and Frontier defence reserves the plan provided for a field army of four higher scale divisions and a heavy armoured brigade. Artillery was to be greatly increased and strengthened.

Four divisions (one lower scale), two armoured divisions, one heavy armoured brigade, 15 squadrons and two civil aviation transport units may seem to suggest that the new Defence Plan paid undue attention to the North-West Frontier compared with elsewhere. Yet if the India Command had gambled on the failure of the threat from the Russians and later the threat from the Germans to materialise and the threat had materialised with disastrous consequences the verdict of history would have been criminal folly. Whether the gamble on the failure of the threat from the Japanese to materialise deserves to be called criminal folly no contemporary historian would be presumptuous enough to judge.

It was planned to complete the defensive works in the Khyber, Kurram and Khwaja areas by June, but Northern Command could not obtain the necessary labour because all the labour battalions being formed had been promised for service overseas. However, when on June 20th the Defence Plan of 1941 was at last accepted by H.M. Government (fine physicians for a cataleptic

[1] *The Second World War*. Winston S. Churchill, Vol. ii, p. 442.

patient!) Hitler relieved the tension on the North-West Frontier by invading Russia two days later. When the German troops were driving toward the Caucasus the menace seemed more serious than before, and the lack of anti-tank guns, air power and anti-aircraft defence perturbed the Indian General Staff.

In spite of the confident belief in London that Japan would not enter the war it was impossible in India to share that confidence and the problem of defending the North-East Frontier presented itself more urgently. Burma was foolishly retained as a separate command from India, and therefore no provision was made for an air striking force. However, an Air Defence Plan was made for the protection of areas producing vital necessities, and it was hoped to provide fighter squadrons for Calcutta, Tatanagar, Asanol and the Digboi oil, together with anti-aircraft guns and equipped observers. It was estimated that 234 heavy and 153 light anti-aircraft guns would be required, and 48 heavy and 180 light mobile guns. When this estimate was made in March 1941 there were available for the defence of the whole of India 17 anti-aircraft guns.

When the forces sent to rescue Iraq were despatched India was left with four infantry divisions in the process of being raised and an incomplete armoured division from which the 3rd Indian Motor Brigade had already been sent to play its part in the Western Desert. It must be added that all these divisions were starved of vital equipment.

Every effort was made to expand the Royal Indian Navy. The two new sloops H.M.I.S. *Jumna* and *Sutlej* were completed and fully commissioned. After playing a part in the Battle of the Atlantic they were sent to the Red Sea. The shipbuilding programme provided for the construction of 40 various types of vessels in addition to the 27 already building—H.M.I.S. *Travancore*, the first vessel of the original construction programme was launched at Calcutta on July 7th 1941 and H.M.I.S. *Baroda*, the second, in October of the same year. Besides the ships being built in India four sloops were on the stocks in Britain and four vessels of the *Bathurst* class in Australia. There was a large increase in recruiting both for officers and ratings. Instructional establishments were increased. The building of a new signal school to accommodate 70 officers and over 900 ratings was begun in Bombay, and a gunnery school in Karachi. New naval barracks for 400 men were opened in January 1941. Naval bases at Cochin and Vizagapatam came into being, and important work was started on the bases at Karachi, Madras, Bombay and Calcutta.

Early in 1941 the ships of the Royal Indian Navy were placed under the command of C.-in-C. East Indies for service in the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden and Persian Gulf, and the opportunity may be taken of recording their valuable help in the operations of the East African campaign.

H.M.I.S. *Hindustan* was present at the evacuation of Berbera in August 1940. Her 3-pounder guns were landed with naval crews and were in action throughout. H.M.I.S. *Parvati*, Lieut. H. M. Choudri R.I.N., did good work when the two Punjab battalions returned a few months later. H.M.I.S. *Ratnagari* with one officer, one havildar and 12 sepoys of the 3rd Mahratta Light Infantry captured the island of Nokra with about 900 Germans and Italians not to mention an Italian governor, a general, two colonels and a quantity of Maria Theresa dollars. Finally Assab, the first place in Africa occupied by the Italians and commanding the Straits of Bab-el-Mandeb, was captured in June 1941 by the 3/15th Punjab Regt after they had been taken through the heavily mined approaches of the port by fast motor boats manned by R.I.N. ratings. The attention of the garrison was diverted by aircraft and the surprise was complete. Over a thousand prisoners were made, and Assab was the amen to Italy in East Africa.

It will be recalled that as early as June 1940 the Prime Minister was puzzled why a steady stream of Indian units was not passing into Egypt and Palestine. Once again the problem of equipment must be stressed. It was not until a personal visit by the Deputy Chief of the General Staff, India to the War Office late in 1940 that H.M. Government agreed to allot to India a 10 per cent. quota of the monthly production of arms and equipment with a promise to meet the urgent need of personnel when shipping was available. These concessions were granted without any guarantee or even promise of their fulfilment.

In January 1941 acceleration in the shipment of material was asked for and an increase of the 10 per cent. quota. It was pointed out that stocks in India had been completely exhausted in equipping the troops sent overseas in 1940. H.M. Government replied that the quota could not be increased, but added with proud encouragement that the releases of material agreed to for October and November 1939 were on the point of leaving England. We may hope that Mr Eden was able to explain to the Prime Minister some of the dams in the way of that steady stream of reinforcements; his reply is not recorded. These words are written with the fullest appreciation of the agonizing difficulty of overtaking the decade which the

locusts of the National Government had eaten since 1931, but justice and truth demand that the implied slur upon the Indian effort should be answered.

By early April in 1941 the position in the matter of equipment was so grave that India had to telegraph that certain forces which had been asked for were not fit for overseas service and that unless anti-tank and anti-aircraft units could be provided the Government of India would not agree to despatch a force likely to be engaged with an enemy equipped on modern lines. We have already heard what happened to the 3rd Indian Motor Brigade at Mechili exposed to German armour against which it had no defence except the gallantry of its officers and men: we shall hear presently of the 3rd Motor Brigade's final tragedy. And that is but one comparatively small tragedy. We shall have to contemplate too many tragedies much more grim and much more prolonged whose authors were not incompetent commanders in the field or troops without the heart to fight, but politicians serving a recreant time and catching votes from a torpid and unimaginative electorate. We can blame General Staffs for want of foresight and determination and ask why they lacked the courage to resign as a body rather than become accomplices of that abdication alike of imperial and of democratic duty. We can stigmatise the moral cowardice of Cabinets and the thin-lipped caution of Treasuries; but in the end the blame for them all rests upon ourselves. It was we who were weary of responsibility like the Romans once upon a time.

Under the principle of replacement four new divisions were to be raised in 1941, but in the event the Indian Army rose from a strength of 400,000 at the beginning of the year to nearly a million at its close. The Royal Indian Navy grew in 1941 from the 170 officers and 1,500 ratings with which the war started to over a thousand officers and 8,000 ratings. The Indian Air Force expanded to three squadrons and six coastal defence flights.

On May 5th 1941 India informed H.M. Government that if the demands for personnel were fulfilled and if the outstanding orders for equipment were executed one armoured and four higher scale infantry divisions would be ready for the defence of India by the latter part of 1942. Their availability for overseas would depend upon their proper replacement. This offer was accepted three months later and India was notified for the first time that equipment would not be a grave difficulty, though India was warned that the provision of essential British personnel would be more difficult than ever. By October 1941 the shortage of officers had

become acute and by the end of the year the deficiency of officers and cadets would be 2,820 and 670 respectively. The C.I.G.S. was informed that the despatch of troops overseas must depend on units' having enough officers able to speak the language of their men. This shortage of officers and technical British personnel was one of the main causes that contributed to the disasters of 1942 when the whole expansion programme was disorganised by Japan's entry into the war.

The preposterous inadequacy of the air forces in India has already been noted. Nevertheless, early in 1941, India was asked to lend her only two modern squadrons to Far East Command until aircraft from the United States became available; and when Indian troops in Iraq required air support repeated requests for the return of these squadrons was refused. Eventually they took part in the Malaya and Burma operations.

In the middle of 1941 the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, India had to point out:

> There are no modern aircraft in India, either fighters or bombers, nor are there sufficient obsolete types for the minimum requirements of frontier defence, seaward reconnaissance and training. Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey, Thailand and formerly Iraq, all fifth-rate powers, have superior types of aircraft to India, many of them supplied by Great Britain. A consignment of Tomahawks from the United States that India had stopped on its way to Iran was recently released by His Majesty's Government, and it is understood that it is now proposed to despatch some Hurricanes to the same destination.
>
> In view of the very great efforts that have been made and risks taken by India to come to the assistance of His Majesty's Government by supplying troops, military supplies and even such aircraft as she had, I feel that her requirements in respect of modern aircraft deserve a little more consideration than they have previously been given.

Under the 1941 Defence of India Plan the need for air services would be much more urgent. It involved 382 service aircraft with administrative and maintenance units, operational facilities and reserves. Toward these requirements it was planned to expand the Indian Air Force immediately to 151 service aircraft with corresponding staffs.

After a long delay H.M. Government, having ignored the previously accepted expansion, decided that Indian air strength could only be built up in accordance with approved strategic

priorities, and in these India's place was near the tail. In the end, when Japan attacked, India was not so well equipped with aircraft as she had been a year earlier. There was not a single radar station in the country and so much time had been wasted in getting H.M. Government to agree even to the expansion of the administrative and maintenance staffs in preparation for a possible sudden windfall of aircraft that the catastrophic consequences in Burma and Malaya were inevitable.

Chapter 8

March–June, 1941. Plans to safeguard Iraqi oilfields—Rashid Ali's 'coup d'état'—siege of Habbaniya—occupation of Basra—conflict of aims between India and Middle East Command.

ON January 30th 1941 Hitler announced that the British Empire would be destroyed in the course of the year. Great Britain was not impressed by this proclamation at the time because the tonic effect of Wavell's victories in the desert and the discomfiture of Italy by Greece were still influential. Nevertheless, it was to be a close call and if the Germans had ever learnt how to wage and win a war as well as they had learnt how to begin a war, to which was now added the handicap of being directed by an amateur strategist, it is difficult to see how that boast could have been falsified.

The counter-offensive by Rommel and the Afrika Korps which started on March 31st had carried the Germans and Italians to within a few miles of the Egyptian frontier by April 13th. By the end of the month the British Expeditionary Force whose despatch to Greece had made that offensive possible had been evacuated. The Balkans were a German province. Turkey was grovelling. Russia was not far from the same ignominious attitude. In Syria the vitiated French authorities were preparing to allow the Germans to occupy their aerodromes. At this grave moment the revolt in Iraq seemed to foreshadow the German plan for the destruction of the British Empire.

After the First World War Mesopotamia, to be known presently as Iraq when the Emir Faisul was elected King, was a mandated territory allotted to Great Britain, and the control of it was given to the Royal Air Force supported on the ground by the Iraqi levies recruited from Assyrians and Arabs under British officers. In 1930 a treaty was made between Great Britain and Iraq as equal and independent states, this treaty to endure for 25 years from the date that Iraq was admitted to the League of Nations which occurred in October 1932. By the terms of this treaty, it was agreed *inter alia* that each country should aid the other if either was engaged in war, that Great Britain should be granted air bases without prejudice to Iraqi sovereignty, and that the Iraqi Government would provide all facilities for the movement of British forces in transit across Iraq.

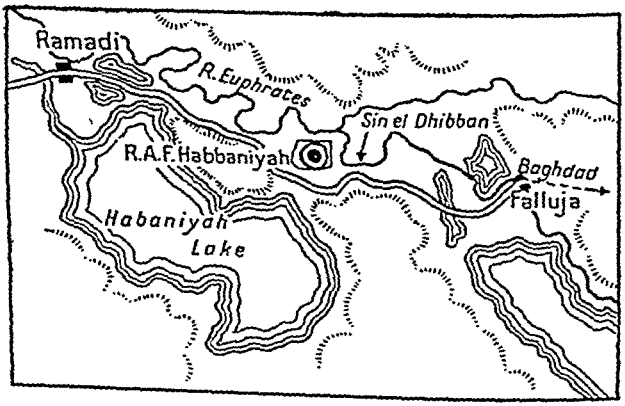
In 1933 King Faisul died and was succeeded by his son Ghazi—a young man of twenty-one. That was the year in which the Germans began the process of infiltration which was another expression of their dream of the Berlin to Baghdad railway dissipated by their defeat in the First World War. In 1936 there was a military *coup d'état* which resulted in the formation of a strongly nationalist government, and although this government declared its intention to observe the provisions of the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty it was largely composed of men responsible for the Assyrian massacres and toleration of it seemed to many in the Near and Middle East evidence of British weakness. In Iraq a local Nazi party began to function. A youth movement was developed on Nazi lines, and several newspapers were subsidised in the German interest. The Nuremberg rally was attended by an Iraqi delegation and free educational facilities in Germany were offered to Iraqi students. In 1939 the ex-Mufti of Jerusalem with various adherents from Palestine and Syria arrived in Baghdad and began to work for Germany, and by 1940 Rashid Ali el Gailani who had become Prime Minister early in the year was seducing prominent officers in the Iraqi army and air force to work with the Axis.

When war broke out the Iraqi Government agreed to close the German Legation in Baghdad and intern all German subjects; but when Italy entered the war Rashid Ali's influence was strong enough to prevent the closure of the Italian Legation, through which he was in communication with Hitler. The young King had been killed in a motor accident, and the new one was only six years old, the country being ruled by the pro-British Regent, the Emir Abdulla Illah. Rashid Ali was eliminated as Prime Minister because the country did not want the war into which it was felt he was dragging it. From that moment Rashid Ali with four military officers of high rank known as the Golden Square prepared for a *coup d'état*. On April 2nd 1941 the Regent fled from Baghdad to the R.A.F. station at Habbaniya whence he was flown to Basra and finally took sanctuary in H.M.S. *Cockchafer*. On April 3rd Rashid Ali became one more dictator as 'Chief of the National Defence Government' without a cabinet. How far Taha El Hashimi, the late Prime Minister, acted in collusion with Rashid Ali is not certain. In any event the prospect was ugly at a moment when British and Imperial troops were fully occupied in Cyrenaica and Greece. The vital oilfields and the vital line of our communications with India were now definitely threatened.

To deal with the emergency thus created the R.A.F. had a training

school of obsolete and obsolescent aircraft at Habbaniya with the exception of nine Gladiators and a single Blenheim, a squadron of Vincent bombers at Shaiba, and a communication flight of three Valentines. To protect them on the ground there were seven companies of the Iraqi levies of whom only the four Assyrian companies could be relied upon, and 18 armoured vehicles. The Iraqi air force had 60 bombers and fighters, all of superior performance to any of the R.A.F. aircraft except the Vincents, Gladiators and single Blenheim.

The R.A.F. base at Habbaniya was situated close to a large lake near the west bend of the Euphrates, which served the flying-boats between India and Egypt. The construction of it was approved in



1933 and the whole vast work was completed in 1937. Millions were poured out upon what at best could only be considered a 25 years' lease, and as all too often with R.A.F. aerodromes the site chosen was strategically ridiculous from the military standpoint. It was protected by the Euphrates on the north and east, but on the south and west it was dominated by a plateau from which ground troops could attack it with ease. Besides this material disadvantage the essential services, including both water and electric power, were all dependent on a single power station placed in the most vulnerable position that could be chosen. No line of communication to Basra existed. In 1933 when Lord Hailsham was Secretary of State for War he drew the attention of the Committee of Imperial Defence to the strategic weakness of Habbaniya and urged Basra as a more suitable site for an air base whence the R.A.F. could easily be

evacuated in the event of 'trouble in Iraq.' Lord Londonderry, the Secretary of State for Air, in his reply, pointed out that such a situation was not envisaged. The National Government was already ambling downhill, and, true to its motto *Safety First*, in blinkers.

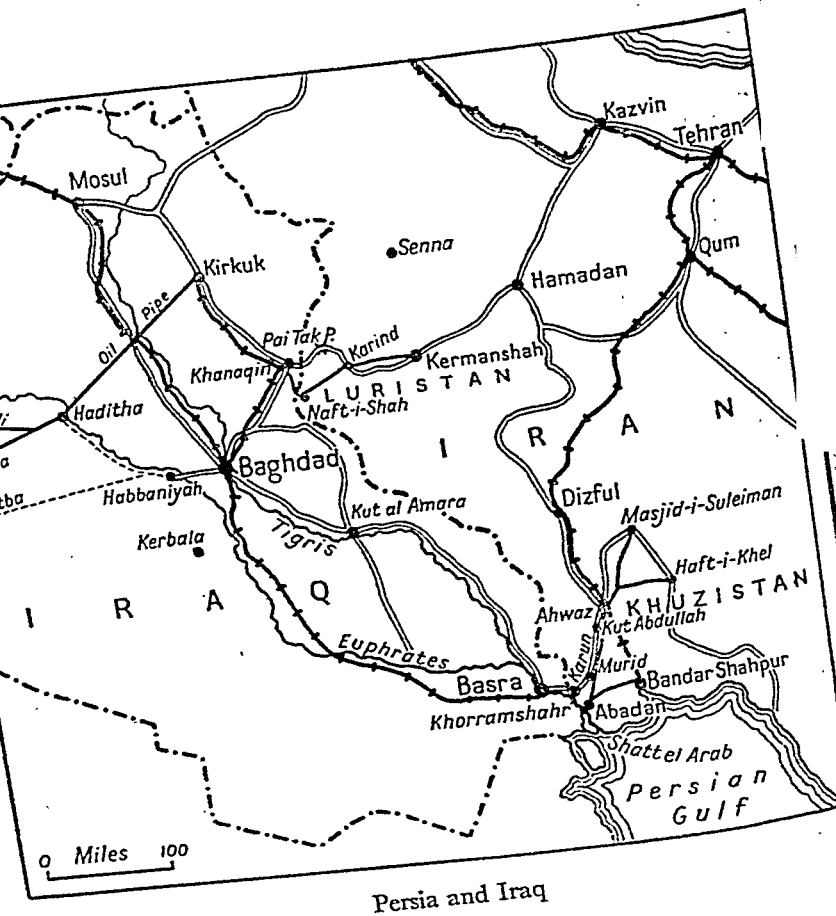
With the worsening of the international situation tentative plans were made for the reinforcement of Iraq from India in the case of emergency. The original plan was for a brigade group to secure the southern oilfields against local risings, this force to be employed under the Air Officer Commanding in Iraq but to be maintained by India. The General Staff in India did not consider such a force to be adequate even for so comparatively limited a commitment. With the outbreak of war an A.O.C.-in-Chief, Middle East, was appointed with operational control (to which administrative control was added later) up to the frontiers and shores of India.

At the end of December 1939 the Chiefs of Staff issued a directive on military policy in the Middle East which envisaged a much more ambitious plan to defend both the Iraqi and Persian oilfields with three divisions and mobile troops based on India. This scheme was known as *Sabine*.

Early in 1940 active planning began between India and Mideast Commands on the first phase of *Sabine* known as *Sybil*. This involved the preparation of a division from India, the establishment of a base for a larger force at Basra, and the possibility of an opposed landing on the Persian side of the Shatt-el-Arab. At this time the preoccupation behind the planning was an attack on the Anglo-Iranian oilfield by Soviet forces. Therefore the force from India was either to go first to Basra and operate later from there or to secure Abadan and the Shatt-el-Arab first and thereafter operate towards Ahwaz and beyond. The advance was to be determined by the political and military situation. It was understood that later on the forces from India up to a total of three divisions would be based on Basra and would operate in a presumably friendly Iraq in conjunction with air forces to the north of Baghdad.

It must be borne in mind that all these plans were prepared before the collapse of France and all the changes which that calamity entailed including the increasingly unfriendly attitude of both Iraq and Persia. The Commander-in-Chief, India[1] did not feel that the part assigned to India in *Sabine* was either clearly enough defined or practically enough conceived. He made several criticisms, one of the most urgent being that every European power would be solely concerned to deny the use of the Anglo-Iranian oilfields to us

[1] General Sir Robert Cassels, G.C.B., G.C.S.I., D.S.O.



Persia and Iraq

because without shipping in the Persian Gulf it could make no use of them for itself, and that this denial could be most effectively contrived by air action. India was entirely without anti-aircraft equipment and therefore could do nothing against such a threat. He further pointed out that although India was to be responsible for organising, despatching and maintaining the force its operations were to be controlled by Mideast which created dangerous opportunities for divided control and responsibility.

When General Auchinleck became Commander-in-Chief, India, in February 1941 he caused an appreciation which had been drawn up by the General Staff for General Cassels in July 1940 to be revised in accordance with the latest developments of the situation and incorporated in a memorandum which was sent on February 21st 1941 to General Wavell in Egypt and to General Dill, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff.

From that appreciation the ultimate conclusion emerged that detailed plans were at once required as follows:

(i) A plan for the initial occupation of Basra and its vicinity on the assumption that the landing might be opposed both by Iraq and Persia with the aid of enemy forces whether German or Russian.

(ii) A plan for the early reinforcement of the leading echelon and for the establishment of a base at Basra.

(iii) After the occupation of Basra and its vicinity and the establishment of a base at Basra alternative plans were required for

(a) Further operations in Iraq.

(b) Operations in the oilfields of south-west Persia, should they be necessary.

It was stressed that these plans should be prepared by the force commander under the direction of C.-in-C., India.

General Auchinleck emphasised to the C.I.G.S. that since India would be responsible for the maintenance and reinforcement of the force the task of occupying Basra should be delegated to G.H.Q., India. He pointed out at the same time the necessity for a corps H.Q., to carry out the detailed planning. In asking Wavell for agreement to his proposals Auchinleck added that if it was decided that control of operations should remain with Mideast he would gladly work under any directive that General Wavell might issue.

On March 8th 1941 Wavell signalled to Auchinleck that he had discussed his memorandum in Egypt with Dill. They agreed that planning should be done in India and that initial control of the

operations in Iraq should rest with India. This agreement was confirmed by the C.I.G.S. who had returned to London. He had arranged that Auchinleck should deal with the War Office direct instead of through the normal channels of Viceroy and Secretary of State.

As a result of the acceptance of the new *Sabine* by Mideast and the War Office a conference was called in Cairo to plan the scheme, at which Auchinleck was to be represented by his Chief of Staff, Lieut.-General Hutton.[1]

Auchinleck's last words to Hutton on March 15th before he left for Cairo stressed his anxiety to gain a foothold in Iraq as soon as possible and by gaining military control to swing the Euphrates tribes in favour of Britain.

In Cairo Hutton was swayed by 'the considered and unanimous opinion of all those authorities who are in close touch with the situation in Iraq.' In other words the Arab Bureau was exerting its influence, and it is too soon for the historian to estimate whether that influence on the whole has been beneficial or malign for the British Empire. The conference in Cairo decided that the control of Iraq would depend upon our ability to bring pressure on Baghdad by military and air forces operating from Palestine. To this end it was proposed to add immediately to Mideast forces in Palestine one Indian infantry division and as soon as available one Indian armoured brigade group. Plans for *Sabine* were to be completed with a view to operate in conjunction with these forces, with one difference. *Sabine* should now include one armoured division and should be completed to three divisions by including a War Office reserve division to replace the one sent at once to Palestine.

Wavell was prepared to accept the inevitable delay in the completion of *Sabine* by postponing it for three months but was firmly of the opinion that the best contribution India could make was the undertaking of such a commitment.

Auchinleck was 'disturbed by this tendency to depart from the object which was decided after careful consideration and agreed to.' He considered the occupation of Basra more important than that of Baghdad in view of possible future operations in Iraq or south-west Persia to safeguard the oil. He did not accept three months as the extra time necessary to complete this new and ambitious *Sabine*, and he declared that it would involve at least a year's delay. He signalled for Hutton to return to discuss with him the 'changed strategic conception' which regarded the protection of the Anglo-Iranian

[1] Lieut.-General Sir Thomas Hutton, K.C.I.E., C.B., M.C.

oilfields and refinery at Abadan as a remote possibility, for he did not agree that the protection of the R.A.F. air route in Iraq, the control of land communications from Basra to Haifa and to Turkey via Mosul, and the control of the Kirkuk and Khanaqin oilfields and pipeline to Haifa only required the 'presence of a Government in Baghdad that is willing to co-operate.' He considered that one essential object of *Sabine* was to be in a position to threaten or attack the Baku oilfields and to protect the right flank of the Turks in the event of Russian aggression. Let it be added that in March 1941 the intervention of Russia only seemed a more remote possibility to Cairo because Cairo was naturally preoccupied with the immediacy of the German threat to the Near East. The command might be called Mideast, but the vital strategic importance of the true Middle East to the whole future course of the war did not seem to have been fully appreciated.

Argument was cut short by the need to catch up with the rapid march of events in Iraq. On the very day that Rashid Ali staged his *coup d'état* on April 2nd, prematurely we may now suppose for the Germans who were battling their way through Cyrenaica and on the eve of their attack on Yugoslavia and Greece, the British Ambassador, Sir Basil Newton, was replaced by Sir Kinahan Cornwallis. It was an awkward moment for such a change, but Cornwallis who had been Adviser to King Feisal I of Iraq for 14 years, faced the situation boldly and proposed to have no official relations with the new régime.

H.M. Government, with what in the circumstances can be described as a certain vagueness about the military situation in North Africa and the Balkans, at once asked C.-in-C., Mideast what forces he could spare for intervention, but said not a word to India in spite of the fact that the C.I.G.S. had recently approved Auchinleck's appreciation of the state of affairs in Iraq.

On April 5th Cornwallis, not impressed by the ability of the Regent to rally public support in his favour as he was now a fugitive on board H.M.S. *Cockchafer*, advised H.M. Government that there were three courses open to us: to restore the situation by armed intervention, to inform Rashid Ali we would not recognise his régime and 'squeeze' him as much as possible, or to recognise the Rashid Ali régime, adding that from what he knew of him he dismissed that course as unthinkable. The Foreign Office noted these three courses and waited for Wavell's reply. Cornwallis and Rashid Ali played with one another for time. On April 10th Rashid Ali in a speech to the Iraqi Senate declared that the national movement

(his own *coup d'état*) was entirely internal and that he intended to carry out the terms of the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty both in letter and in spirit. This was an astute move because he could claim that armed intervention by us was an act of aggression.

Meanwhile, on April 7th Wavell had replied to the Chiefs of Staff enquiry about sending forces to Iraq that all he could do 'in the case of most extreme urgency' was to move one British battalion by road from Palestine to Iraq and use R.A.F. aircraft already there. 'Any other action is impossible with existing resources.' The Chiefs of Staff might have known this without waiting for Wavell's reply.

On April 8th a 'most immediate' telegram was sent to the Viceroy by the Secretary of State for India in which he asserted that the situation in Iraq was critical and that everything depended on our ability to make a show of force, even if it was only to hold Basra and Shaiba. Moreover, the Americans were anxious for an air assembly base to be formed in Basra to which they could ship direct. It was hoped that India could supply at 'a very early date' a force to secure Basra. The answer was to be placed before the War Cabinet on the evening of the 9th, but a second telegram despatched on the 8th changed the hopeful enquiry into a direct request for troops.

The Viceroy replied that after consultation with the Commander-in-Chief India could immediately send to Basra one infantry brigade and one field regiment with ancillary troops. These troops were already embarking at Karachi for Singapore and would be diverted, but the convoy would not be tactically loaded, Malaya not being a theatre of operations; therefore if there was any possibility of an opposed landing naval and air protection would be required. Besides this sea-borne force, India would send 390 of the King's Own Royal Regt with 12 light-machine guns, six Vickers guns and two anti-tank rifles by air to Shaiba. Finally, India proposed to follow up this immediate despatch of troops with two more brigade groups and base units to make up the division which India believed was the minimum required for effective strength.

It should be noted that parting with these guns was a blood transfusion for India, that the force being despatched was at the expense of reinforcements for Malaya and would affect the whole expansion programme, and that this force was short of essential units and equipment.

The Viceroy and the Commander-in-Chief courageously accepted a grave risk by sending Indian troops on an adventure the outcome of which was so obscure and which might if unsuccessful have disastrous effects on the situation inside India. It grows even clearer

that the catalepsy diagnosed by the Prime Minister was the effect of narcotics administered by H.M. Government, and with the wisdom that is supposed to come after the event he might have spared a footnote [1] to explain that when he adjured Eden, Lloyd and Amery to cure India of her catalepsy he was not in possession of the facts.

General Wavell abstained from giving or expressing a definite opinion about these Indian proposals which were 'gratefully accepted' by the War Office. 'It is just possible that this force might suffice to swing the scales in Iraq. I am fully committed in Cyrenaica and can spare nothing for Iraq,' he signalled to General Auchinleck personally. Nevertheless, he offered to lend a squadron of Wellingtons temporarily to support the Basra landing, and it was a most welcome loan.

On April 11th Cornwallis who had been a strong advocate of using force against Iraq asked for the air-borne troops to Shaiba to be held up. Rashid Ali's move the previous day in the Senate required consideration before the counter-move could be decided. He asked to be allowed to test Rashid Ali's sincerity by telling him that the military situation in Cyrenaica demanded the rapid transit of troops through Iraq to Palestine, that in accordance with our treaty rights we were opening the lines of communication at once, and that the movement of troops would begin on a date to be named. If Rashid Ali created obstacles we should have the right under the treaty to take any action we thought fit and be able to counter any propaganda about aggression. If Rashid agreed we should gain a military foothold in the country without precipitating a difficult situation.

The Chiefs of Staff at once signalled to suspend the departure of the air-borne troops and to hold the convoy, which had already sailed, at Bahrein.

This decision worried Auchinleck. He wrote to the Viceroy's Private Secretary that to defer action for the security of Basra might well result in our never getting to Basra at all. He considered that the possession of a base at Basra might 'make the difference between success and failure in the Near and Middle East during the next six months.' He thought there was a danger that Rashid would use the breathing space to invoke German aid, 'which might even take the form of airborne troops and aircraft.'

'I am convinced that if we are to prevent a general deterioration of the situation in Asia generally . . . we must show now that we are prepared to maintain our position by force.'

[1] *The Second World War.* Winston S. Churchill, Vol. ii, p. 146.

Lord Linlithgow felt as strongly about the position as Auchinleck did, and on April 13th he sent Mr Amery a telegram with which the Secretary of State for India was able to galvanise the Chiefs of Staff who immediately signalled permission for the Basra expedition to proceed. Cornwallis hoisted Rashid Ali with his own petard who with no time now to parley had to consent to the landing at Basra. There on April 18th the convoy arrived without incident and simultaneously the 1st K.O.R.R. landed at Shaiba aerodrome.

The initial landing from the convoy was made by 200 men of the 2/8th Gurkha Rifles[1] and by that night the battalion had seized the whole dock area. Next day the rest of the 20th Indian Infantry Brigade consisting of the 2/7th Gurkha Rifles, the 3rd Sikh Regt and the personnel of the 3rd Field Regt without their guns disembarked. The troops were commanded by Major-General W. A. K. Fraser, commander of the 10th Indian Division.

The brigade was partly trained and poorly equipped, and though the landing had been accomplished without resistance it was clear that Rashid Ali was determined while Wavell's forces in the Western

[1] The 2/8th Gurkha Rifles had had a long and honourable history particularly on the North-East Frontier. A famous incident in their history was when in 1891 35 men under a jemadar joined with a detachment of the 3/1st Punjab Regt under Lieutenant Grant in an attempt to relieve the Manipuri mission. At Thobal the little force was attacked by several thousand Manipuris and were held by the accurate rifle fire of the Gurkhas, the Punjabis being recruits armed only with Sniders. Grant who received the V.C. reported the magnificent conduct of the Gurkhas every one of whom was decorated for gallantry. Thobal Day was kept by the battalion on April 6th. Here they were in another tough April 50 years on. The 2/8th fought at Ypres where on October 30th 1914 they were given trenches too deep for the little men to see to shoot and they had to give way. They got their own back from the Germans at Loos on September 25th 1915, and took many prisoners, but the support failed and only 150 of them came out of that action.

The most famous action of the 2/7th Gurkha Rifles was in Mesopotamia in the First World War when the battalion reduced from 900 to 300 riflemen with 100 of the 4/14th Punjab Regt withstood the whole of the Turkish 35th Division to help Townsend's retreat The glorious 400 were surrounded by thousands; after repeated attacks had failed to dislodge them from what became known as Gurkha Mound, the defenders charged and drove the Turkish division back. After this they followed in that gloomy retreat for 12 hungry thirsty days and sleepless nights to become prisoners and endure the foul treatment of the Turk. Here they were back in Mesopotamia.

The 3rd Sikh Regt was recruited by Captain Thomas Rattray 18 months before the Mutiny and more familiar as Rattray's Sikhs than as the 45th Sikh Infantry. Rattray's had a great reputation to live up to in Iraq. It was the 3rd and 4th Sikh Regt who suffered between them 2,000 casualties in the last effort to relieve Kut. Maude said that it was their magnificent fighting qualities which paved the way for victory in the Second Battle of Kut. Here were Rattray's Sikhs back in Mesopotamia.

Desert were hard pressed and the British forces in Greece were being driven out of it to take advantage of the situation as soon as possible. Nevertheless, the pressure by India on the Chiefs of Staff to do what she could at once and risk disaster undoubtedly saved the real Middle East and provided the first occasion during the Second World War when the Germans were anticipated by us; indeed, on reflection it is difficult to name another.

On April 25th a secret treaty was signed in Baghdad by Rashid Ali and the Italian Minister by the terms of which Germany and Italy undertook to supply financial and military aid to the Iraqi Government for a war against the British Empire. Furthermore, Germany and Italy recognised a future union between Iraq and Syria under the King of Iraq in return for which they were to receive oil and pipeline concessions, the lease of three ports on the Syrian coast, and the right to construct air, naval and military bases on this leased territory.

A day or two later Cornwallis notified Rashid Ali, who had already demanded that no more troops should disembark at Basra until the present force had passed across the frontier of Iraq, that three transports carrying ancillary troops of the first force were nearing Basra. Rashid Ali, no doubt emboldened by his secret treaty, refused permission for them to land. Cornwallis told him that the troops would disembark and that his government would be held responsible for any hostile action. India strongly supported the Ambassador's firm attitude and urged London to agree to the use of force if necessary. On April 29th the convoy reached Basra and the troops were disembarked without incident on the day that the last remnants of the British Expeditionary Force were being rescued from the mainland of Greece.

Rashid Ali now decided to precipitate the issue, whether because he had received a definite promise of German air-support or because he hoped to force the Germans to provide it immediately is not certain. Ever since the disembarkation of the 20th Indian Brigade Iraqi troops which had been concentrated round Basra in early April had been steadily moved north. By the last day of the month the river bunds had been cut and the countryside round Habbaniya was made inaccessible to infantry by flooding, thus making any move by the 20th Brigade to relieve the garrison impossible. An Iraqi force of something over 6,000 with thirty 3.7 howitzers, 4.5 howitzers and 18-pounders occupied the plateau commanding the Habbaniya aerodrome. The Air Officer Commanding Habbaniya received an impudent message from the officer commanding the

Iraqi force to say that the Habbaniya plateau had been occupied for a training exercise and forbidding aircraft and personnel to move out under penalty of shelling.

The A.O.C. sent a suitably defiant reply and asked the Air Ministry for an immediate directive. He received it from the Prime Minister personally on May Day:

If you have to strike, strike hard. Use all necessary force.

The A.O.C. struck next morning by bombing the Iraqi land forces and within five minutes the first Iraqi shells landed on the Habbaniya aerodrome.

Until now the control of operations in Iraq had rested with the C.-in-C., India, but on May 2nd the War Office telegraphed that in view of the situation, which was not visualised when India assumed responsibility, operational command should pass temporarily to Middle East whence alone immediate assistance could be given. The reason for this change is not clear. Mideast had definitely stated that troops could not be spared for Iraq and had made it clear that operations in Iraq would be a diversion from the primary task in the Near East with which Mideast was all too anxiously preoccupied. India had recognised the strategic danger in the Middle East and had committed her inadequately equipped troops to avert disaster. The only reinforcement Habbaniya had received was the 1st K.O.R.R. which had been flown there on April 24th.

Wavell was not at all gratified by the decision to add operational command in Iraq to his own formidable task. He told the C.I.G.S. that he had consistently warned him that no aid could be given to Iraq from Palestine and had always advised avoidance of any commitment in Iraq. He did not see how he could accept responsibility for a force at Basra of whose dispositions and strength he was unaware; he considered that it must be controlled from India. He could only advise negotiations with Iraq on 'the basis of liquidation of a regrettable incident by mutual arrangement with the alternative of war with the British Empire, complete blockade and ruthless air action.'

Wavell added that, while he was willing to create an impression in Palestine that he was preparing there a large force for action in Iraq, the maximum support he could send would be a mechanised brigade incomplete in transport and weapons and not fully trained, a field regiment less one troop, one infantry battalion in M.T., and three mechanised squadrons of the Transjordan Frontier Force whose political attitude was doubtful. Such a force would have few anti-

aircraft and anti-tank weapons and lack any armoured cars or tanks. Wavell made it clear that he considered such a force was likely to be too weak and too late to affect the situation and suggested that the Turkish Government's offer of mediation should be accepted.

The Chiefs of Staff did not agree with General Wavell. He must accept the control of operations both in the northern area and from Basra. The active defence of Habbaniya must be maintained and the preparation for sending a force to its relief must be pressed on.

At this point, the date of the last instructions to Wavell being May 4th, we must see what was happening at Habbaniya.

Mention has already been made of the obsolescent aircraft on which the Air Officer Commanding had to rely. Of these only 56 were fit for operations. Air Marshal Sir A. M. Longmore, A.O.C.-in-C., Mideast on April 14th had promised a small reinforcement in the event of Rashid Ali's actively opposing the disembarkation of the convoy and next day he decided in any event to send nine Wellingtons and six Gladiators before the evacuation of Greece, already a certainty, would have time to influence the Iraqi Government, though he did not expect active opposition from Rashid Ali. However, Longmore's intentions were thwarted by the Air Ministry which was unable to understand how the proposed reinforcements could be spared, especially as the A.O.C.-in-C. did not expect active opposition and as A.O.C. Iraq already had a considerable number of aircraft available if required. Longmore cancelled the move of the Wellingtons, but in spite of the Air Ministry he sent the six Gladiators escorted by one Wellington. Three more time-expired Gladiators arrived in time for the battle and almost as soon as it had started further reinforcements came.

To fly the obsolescent aircraft of No. 4 Special Flying Training School at Habbaniya A.O.C. Iraq had 35 pilots, of whom the greater number were instructors who had done nothing but circuits and landing since their original training some years before. Of the rest a few were pilots who had been returned from squadrons as unsuitable for operational flying, others from the headquarters staff had done hardly any flying for several years, and two or three were pilots who after doing an excessive amount of operational flying had been sent to Habbaniya for rest. There were two observers and two air gunners. What those 35 pilots achieved with the ancient craft and what their pupils achieved with the bombs was a display of courage and skill which the present chronicler can only salute with awe as he passes on.

For four days the air battle against superior numbers continued, the aerodrome under shell fire all the while. On the fifth day Colonel Ouvry Roberts,[1] the G.S.O.I. of the 10th Indian Division who had been flown in to take brilliant command of the ground troops, ordered a sortie. On May 6th the King's Own supported by the Assyrian companies of the Iraqi levies, some armoured cars, and two 4.5 howitzers, survivors of the First World War which had been decorating the entrance to the officers' mess and had been put in order by some British gunners, reached the plateau to find the enemy still there but badly shaken and waiting for reinforcements. He was badly shaken by those two old howitzers which he supposed to have reached Habbaniya from Basra. After some hard fighting the Iraqis quitted the plateau before their relief arrived, and it was at once occupied by the King's Own. Then news came that large enemy reinforcements with guns and armoured cars were moving toward the plateau from Falluja. The advancing and retreating forces met on the road about five miles east of Habbaniya just as every available aircraft arrived to attack the advancing column. When the bombs fell on the first vehicles the rest instead of dispersing closed up and stopped head to tail. The attack lasted nearly two hours and the road was a sheet of flame with exploding ammunition and burning cars. That day 408 prisoners were taken by the King's Own and the casualties of the enemy were over a thousand. The Assyrian levies fought splendidly.

Next morning on May 7th when the armoured car reconnoitred the plateau the enemy had departed leaving behind him a quantity of arms, ammunition and armoured cars badly needed for the defence of the camp.

While the battle of Habbaniya was in progress a battle of another kind was going on at top level. India strongly opposed the idea of negotiation with Rashid Ali which would be considered a sign of weakness and likely to damage our prestige throughout the East. Auchinleck could hardly agree to Wavell's suggestion that the troops at Basra should be moved to Palestine while we parleyed with Rashid Ali. The maintenance of a strong Basra base had been the first object of the despatch of troops from India.

Wavell, on the other hand, considered that the reply of the Chiefs of Staff to his suggestions had failed to face the awkward facts. He felt it was his duty to warn them in 'the gravest possible terms' that the prolongation of the fighting in Iraq would endanger the defence of Egypt and Palestine. The political repercussions would be

[1] Lieut.-General Sir Ouvry Roberts, K.C.B., C.B.E., D.S.O.

incalculable and might cause serious internal trouble in his Mideast bases, none of which was in the true Middle East, it should be noted. That unfortunate misuse of Mideast for Near East caused an ever increasing confusion in this vital argument. Wavell again urged a settlement by negotiation, but meanwhile he was assembling at H.4, a station on the Haifa pipeline, the force of which he had already given details. This force, even incomplete in many respects, could not be assembled before May 11th.

By this time the British colony in Baghdad had taken refuge in the American Legation and the British Embassy where the Ambassador's wireless set having been dismantled and removed by the Iraqis he was out of communication.

On the pressure of the Chiefs of Staff Wavell assumed command of land operations in northern Iraq from noon of May 5th, and of those in southern Iraq on May 9th.

Auchinleck had been hammering away at the C.I.G.S. He did not believe that either in London or in Cairo was there a clear view of the situation. He argued that if Alexandria and the Canal were closed to us by enemy action the loss of Egypt would not be a major disaster, though the importance of continuing to hold it could not be minimised. Yet even if Egypt were lost we should still be able to hold the Sudan and deny the use of the Red Sea to the enemy. If Turkey was not to subside into passivity under a German advance it was essential to deny Syria, Palestine and Iraq to the enemy, and as this might soon become the primary strategic object in this theatre the development of Basra as a base for lines of communication was an urgent necessity. At present only India could produce the troops required to occupy Iraq, and, now came the sting, Indian troops could not perform the task unless they were provided with the modern weapons and aircraft that India was unable to supply. This argument was backed up by a formal offer by India that in view of the 'grave situation in Iraq,' if shipping could be made available, the Basra force would be brought up to five infantry brigades with ancillary troops by June 10th. These troops would lack anti-aircraft and anti-tank artillery and armoured vehicles, so that India would have to take serious risks to make them available. Nevertheless, the risks were worth while. The Chiefs of Staff accepted with gratitude this 'bold and generous offer,' and asked that the forces be prepared as a 'matter of urgency.'

With the shadow of Malaya and Burma over the mind of the chronicler he stops to remind the reader that at this date it was still regarded as merely an inconvenience to divert a convoy from

Singapore to Basra, that at this date Burma was still being withheld from the Indian High Command, and that at this date vital arms and equipment promised 18 months earlier had not yet arrived. Bold and generous indeed was that Indian offer, and when the reader staggers back through the jungles of Malaya with Indian and British troops unequipped for their desolate task, when he stands beside the deathless dead in Arakan, at Kohima and around Imphal, and when from afar in time and place he shares the captivity of Nippon's unhappy prisoners he may appreciate better than he may now the full boldness and generosity of that gesture.

On May 8th General Wavell was still unconvinced by General Auchinleck's argument. In his opinion the forces from India could secure Basra, but they could not advance northward without the co-operation of the Arab tribes. The force from Palestine might relieve Habbaniya, but it could not enter Baghdad against opposition or even maintain itself. If the Axis should intervene in the air, the troops both in Habbaniya and Basra without anti-aircraft protection would be in a difficult position. If more aircraft were diverted to help them, Egypt and Palestine would be dangerously weakened. Even the aircraft already sent to Iraq had seriously reduced the scale of our attacks on Benghazi. He was still of the opinion that a political decision should be sought.

Cornwallis could not be consulted over the course to be adopted, being out of communication by cypher. Auchinleck continued to press for action from Basra. The effort India was prepared to make and the risks she was prepared to take could be justified only in support of a policy which was sound. In his opinion the opportunity for controlling the situation by sending a force from Palestine had passed. We were firmly established at Basra. The immediate policy should be to establish ourselves in force at Baghdad and other key points like Kirkuk and Mosul. The Iraqi air force and the Iraqi army had suffered a severe setback at Habbaniya. They were short of ammunition, and bold action held every prospect of success. India would provide the troops. Indeed, it was only lack of equipment which prevented India's offering more troops, but not for a passive and defensive attitude at Basra.

The Viceroy was in accord with the Commander-in-Chief. He insisted that, however much we might choose to represent our position in Iraq as facilities granted by the treaty we must be prepared to contemplate effective occupation of Iraq for the rest of the war.

The divergence of opinion was complete when on May 10th

General Wavell asked for a decision on policy from the War Cabinet. He considered that in Iraq our interests demanded the avoidance of a major conflict with the Arabs, the security of oil supplies from Iraq and Abadan, and the maintenance of the air route to India. Yet all these were of minor importance compared with the security of Egypt and Palestine.

The bogy of an Arab uprising had long haunted British policy in the Near and Middle East; Wavell could hardly avoid being influenced by the intelligence of the Arab Bureau. The tasks imposed upon him in the Balkans, the desert and the Levant were such as might have made the most reckless of generals pause before he did anything to impose an added burden upon his already overstrained command. He believed that if the Germans did advance through Turkey they would advance through Syria or Palestine and Egypt. He believed that the parachute troops assembling in Greece were destined for an attack on Crete. He believed that Baghdad could be more easily occupied at once from Palestine than from Basra and he urged again the advantage of a political settlement. At the same time a directive was sent to Major-General Fraser then in command at Basra emphasising the need for the restoration of a friendly government. Fraser was not to make overtures but he was not to discourage their being made.

Auchinleck on the other hand was strongly opposed to any negotiations with an agent of the Axis like Rashid Ali. He was also perturbed by the delay which he considered was prejudicing his ability to carry out the task in Iraq when control reverted to India. He did not believe in appeasement of the Arabs as a policy to stave off a rising; he believed that such a policy as evidence of weakness was more likely to provoke unrest. Finally he disagreed with Wavell's contention that the security of Iraq was of minor importance compared with the security of Egypt and Palestine, and insisted that it was the other way about.

Wavell replied that his main task was the expulsion of Axis forces from Egypt and Libya, which must be jeopardised by the diversion of troops and material to support a military occupation of Iraq. His advisers with experience in Arab affairs were unanimously of the opinion that such an occupation would be a 'calamity if forced upon us.' On May 12th he was still hopeful of a favourable political settlement. One asks to what extent the Arab Bureau was responsible for our policy in Palestine which was made to look so ridiculous by the feeble performance of Egyptian, Arab and Syrian warriors against the inferior and less well equipped forces of Israel in 1948.

After the ignominious Iraqi retreat from the plateau the R.A.F. made concentrated raids on Iraqi aerodromes and landing grounds in the course of which they destroyed 13 aircraft and put another 22 out of action. Those losses on top of previous raids on the Raschid aerodrome at Baghdad and the airfield at Ba'quba practically annihilated the Iraqi air force as a fighting unit.

Then on May 10th, three Heinkel 111's arrived at Mosul followed two days later by 12 more Heinkels and 14 Messerschmitt 110's. These German aircraft had reached Mosul by way of Syria where they had been given all facilities by the vitiated French. From that date onwards these new arrivals bombed and shot up the Habbaniya camp regularly.

At this grave moment when the objective of the German parachute troops mustering in Crete was still uncertain and when German personnel in Syria were awaiting their instructions a Heinkel arrived over Baghdad bearing von Blomberg, the commander of German air forces in the East and head of the German mission to Iraq. Rashid Ali and his ministers were on the airfield to receive him; Iraqi troops and police were guarding it. One excitable soldier or policeman fired his rifle to salute the circling Heinkel, and the bullet killed the son of Field-Marshal von Blomberg instantaneously. It might be rash to claim that this fantastic accident determined the issue; but undoubtedly it did cause such confusion in the German plans that by the time it was cleared up the hour for a decisive German intervention had passed.

During the tense days of fighting at Habbaniya and the tense days of argument between Delhi, Cairo and London the 21st Indian Brigade commanded by Brigadier C. J. Weld joined the 20th Indian Brigade at Basra. This consisted of the 4th Frontier[1] Force Rifles, the

[1] The 4th Frontier Force Rifles were the famous 57th (Wilde's Rifles) of the old Frontier Force. They were in that blazing march of a thousand miles to Delhi in 1857. They were with Colin Campbell at Lucknow and with the old 91st Highlanders stormed the Sikanderabagh. That was when Sepoy Mukarrab Khan thrust his left arm on which he carried a shield between the heavy closing doors. When his left hand was hacked he withdrew it and thrust through his right hand which was nearly severed from his wrist. The doors could not be closed and Wilde's went through. Wilde's Rifles went to France in 1914, and later were with Smuts in East Africa.

The 2/4th Prince of Wales's Own Gurkha Rifles were back in the country where they had distinguished themselves a quarter of a century earlier. They were in the first brigade which entered Baghdad in Maude's victorious advance and the 2/4th were left to garrison the city. Baghdad Day was the battalion's anniversary holiday.

The 2/10th Gurkha Rifles were formed only in 1908, and were blooded on the eastern bank of the Suez Canal when they stopped the Turkish advance, though

2/4th Gurkha Rifles and the 2/10th Gurkha Rifles with ancillary troops, and it came under the 10th Indian Division to the command of which on May 16th Major-General W. J. Slim, recovered of his wound in Eritrea, succeeded Major-General Fraser[1] who after carrying out a difficult and thankless job at Basra had gone sick.

On the night of May 7/8th Ashar, the business quarter of Basra, was occupied by the 20th and 21st Brigades against some opposition from Iraqi police and civilian snipers, the 2/7th Gurkha Rifles being assigned the chief part. Under a threat of bombardment by Major-General Fraser the sniping ceased.

Lieut.-General Quinan[2] had taken over command of all British land forces in Iraq with a directive stating that it was the intention of H.M. Government (i) to develop and organise the port of Basra to any extent necessary to enable such forces to be maintained as might be required to operate in the Middle East including Egypt and Turkey, (ii) to secure control of all means of communication and develop them, (iii) to take measures to protect the Basra base against armoured and air forces and to protect the R.A.F. installations at Habbaniya and Shaiba, the Kirkuk oilfields, the pipeline to Haifa, and the lives of British subjects in Baghdad and elsewhere in Iraq. He was also to make plans for the protection of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company's installations in south-west Persia should that prove necessary. He was informed that it was the intention of H.M. Government to increase his forces up to three infantry divisions with possibly an armoured division as soon as these troops could be despatched from India. General Quinan arrived in Basra on May 7th to take up his command. About the same time a small Force Headquarters with Headquarters 21st Indian Infantry Brigade and a part of Headquarters 10th Indian Division reached Basra.

On May 8th G.H.Q. Middle East Forces decided that British forces in southern Iraq should be placed under the immediate command of Mideast and that all operations north of Kerbala would be controlled by Headquarters Palestine and Transjordan.

These involutions of command have been a handicap ever since communication became so fatally easy: every nation suffers from them.

Wavell sent his Chief of Staff to Basra on May 15th. By this time all was quiet there. Quinan was clear that his first task was to secure Basra as a base and could not contemplate any move northward for

heavily outnumbered. From there they went to Gallipoli and at Suvla a section got just a little nearer to Constantinople than any other troops on the peninsula.

[1] Major-General W. A. K. Fraser, C.B., C.B.E., D.S.O., M.V.O., M.C. (C.I.H.).

[2] General Sir E. P. Quinan, K.C.B., K.C.I.E., D.S.O., O.B.E. (8th Punjab Regt).

three months on account of the floods. The report of his C.G.S. confirmed Wavell in the belief that his policy had been and was the right one. The arrival of units of the Luftwaffe suggested that the situation in Baghdad might deteriorate and the Chiefs of Staff suggested a meeting between Wavell and Auchinleck at Basra to help them decide what was the right policy in Iraq. This conference was held on May 24th 1941. The arguments already familiar were reiterated by both sides without either's being able to accept the other's point of view. Nevertheless, two valuable results were achieved. Quinan was ordered to advance on Baghdad as soon as possible and when he reached it India was to resume control of operations in Iraq. To these proposals the Chiefs of Staff agreed on May 30th.

It should be borne in mind that while this conference at Basra was being held the situation in Crete was already very grave and that three days later the decision to evacuate the island was taken. Wavell was convinced that the Axis strategy was to close the Aegean to the Royal Navy and by gaining control of Syria threaten the Canal from the East. In the face of this imminent threat he cannot be blamed for regarding a German control of Iraq as a more remote danger, but Auchinleck must be praised for the prompt action which alone made that point of view tenable.

The rest of the Iraq story may be told briefly. The small mechanised force from Palestine reached Habbaniya on May 18th. Known as Kingcol after its commander Brigadier Kingstone,[1] Kingcol had arrived at the banks of the Euphrates from the shores of the Mediterranean, across a waterless desert that no military force had attempted to cross since Alexander the Great. There was water enough when Kingcol did arrive, for the Euphrates and the Tigris were in flood and the Iraqi engineers by demolitions had almost made a better job of barring the way to their capital with water than the Dutch had made in May 1940. Yet they had not destroyed the large steel bridge across the Euphrates at Falluja, and that was the key to an advance on Baghdad.

The immediate problem was to let Kingcol into Habbaniya before it was let out again across the floods to Baghdad. Labour was short: equipment was scarce. A section of No. 10 Field Company, Q.V.O. Madras Sappers and Miners was flown in to do the necessary bridging and Kingcol came through. The job to give them a crossing to make their eastward move to Falluja was tougher. The site chosen was Sin el Dhibban on the near bank of the Euphrates four

[1] Brigadier J. J. Kingstone, C.B.E., D.S.O.

miles downstream from the cantonment, where the river was 750 feet wide with a strong current. Bridging in the time available was out of the question. A ferry was made with a 1,500 feet wire rope to hold the raft. This involved floating that large coil of cable across the river, fixing the ends on both banks, holding it taut, and strengthening it against the strain of the ferryman's hook holding on against the current. Vehicles had to be loaded on rafts and helped ashore over improvised ramps, and this business had to be repeated over other water obstacles before Falluja was reached. The task called for many hours of wading, towing, pushing and battling against the stream, and the Madras Sappers and Miners were always in the forefront of it.

The first experimental trip over the ferry was made on the afternoon of May 18th, and Colonel Roberts, who was to command the attack on Falluja, decided to cross at once. The sappers asked for one more day 'to make sure the ferry really would work.' Roberts, himself an old sapper, refused. Baghdad must be reached before the Luftwaffe could build up its strength. The crossing of the troops for the left flank column began at 6.30 p.m. that very evening and by 9.30 a.m. of May 19th the troops were all across. General Clark[1] who commanded Habforce of which Kingcol was part described it as 'a campaign won on two ropes.'

That day the King's Own, the Assyrian levies, and the mechanised force from Palestine occupied Falluja after hard fighting which lasted nearly all day. Kingcol then pressed on to relieve the British in Baghdad.

On May 27th the 20th Indian Brigade left Shaiba with orders to occupy Ur, about 80 miles east of Basra, which was done after a short display of opposition by the Iraqis who quickly fled. The rate of progress may seem slow, but it must be noted that the Iraqis besides their flooding of roads had removed hundreds of sleepers from the railway line and demolished essential installations, and that the transport of the 20th Indian Brigade was quite inadequate.

By now Kingcol was on the outskirts of Baghdad and to Mr Somerset de Chair, the intelligence officer of the 4th Cavalry Brigade, the progress of the Indian troops seemed ludicrously slow:

In *The Golden Carpet* he writes:

> The Basra Elephant, with its toppling Howdah of Staff Officers penetrated as far as Ur of the Chaldees, but this interesting peep into ancient history does not seem to have affected the course of this campaign.

[1] Lieut.-General J. G. W. Clark, C.B., M.C.

troop of the 15th Field Regt and ancillary units, in all 1,400 strong with 210 vehicles. It proceeded by river as far as Kut Al Amara, steamers and barges being collected somehow. The column embarked at Maqil on June 11th and reached Kut on June 17th under naval escort. The journey up the Tigris had as salutary an effect on the tribes as even the Arab Bureau could have hoped for. By June 17th the 10th Indian Division (less the 25th Brigade) was concentrated in the area round Baghdad.

On June 18th Major-General Slim was appointed to command the whole of northern Iraq, and on the same day the control of operations in Iraq passed from Mideast Command to the Commander-in-Chief, India, Lieut.-General Quinan being appointed to take command of all troops in that area. On June 9th the 17th Indian Infantry Brigade commanded by Brigadier Gracey[1] reached Basra followed on June 16th by the 24th Indian Infantry Brigade commanded by Brigadier Le Fleming.[2]

Slim had orders to retain a minimum number of troops in Baghdad and round about, but to keep them all in a mobile condition to give the Iraqis an impression of greater strength in numbers than we had. He was also to help in the preparation of their landing grounds in the Mosul district and to make administration arrangements for the maintenance of four R.A.F. squadrons. By June 20th his forces had spread out over the Iraqi plain inside the triangle Basra, Haditha and Mosul.

On June 22nd Hitler invaded Russia. The pattern of German

were the first troops to enter Baghdad in 1917. They made a famous charge against the Turkish position at the battle of Istubalat on April 22nd 1917 when all the officers and nearly all the sowars became casualties. In 1919 they had hard fighting in the Kurdish rebellion when without water and short of ammunition they resisted for three days a force of Kurdish tribesmen several thousand strong. The 13th D.C.O. Lancers was one of the first two Indian cavalry regiments chosen for mechanisation. The last mounted parade was held on April 9th 1938, their commanding officer then being Lieut.-Colonel F. W. Messervy who displayed such prowess as a cavalry leader new style with Gazelle Force in Eritrea. It is worth setting on record that when Messervy tried to train his men for tank warfare, using red flags for tanks, he was forbidden to continue because he and his men would never be likely to meet tanks in the rôle designed for them by H.M. Government, should war come. The effect on the dashing Messervy himself was more like St Vitus's dance than catalepsy.

The old blue signal standard of the 1st Bombay Light Cavalry, the Kala Baba, was believed like the green fairy flag of the Macleods to bring victory in the field, and for many years after it was too frail for battle recruits held the fringe of it in their right hand when being sworn in until it became too frail even for that.

[1] General Sir Douglas D. Gracey, K.C.B., K.C.I.E., C.B.E., M.C. (1st G.R.).

[2] Colonel R. E. Le Fleming, O.B.E., M.C. (Indian Grenadiers).

Chapter 9

June, 1941. Decision to occupy Syria—seizure of Deraa—the fight for Kissoue—setback at Quneitra—the heroic defence of Mezze—the fall of Damascus.

IN September 1936 a treaty was signed between France and Syria by which the French mandate gave way to Syrian autonomy. Under the terms of this treaty France was entitled to maintain armed forces in Jebel ed Druze and Latakia and two airfields. After the Franco-German armistice in 1940 Syria remained within the orbit of Vichy, and after Rashid Ali's *coup d'état* in Iraq the Germans decided to use the Syrian airfields. Early in May General Huntziger, the Vichy Minister for War, informed General Dentz, the French High Commissioner, that Admiral Darlan having conceded the use of the Syrian airfields he was not to oppose the landing of German aircraft. The first of these reached Syria on May 9th 1941, and a few days later others arriving at Mezze and Palmyra went into action against Habbaniya as already related. In addition to the landing grounds the Vichy authorities allowed the Germans the use of the Syrian railways to send aviation petrol, arms and ammunition to Mosul. These passed through Turkey as French, being ostensibly sent to meet the threat of a mythical Kurdish revolt.

On May 15th Mr Eden stated in the House of Commons that the Syrian airfields were being used by the enemy and he warned the Vichy Government of the consequences. The French affirmed that the Syrian airfields had been used by the Germans only in forced landings, but the strategic implication was menacing, not only in Iraq and the Russian oilfields but also to Palestine, Suez and Cyprus. The best that could be hoped from the Turk was that he would not enter the war beside Germany. There was no likelihood that he would attempt to resist the movement of German troops and material with a view to occupying Syria in strength, and the only course for the British Government was to invade Syria first. Preparations for this were started in the middle of May, and the invasion began on June 8th, with an advance from Palestine on Damascus and Beirut by three lines.

The Vichy military forces were estimated at from 40,000 to 50,000 men, the remnants of Weygand's army, mostly well-trained and

experienced soldiers with about 90 tanks. Their main strength was disposed on the Palestine and Transjordan frontiers, and at Quneitra, Damascus and Beirut. The Allied troops available were the 7th Australian Division (less one brigade), the 5th Indian Infantry Brigade Group, a Free French division, a commando, a composite mechanised regiment of the Royal Scots Greys and Staffordshire Yeomanry, the Transjordan Frontier Force of Arabs and ancillary units. Of the above forces the Free French consisting of six battalions, one battery and about 20 tanks, but incomplete in transport and weapons, were at Qastina, south of Jaffa, under the command of General Legentilhomme. The Australian Division consisted of the 21st and 25th Brigades, each of three battalions. They had the light tanks of the Divisional Cavalry Squadron, but they had no medium machine-guns and troop-transport for two battalions only.

The 5th Indian Infantry Brigade Group commanded by Brigadier W. Lloyd was composed of the 1st Royal Fusiliers, 3/1st Punjab Regt, 4th Rajputana Rifles (Outram's), 1st Field Regt R.A., a signal section and anti-tank company, 18th Field Company of Sappers and Miners, a Royal Indian Army Service Corps transport company, the 14th Indian Field Ambulance, an Indian staging section, and a workshop company. They began to cross into Palestine from Egypt on May 16th and by May 19th they were assembled at Gadera. Four days later the 5th Indian Brigade Group was concentrated in Transjordania, south of the Syrian frontier in the Irbid-Samakh area, where they worked for nearly a fortnight to develop and strengthen the defences on the Transjordan road which ran parallel to the Syrian frontier. On June 8th the advance began.

The broad plan was that the 7th Australian Division would advance along the marine road through Haifa to capture Beirut while the 5th Indian Brigade would cross the frontier from Transjordan and open the way for the advance of the Free French on Damascus. The Australians were to have the help of a commando landing from Cyprus at the south of the River Litani, the 5th Brigade was to call upon the Transjordan Frontier Force. For the operation the Brigade Group was divided into four columns. Column A commanded by Lieut.-Colonel L. Jones consisted of the 4th Rajputana Rifles (in M.T.), Column B commanded by Brigadier Lloyd consisted of Brigade H.Q., with the 3/1st Punjab Regt (in M.T.), Column C consisted of C Company 1st Royal Fusiliers with a detachment of sappers and miners. Column D commanded by Lieut.-Colonel Orr consisted of the 1st Royal Fusiliers (less one

company). Column A was to attack Deraa in conjunction with Column B after the latter had secured communications to the south and south-east. Column C was to secure the high ground in the El Aal-Fiq area and deny the enemy access to the railway line. Column D was to capture and hold Quneitra.

As soon as Deraa had fallen Column A was immediately to advance and capture Meskine, where a small garrison was to be left behind and the rest of the column was to secure Ezraa and open a way for the Free French.

In the hope that many of the Vichy soldiers would not fight to aid German schemes, every important offensive was to be preceded by a 'pour parler' party carrying a white flag and an appeal to surrender with honour.

At 2 a.m. in the morning of June 8th the columns moved forward, and the railway line was secured by the Transjordan Frontier Force. The first objective of Column A was the Chenab viaduct, which a platoon of the 4th Rajputana Rifles was to capture. A hundred yards from the bridge the platoon halted. Captain Adam Murray, with Havildar Goru Ram and a Free French officer, went forward, cut the wire, charged the sentry and shot up the post. The rest of the platoon then rushed the bridge which was captured and consolidated by 3 a.m. Meanwhile, the rest of Column A and Column B had moved forward to surround Deraa, the Rajputana Rifles from the north and west, the 3/1st Punjab Regt from the south and east. Columns C and D advanced to capture Fiq and Quneitra.

At 6 a.m. the 'pour parler' party drove up to Deraa in a staff car to present the ultimatum. An anti-tank gun wrecked the bonnet of the car without exploding, and the party proceeded on foot. The ultimatum was rejected and at 7.30 a.m. the town's defences were bombarded. By 8.30 a.m. the town had been captured by the 3/1st. However, a train with most of the garrison got away just before the arrival of the Rajputana Rifles, who had had a long difficult roundabout march to get into their position. The local inhabitants descended upon Deraa to loot it, but were dispersed by the Punjabis. Later in the morning Outram's pressed on northward to Sheikh Meskine with a battery of the 1st Field Regt R.A. and one light anti-aircraft troop. The Punjabis protected their right flank by patrolling the road to Sourida. French armoured cars opposed the advance of Outram's, and they were attacked from the air. However, the battalion pushed on boldly and reached Sheikh Meskine that afternoon. At 4 p.m. an attack was put in, but it failed to penetrate

the village through concentrated machine-gun fire and shelling by the Vichy 75's. The plan of attack was changed, and a company was sent round on the left flank to seize a small hill overlooking the village from the west. The leading platoon was held up 350 yards from the hill by machine-gun fire from several posts, and a second platoon was put in. The platoon commander and havildar became casualties, but Naik Bhopal Singh took over command and pressed in with the attack. He and three other riflemen reached and annihilated the first machine-gun post, and then went on to annihilate another. The four of them killed over 40 men between them. This leading platoon was now able to advance, knock out the remaining posts, and capture the hill just as the Vichy tanks appeared in the open country.

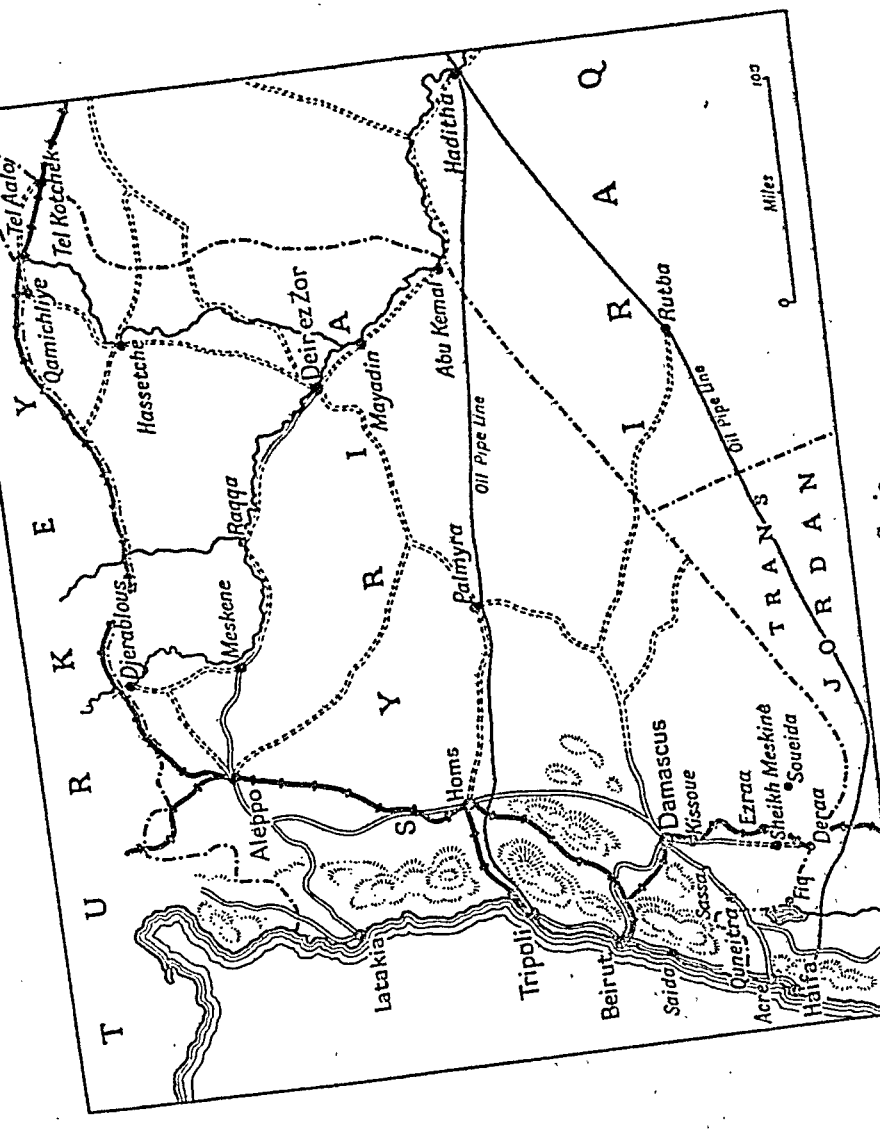
At dawn of June 9th Sheikh Meskine was captured without opposition, the garrison having cleared out during the night. A couple of hours later a company of Outram's with the mortar platoon and a couple of anti-tank guns set out for Ezraa which they secured without opposition by 7.30 a.m.

The Royal Fusiliers captured Quneitra and Fiq that day, having moved up along the west side of the Lake of Tiberias.

Meanwhile, Legentilhomme had brought up the Free French forces to help in the reduction of Sheikh Meskine and Ezraa if necessary, and finding the task already accomplished they passed through northwards with a battery of the Royal Artillery, Outram's and the Punjabis watching their left flank. Along the coast the Australian Division was moving up on a two brigade front, with sharp fighting to cross the Litani.

At noon on June 12th an urgent appeal for help was received at Brigade H.Q. from Legentilhomme to deal with about 100 Vichy vehicles outflanking him on the east. A company of Outram's with a troop of the 1st Field Regt and an anti-tank troop were despatched in response, and B Squadron of the Royal Dragoons which had now arrived to reinforce the 5th Indian Brigade was ordered to stand by. The alarm was a false one. The 100 vehicles were Colonel Collet's Free French cavalry column. On this day the 5th Indian Brigade was placed under command of General Legentilhomme for the attack on Damascus, the protection of the lines of communication devolving on the Transjordan Frontier Force.

Immediately after this Legentilhomme was wounded and, although he wished to command from hospital at Deraa, Force H.Q. in Jerusalem ruled that Brigadier Lloyd must command both his own brigade and the Free French. However, they were still called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Gentforce. Lieut.-Colonel Jones of Outram's assumed command of the 5th Indian Brigade.

The object of the operations by Gentforce was to secure the line of the Kissoue-Damascus road on June 15th by attacking the enemy's left flank as a preliminary to cutting his communications with Damascus. The country here is a rolling plain netted by numerous streams and studded with hills which rise abruptly from the low ground and are strewn with lava boulders. The area is crossed by the Nahr el Aouaj which flows from west to east. The Vichy forces, about equal in numbers to ours, but much superior in tanks and armoured cars, held a strong position at Kissoue.

Two roads led to Damascus, one from Quneitra the other from Deraa. The former ran through country suitable for the deployment of armoured vehicles, but the ground on either side of the Deraa road was hilly. On the west and nearest to Kissoue was a high rounded hill free from lava boulders on its lower slopes called Tel Kissoue, and behind this farther west was the great hill of Jebel Madani commanding both of the roads. On the east was Jebel Abou Atriz almost sheer and its continuations, Jebel el Kelb and Jebel Tannouriye, were bouldered precipitous heights well fortified and garrisoned.

The operation was to be carried out in two phases. Phase A was for the 5th Indian Brigade to secure the area Tel Kissoue-Kissoue-Monkelbe. Phase B was for the Free French to secure Jebel Abou Atriz and Jebel el Kelb. To carry out Phase A the battalion of Infanterie de Marine came under 5th Indian Brigade which was to be supported by all available artillery. Phase A was to be concluded by 8 a.m. of June 15th when except for one battery it would pass to the Free French for Phase B to begin at 8.15 a.m. Phase B was to be put into operation regardless of the amount of success achieved by the 5th Brigade. Simultaneously with the opening of Phase B Collett's cavalry force was to move north of Abou Atriz and Kelb to cut the enemy's communications with Damascus.

Kissoue was a strong position. The Nahr el Aouaj flowed south of it across the line of advance of the Punjabis and the village itself was surrounded by strongly wired and defended localities behind considerable defence works. Numerous posts were hidden on the outskirts; the small lush orchards were wired and defended by machine-guns.

At 4 a.m. on June 15th the four companies of the 3/1st Punjab Regt moved forward for a frontal attack on the village. C Company of the 1st Royal Fusiliers advanced simultaneously as left flank

forward. Advancing in complete darkness the 3/1st established a bridgehead over the wadi just east of the village. The bridge had been destroyed, but the attackers were carrying 30 wooden ladders which the sappers had made overnight to negotiate the anti-tank ditches. On the southern edge of the village the right-centre company fought at close quarters in the gardens and houses. The left company, which had captured its objective 1,000 yards west of the village, wheeled in to help the left-centre company fighting in the gardens south-west of the village. There was tough fighting in this sector for some time, but by 8.30 a.m. Kissoue was taken. It was a brilliant action, and fortune favoured the attack which coincided with a relief of the Vichy garrison's forward units who were caught with most of their weapons already in the lorries waiting for the returning troops.

Outram's moved through the Punjabis and at 9 a.m. A and B Companies began their assault on Tel Kissoue. Crossfire from machine-gun posts on Tel Afair, the small hill north-east, was harassing for a while, but C and D Companies supported by carriers relieved the situation until counter-attacked by enemy tanks and compelled to withdraw. On the extreme left the Free French Marines with C Company of the Royal Fusiliers had cleared Monkelbe village by 11.30 a.m.

Phase B had started half an hour earlier. Jebel Kelb was captured, but the Free French were held up from Jebel Abou Atriz and could make no further progress. On the extreme right Collett's force was stopped by heavy artillery fire and tank attacks from Tel Soutaine.

This news was made more depressing by news from Quneitra, where the Royal Fusiliers reported a strong enemy force advancing from Sassa. On top of this came news that the line of communication was threatened by the recapture of Ezraa by two companies of Tunisian troops who had advanced from Soueida with 10 armoured cars, two 75's and three anti-tank guns. Finally, the 3/1st was being heavily counter-attacked in Kissoue by tanks. This counter-attack failed thanks to the marksmanship of the Punjabis and their skilful use of tank cover. Later from Tel Afair bugles were heard sounding the charge and a squadron of Spahis came galloping across to the lower slopes of Tel Kissoue. Outram's riflemen held firm and the cavalry retreated leaving many dead and wounded behind them.

To restore the situation round Ezraa a small force was detached to move to the help of the Transjordan Frontier Force at Sheikh Meskine under the command of Colonel Jenin.

Meanwhile at Quneitra the Royal Fusiliers (less one company)

were in a bad way. The outpost company was driven in, and the Vichy force invested them during the night, cutting the roads east, west and south with cavalry patrols. Orr, the battalion commander, asked urgently for the return of the anti-tank platoon of their Bofors guns and C Company which had been taken away for the operation against Kissoue. Even if they could have been sent it is doubtful whether they would have been able to get through to Quneitra.

The enemy strength was 11 medium tanks, 10 armoured cars, a battalion of the 17th Senegalese Regt, a company of the Foreign Legion with mortars and heavy machine-guns, one or two 75's, and two squadrons of Circassian cavalry. The garrison of Quneitra consisted of two armoured cars of the Royal Dragoons, one 20 mm. Breda gun, and the 1st Royal Fusiliers, less C Company and with B Company depleted by reverses during aggressive patrolling near Sassa. It was about 575 men against between 1,500 and 2,000, and the Breda gun broke a spring after five rounds had been fired.

At 4.45 a.m. on June 16th the Vichy tanks appeared and for six hours they more or less did what they liked without infantry support. They knocked out the road blocks and roared over the ruins into the town. Nothing the Fusiliers had could make any impression on the armour of these tanks, impenetrable to Boyes rifles at five yards' range and impervious to grenades or Molotov cocktails. Then at 10.45 a.m. a full scale attack was launched with infantry and tanks. The forward companies of the Fusiliers were ordered to withdraw to battalion headquarters. Only 12 men each of A and D Companies and about 50 men of B Company managed to get back. The enemy followed up too quickly for a defence plan to be organised. As parties returned they had to take up positions in the first house handy, and it was soon impossible to know which houses held our men, which the enemy. Worse than that, the troops were cut off from their reserves of ammunition, and all they had was in their own pouches. Enemy infantry were occupying more and more of the houses; the tanks were roaring up and down the streets and shooting at every target available.

At 5.30 p.m. that afternoon the enemy sent a flag of truce demanding surrender. As the ammunition was practically exhausted and further resistance could have meant nothing but a massacre the commanding officer of the Royal Fusiliers had no alternative, and at 6 p.m. on the evening of June 16th what was left of the battalion surrendered.

In an attempt to deal with the critical situation by a rapid advance on Damascus orders had been given on the afternoon of

June 15th for the 3/1st Punjabis to capture Jebel Madani and move forward to establish a position at Aartouz across the Quneitra-Damascus road, for the Rajputana Rifles to seize the line of that road from Aartouz to the junction of the track from Kissoue, and for the Free French Marines in Monkelbe to co-operate with the Rajputana Rifles by advancing through Deir Khabiye. The positions of the latter facing Tel Kissoue were to be taken over by a Free French battalion. All the operations planned for that night of June 15/16th were carried out with slight opposition and almost without loss.

On the afternoon of June 16th news came that Ezraa had been recaptured. Then the French Marines near Aartouz were attacked by Vichy troops; after some confusion the enemy was repelled by concentrated artillery and anti-tank fire. At dusk five Vichy bombers escorted by fighters caused heavy casualties, and went on to bomb Kissoue. During this time Royal Bombay Sappers and Miners worked hard to make the position tank-proof as far as possible.

Meanwhile, the Australians had been pressing on along the coast toward Beirut against stiff opposition, and by the afternoon of June 15th the port of Saida, the ancient Sidon, had been occupied. By June 16th the line held on the Damascus front ran from Saida through Jezzine, Rachaia el Quadi and Aartouz to Kissoue.

The 5th Indian Brigade spent June 17th in rest and consolidation, only interrupted by a few encounters with tanks from Quatana in the area of Aartouz. That evening the 2nd Queen's Regt which had been brought up from Palestine reoccupied Quneitra, the Vichy troops having withdrawn. The intention had been that the Punjabis and Outram's should attack Mezze along the Quneitra road while the Free French should attack Qadim and advance along the main road toward Damascus. However, the Free French not being ready, and the two Indian battalions being much exhausted, the attack was postponed till the following night (June 18/19th). News came during the afternoon that the Vichy force from Quneitra and another Vichy force which had moved round the desert flank were threatening to cut the road behind the 5th Brigade, but it was decided to press on because a serious threat to Damascus would force the Vichy commander to order back these flanking forces.

Mezze was a large village standing at the junction of the road from Damascus to Beirut and Quneitra. A dusty huddle of biscuit-coloured hills, Jebel Aannter, rose to the west, crowned at its north-east end by four forts which covered the Beirut road and the low-lying country south and east of Mezze. Qadim was on the

Deraa road about four miles south of Damascus and about the same distance down the Quneitra road, east of it was the fortified hamlet of Mouddamiya and, also east of the road, a couple of miles nearer to Mezze, the airfield. Immediately north of Jebel Madani, the hill dominating both roads two or three miles farther south, was a stretch of level infertile moorland, but beyond this the country was a maze of gardens and orchards fenced by hedges of prickly pear and irrigated by countless small streams and channels.

The plan of operations to carry out which the 5th Indian Brigade marched northwards on the night of June 18th was as follows. The Punjabis would lead across country west of the Quneitra road followed by Outram's and the Bombay Sappers and Miners. Along the road itself parallel with the rear of the column would move ammunition, food and medical stores in trucks with a platoon of the brigade anti-tank company under the brigade transport officer. At dawn the 1st Field Regt R.A. (less one troop) would move to the areas of the woods of Daraiya escorted by six carriers of the Rajputana Rifles. The French Marines, C Company of the Royal Fusiliers, one troop of gunners and one light anti-aircraft troop, both in an anti-tank rôle were to form a defensive flank on the line from Aartouz to Jebel Madani.

The 3/1st Punjab Regt was to detach the Rajput company to seize a feature where the track led off the main road. To the Sikh company was assigned the job of disposing of any defended localities on the road, particularly the fortified hamlet of Mouaddamiya and the Mezze airfield. A third company of Punjabi Mussalmans was to seize the high ground west of Mezze, where on arrival the Rajputana Rifles were to occupy positions blocking all roads in the area, particularly the Beirut road with a view to cutting a Vichy retreat by road or rail. The rest of the 3/1st Punjab Regt would remain in brigade reserve.

While the 5th Indian Brigade was advancing on Mezze the Free French forces were to advance and capture Qadim as a preliminary to entering Damascus by the Jerusalem Gate.

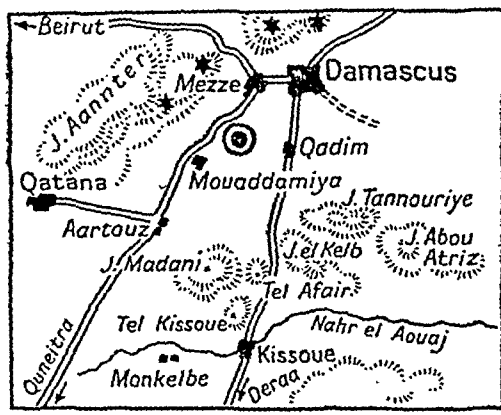
The troops had been able to rest and bathe, but they were still tired by what had already been an extremely arduous campaign when at 8.30 p.m. they set out in the darkness on what was to prove as desperate an enterprise as any in the war.

The attack on Mouaddamiya began soon after 10 p.m. The 3/1st somehow made their way through the wood that surrounded it and managed to destroy several enemy tanks. Only 27 of the men reached the end of the wood, but the enemy post was obliterated and

the main column was able to move on. The Hazara company now led the advance on the other side of the road and after knocking out some Vichy machine-gun posts and avoiding others they were through the first enemy line by 11 p.m.

Meanwhile, a disaster had occurred. The transport moving along the road got ahead of the marching troops and ran into a road block covered by an anti-tank gun and machine-guns. Most of the vehicles were knocked out, and what was left of the transport was held from moving by enemy tanks and guns in the olive groves. It never rejoined the column.

Mezze was reached at 4.15 a.m. after a 12-mile march in black darkness over unreconnoitred country; a quarter of an hou



later the attack started. Two of the guns firing down the road were knocked out by Subadar Mohammed Akbar of the 3/1st. In the squalid high-walled streets of the village the fighting was hard, but after an hour the enemy was driven from the houses by grenades and bayonets and Mezze was in our hands. The company of Outram's ordered to cut the Beirut road and railway made its way round the village, driving off some Vichy cavalry which tried to stop them. They turned back a train, set fire to a petrol dump, destroyed seven lorries and repelled an attack by one of the Vichy battalions before they were attacked at 9 a.m. on the morning of June 19th by five heavy tanks, when they fell back in good order into Mezze.

The night march into Mezze had been planned with the object of drawing off some of the Vichy forces standing between the Free French and Damascus. Unfortunately when the 5th Indian Brigade

set out the Free French did not. So here was the 5th Brigade faced with the enemy's full strength, for the Free French were still at Kissoue. The two companies of the 3/1st detailed to deal with Mouaddamiya and occupy the high ground west of Mezze had not reached Mezze with the rest of the brigade. After a good deal of heavy fighting in the course of overcoming enemy posts many of these were reinforced and the two companies with the sappers and miners cut off from the brigade had to take cover in the woods south-east of Mezze where later in the day the Fusilier company with carriers under the command of Major Burke R.A. joined them. Every attempt to get through with anti-tank guns and ammunition to the now beleaguered troops in Mezze was thwarted by reinforced machine-gun posts and fire from the buildings on the airfield. In Mezze itself the troops tried to get the village into a state of defence with hastily put together road blocks at the approaches. Brigade headquarters with a company of the 3/1st, a company of Rajputana Rifles, and both battalion headquarters was established in Mezze House and the other companies found the best defensive positions available in the rest of the village.

Mezze House was a large double-fronted two-storied square villa covered with stained and musty dark pink stucco in a high-walled garden of about a square half-acre. It stood on the northern outskirts of the village among dense orchards round which ran two roads east and west; south-east was the village square from which a drive led to the blind gateway of the walled garden. Even in high June the house must have cast upon those who passed through its gateway an ominous sense of impending disaster, and the high square rooms with their large shuttered windows can have done nothing to dispel this tragic premonition. To this day the place is haunted, and the very sunlight in that high-walled garden is sombre. Here was made the last stand of the 5th Indian Brigade.

Soon after that company of Outram's fell back on Mezze before the onset of the heavy tanks of Vichy the men at the road blocks were driven in, and the tanks broke through into the village, roaring round the houses, firing through the windows and breaching the walls. The accurate fire of those two Indian battalions, veterans of Sanchil's livid crags, kept the infernal Senegalese from getting close; but the tanks could raven at will round these blind alleys. At 4 p.m. one of the companies of Outram's, its ammunition exhausted, its casualties heavy, had to capitulate after the walls of the building they held had been shattered by the 35-ton tanks. By now to the tank attacks was added heavy shelling over open sights from the

heavy guns mounted on the beige hills above the village. Later that afternoon the attack was concentrated on Mezze House to which as many men as possible had been withdrawn. The garden wall was stout enough to be a tank obstacle, but it was possible to fire down the drive from the square. At nightfall the attacks ceased, but the defenders' case was desperate. Ammunition was almost exhausted. No food had been eaten for nearly 24 hours except a little fruit in the garden, which was eked out. There were about 50 prisoners to provide for. Medical stores were finished, and the doctor was bandaging the wounded lying in the shuttered rooms with torn sheets from the beds in the house. Among the mortally wounded was Lieut.-Colonel H. E. Greatwood, the third commanding officer of the 3/1st Punjab Regt to give his life since the Red Eagles started upon their career of glory. Those less severely wounded went back to their posts at the loopholes in the garden walls or at the barricaded gate.

That night at 8.45 a jemadar with a British and a French officer made an attempt to reach Gentforce Headquarters with news of the desperate state of affairs in Mezze House. They crawled through a hole in the wall, scrambled across gardens and hedges of prickly pear, over walls and rooftops and streams, until at 5.30 next morning they reached Force Headquarters, their clothes in shreds, their bodies agonised by the damnable needles of the cactus, utterly exhausted.

Early on that morning of June 20th a battery of the 1st Field Regt and the French Marines were despatched to the aid of the defenders in Mezze House and reached the airport where they joined the Punjab detachments in the woods. Brigadier Lloyd who had been commanding Gentforce now resumed command of the 5th Indian Brigade and put this force under the command of Major Burke who made repeated attempts to get through, his splendid gunners advancing over the foothills and blasting their way, muzzles down, always in line with and sometimes in advance of the infantry. A Free French attack the previous night on Qadim had been an expensive failure, and on that morning of June 20th they were unable to mount the fresh attack that might have drawn off the Vichy forces from Mezze, because they were held up by three tanks. That afternoon two British anti-tank guns and an anti-aircraft gun drove off the tanks, and by nightfall the Free French had taken the Vichy positions which had been holding them. Next morning, on June 21st they captured Qadim, and by noon were in Damascus, most of the Vichy forces retreating west along the Beirut road. All very satisfactory.

But what of the defenders of Mezze House whose valour had made the capture of Damascus a not very difficult operation for others?

All through the night of June 19/20th they were being hard pressed; the tired sepoys and riflemen at the loopholes and the breaches always had to fire with careful aim because not a round of the fast-failing ammunition could be wasted. The enemy took advantage of this to get within grenade distance of the house, and one grenade burst in a tall window of the salon on the left in which a conference was being held. The morning wore on. The relieving column could be heard fighting its way up past the airfield.

Then at 1.30 p.m. the enemy brought up their 75's and began to shell the house at point blank range. A part of the roof collapsed and while the wounded were being rescued from the debris the enemy scaled the walls. They were driven back; it was for the last time. The decision was taken to ask for a truce to evacuate the wounded, for although by now ammunition was exhausted and the garrison had been without food for more than 50 hours it was hoped to delay surrender until Burke's relieving column could reach them. However, the enemy on seeing the white flag supposed that the garrison was surrendering and rushed the gate. What was left of a company of the Rajputana Rifles tried to bayonet their way out, but they were overpowered.

When Burke's column which had been reinforced by one Australian battalion recaptured Mezze at 7 p.m that evening Mezze House was empty except of the dead.

For 36 hours the enemy continued to shell Mezze from the high ground to the west, but eventually he was pushed back towards Dimas on the road to Beirut.

One question remains. Where during this brave and bitter fighting of the 5th Indian Infantry Brigade was the R.A.F.? Those men of London's ancient regiment, those men of India's senior regiment, those men of India's senior rifle regiment must have looked back to the grey heights of Keren and, remembering what Slatter's squadrons did for them there, wondered.

Chapter 10

June–July, 1941. Threat to Aleppo breaks French resistance—occupation of Syria—exchange of commands between Generals Wavell and Auchinleck—lessons drawn from Syrian campaign.

THE fall of Damascus was far from being the end of this struggle so wantonly provoked by the Vichy French. On June 21st they still held four-fifths of Syria including the ports of Beirut and Tripoli and the entire railway line north of Damascus. The thrust from Palestine was but one prong of the trident. Habforce was the prong of the second thrust at Palmyra. The third and decisive thrust was made by the Indian troops in Iraq. The 10th Indian Division commanded by Major-General Slim consisted of Weld's 21st Brigade and Mountain's 25th Brigade with the 2/8th Gurkha Rifles from the 20th Brigade. Slim's main object was to capture Aleppo and thereby threaten the rear of Vichy's forces in Beirut, which from the River Damour were holding up the advance of the Australians. Powell's 20th Brigade less 2/8th Gurkha Rifles but with the 1st Frontier Force Regt and 5th Frontier Force Rifles from Gracey's 17th Brigade of the 8th Indian Division was to capture all territory in the north-east of Syria including the railway.

The area in which these operations were to be carried out was rolling desert through which the Euphrates flowed from the north-west. The railway northward from Damascus branched at Aleppo, one branch running west to Anatolia, the other east along the Turkish frontier into Turkey, back into Syria and finally joining the Baghdad railway at Mosul. The only sea-port in this area was Latakia, of little importance even to smokers nowadays; but the oil pipeline from Haditha to Tripoli traversed this area, and that was of great importance.

The 20th Indian Brigade with the two battalions from the 17th Brigade was to operate independently of the 10th Division and was to be under H.Q. British Troops in Iraq for the period of operations.

Before the advance began Haditha was stocked with 15 days' supplies and with enough petrol for two lorry-borne infantry brigade groups, one armoured car regiment and one squadron of the R.A.F. Shortage of transport made the first forward moves difficult. There were one and a half general purposes transport companies

available. Neither H.Q. Palestine and Transjordan nor the R.A.F. in Iraq could help. The second line transport of all but one brigade in Iraq was called upon and efforts were made to hire civilian transport.

The first move forward was made from Haditha on June 27th by two companies of the 2/4th Gurkha Rifles with a squadron of the 13th Lancers, and next day Abu Kemal was captured without opposition apparently. By June 30th the rest of the 2/4th Gurkha Rifles and the 13th Lancers were concentrated there and Advanced H.Q. of the 10th Division handed over the command of the column to G.O.C. Palestine.

On July 1st the 2/10th Gurkha Rifles moved forward at dawn along the river route. The road was bad and in many places impassable off it. Vichy aircraft bombed the column, causing casualties to men and vehicles. Then a heavy dust storm slowed progress. However, by 2.30 p.m. the column was nine miles from Deir ez Zor, the chief town of east Syria, with two bridges across the Euphrates.

The advance of the 4th Frontier Force Rifles (Wilde's) progressed satisfactorily, but wireless contact was lost with the brigade commander who was with the 2/10th Gurkha Rifles, and on top of that for the same reason the whereabouts of the 13th Lancers could not be ascertained. Brigadier Weld therefore stopped the advance of the 2/10th Gurkha Rifles in order not to upset the original plan of enveloping the enemy. Contact was re-established late that night, and the 4th Frontier Force Rifles were ordered to move to Mayadin near the river because they were short of water and also the escarpment south-west of Deir ez Zor made it impossible for their vehicles to get round to the north of the town. This return to Mayadin by the Frontier Force Rifles and also the 13th Lancers used up more petrol than was safe, and the intended wide movement to bring this column round to the enemy's rear would have left it almost dry when it arrived, which if French resistance were at all tough might mean immobilisation when in contact with the enemy. The brigade commander therefore ordered the 4th Frontier Force Rifles to get astride of the Palmyra road on the flank instead of the Raqqa-Aleppo road in the rear of Deir ez Zor. This change was not approved by Slim who had gone forward to brigade headquarters on July 2nd. He decided that the risk of the petrol's running short was a better one than losing the chance of a complete surprise by holding the enemy on the Palmyra road approaches on the alert. The final plan for operations on July 3/4th was for the 2/10th Gurkha Rifles supported by all the field artillery except one troop to move direct on

Deir ez Zor during the night and be ready to attack at 9 a.m. when the enveloping movement ought to be having an effect; for the 4th Frontier Force Rifles, with one troop of artillery and the 13th Lancers (less one squadron) at 4.15 a.m. on July 4th to move wide round the enemy's southern flank, gain the Aleppo road and advance on Deir ez Zor from the north; for one squadron of the 13th Lancers to demonstrate on the plain south-west of the town; and for the 2/4th Gurkhas Rifles to be in brigade reserve.

Slim was justified in taking the risk he elected to take; it was a foretaste of that much wider and much longer sweep of 400 miles to the Irrawaddy which he would make nearly four years later when his rope uncoiled and began to strangle the Japanese in Burma.

At first the Vichy 75's firing from concrete emplacements south and west of Deir ez Zor and outranging our 18-pounders made the move forward by the 2/10th Gurkha Rifles none too easy; fortunately the enemy's fire was directed on the road instead of on the troops moving between the road and the river, so that casualties were light. Meanwhile, the flanking column left Mayadin at 4.15 a.m. on July 3rd, crossing the Palmyra road about 20 miles from Deir ez Zor. The squadron of 13th Lancers quickly drove off eight armoured cars that threatened opposition. The column reached the Aleppo road by 10.30 a.m. and its arrival from the north completely surprised the enemy, who offered no opposition until the barracks on the outskirts of the town were reached. The cars pushed on down the main street and cut off a number of vehicles trying to escape across the Euphrates bridge leading to the Souar-Hassetche road, the only escape route not covered by the encircling movement. An attempt was made by the enemy to guard the demolition of the north-east bridge, but the 4th Frontier Force Rifles rapidly cleared the houses on either side of snipers and seized the bridge intact. The 2/10th Gurkha Rifles who had worked up close to the enemy's positions by 11 a.m. saw him abandon those positions in the dismay caused by the attack from the north and pressing on joined up with the Frontier Force Rifles in the town.

Only a hundred prisoners were taken because the bulk of the Syrian troops changed into civilian clothes and either hid themselves in the town or cleared off to their villages. However, nine guns, five aircraft and 50 lorries were captured and a big haul of arms, ammunition and petrol was made.

Our troops clearing the town had to put up with a heavy attack that morning by ten Vichy bombers escorted by seven fighters, and suffered considerable casualties in men and vehicles. It was 3.30 that

afternoon before the last opposition inside the town was finished and the sappers and miners of the 9th Field Company were able to remove the demolition charges from the north-east bridge. At 6 p.m. the Vichy air force made another heavy attack, shooting down two of our long range Hurricanes and driving the rest out of the air. From that time onward the troops, transport and guns were subjected to heavy bombing and machine-gunning from the air, with which the small fighter flight with the 10th Indian Division was too weak a type of aircraft to deal, and the effect of these air attacks against which there was no means of retaliation had a bad effect on the morale of the men until suitable dispositions were obtained.

On July 5th the 2/4th Gurkha Rifles with a squadron of the 13th Lancers and a troop of the 157th Field Regt took Raqqa without opposition. Here, too, they were heavily attacked from the air, and supply columns had to move by night.

Meanwhile, the third move through the Bec du Canard province to seize the Mosul-Aleppo railway had begun. The Vichy command under pressure had started to withdraw their forces through Tel Abiad toward Djerablous on the Turkish frontier. In order to intercept this movement the 2/4th Gurkha Rifles and a squadron of the 13th Lancers were ordered to move from Raqqa to Tel Abiad, and garrison duties in Raqqa were taken over by a company of the 4th Frontier Force Rifles, but on reaching Tel Abiad they found that the enemy had already passed through. The Lancers with a platoon of the Gurkhas set out in pursuit and attacked the enemy with machine-gun fire as his rearguard was crossing the Euphrates at Djerablous. Air attacks on the troops in Tel Abiad were frequent. They were frequent, too, on the little garrison occupying Raqqa, which was also heavily shelled on July 9th. That night the garrison was attacked by a large band of Arab tribesmen with automatic weapons and a certain amount of mechanical transport. These Arabs were driven off by the armoured cars of the 13th Lancers and two bayonet charges by the Frontier Force Rifles.

The preliminary move in the Bec du Canard operation was made by the 1st Frontier Force Regt (Prince of Wales's Own).[1] From Tel Kotchek they went on to seize Tel Aalo which surrendered

[1] This was the old 51st Sikhs of the Frontier Force. They made a famous charge when fighting their way to relieve Peking with the American 14th Infantry, and the White Ensign of the Royal Navy hoisted at the British Legation was presented to the battalion by Lieutenant Roger Keyes (the future Admiral of the Fleet) R.N., whose father commanded the Punjab Frontier Force from 1870 to 1878 and who was himself born at Kohat.

after a good deal of parleying with the Vichy officers. On July 7th the 5th Frontier Force Rifles[1] with a troop of 18-pounders went on to seize Qamichliye, the garrison of which was given an hour to escape because shelling of the town besides loss of life for the inhabitants might have meant that some shells went over into Turkish territory. Large stores of arms and ammunition were found here, and a long length of railway line was taken intact.

On the same day as Vaughan's occupied Qamichliye two companies and a platoon of the 1st Frontier Force Regt moved out from Tel Kotchek to occupy Hassetche, which a fast column of one company reached by 6 p.m. in the evening of July 8th. By now the 10th Indian Division was advancing along the west bank of the Euphrates with a view to attacking Aleppo from the east, the threat to which decided General Dentz, the Vichy Commander-in-Chief, to ask for an armistice. Negotiations began on July 11th and on July 14th General Maitland Wilson, G.O.C.-in-C. Allied Forces in Palestine and Syria met the Vichy representatives at Acre where the armistice terms were signed in the barracks named to commemorate Sir Sidney Smith, who spoiled Napoleon's Eastern plans in this town once upon a time.

The Indian and British prisoners of war were sent back from France shortly afterwards, and the strategic points vital to security against a German move against Syria were occupied by the 10th Indian Division for the time being; it was maintained from Iraq, thereby putting a heavy strain on the limited transport available. The 20th Indian Brigade moved back to Baghdad to guard the Kirkuk-Haifa pipe line and the oilfields.

Meanwhile, on July 5th General Sir Claude Auchinleck succeeded General Sir Archibald Wavell as Commander-in-Chief, Middle East Forces, and General Wavell became Commander-in-Chief, India on July 11th.

On July 17th the headquarters of the 8th Indian Division with the 5th Royal Mahratta Light Infantry[2] arrived in Basra. The Divisional General was Major-General C. O. Harvey.[3]

[1] The 5th Frontier Force Rifles was originally the 58th (Vaughan's) Rifles. Vaughan's went to France in 1914 and was later with Allenby in Palestine.

[2] The 5th Royal Battalion was the old 117th Mahratta Regt and its officers were now all Indian. They fought grandly at Ctesiphon and were captured at Kut, having already lost over 400 men. Their splendid devotion throughout the fighting in Mesopotamia was recognised by the title 'Royal.' The 5th Mahratta Light Infantry was now in the 24th Brigade of the 6th Indian Division.

[3] Major-General Sir C. O. Harvey, C.B., C.V.O., C.B.E., M.C. (Central India Horse).

On July 26th the 18th Indian Infantry Brigade reached Basra. This consisted of the 1/2nd King Edward's Own Gurkha Rifles, the 2/3rd Queen Alexandra's Own Gurkha Rifles and the 3rd Baluch Regt (Queen Mary's Own).[1]

The operations of the 10th Indian Division were brief, and the total casualties, more than half of them from air attacks, hardly amounted to a hundred. Nevertheless, they are important because they taught some valuable lessons and they were handled with such skill and courage by Major-General W. J. Slim that they seemed a good deal easier than they really were. A lesser man with his first divisional command might have played for safety first in the circumstances. 'The chief lesson from these operations' he wrote in his report, 'was the tactical advantage that can be gained from the full and bold use of a completely motorised force. To gain this advantage movement must be bold and risks must be accepted.' When Slim insisted that the 13th Lancers and Wilde's should make that wide sweep at the extreme range of their petrol to attack Deir ez Zor from the north he made a decision that undoubtedly shortened the Syrian campaign perhaps by weeks. If he had listened to the voice of caution he would merely have sent them down the Palmyra road on a flank. Resistance would have been tough and the attack on Deir ez

[1] The 2nd Gurkha Rifles were the old Sirmoor Rifles raised at Nahun as long ago as 1815. Their military history was as glorious as it was long. Perhaps the most famous feat was when with the Guides Infantry and the 60th they held the main piquet at Hindu Rao's house throughout the Siege of Delhi under constant fire for three months in the course of which they withstood 26 attacks. When later they became a rifle regiment according to custom they had to give up the carrying of colours. However, Queen Victoria, determined that they should have something to record a great military feat, devised a truncheon to be carried instead of the colours. This bronze emblem six feet high was surmounted by three Gurkha soldiers supporting a silver crown. On this all recruits swore their allegiance. The 2nd Bn was in France in 1914, and the 1st Bn fought in Mesopotamia and later until 1921 was on the coast of the Caspian Sea to keep the Bolsheviks out of Persia.

The 2nd Bn of the 3rd Gurkha Rifles was not raised until 1891. It fought in France in the First World War when during the Battle of Loos Rifleman Kalbir Thapa was the first Gurkha to win the V.C. The 3rd Gurkha Rifles wore the black facings of the Rifle Brigade. At Neuve Chapelle Rifleman Gane Gurung, having got ahead of the rest of the battalion in an attack, captured eight large German prisoners and marched them back towards the advancing British line. A battalion of the Rifle Brigade delighted by the spectacle cheered the little man as it moved forward into action, which may be the only time such an incident has occurred.

The 3rd Baluch Regt was formerly the 127th Queen Mary's Own Baluch Light Infantry. It was one of the three Indian infantry units which helped to storm Magdala in 1867 and it was again in East Africa during the First World War. Baluchis were no longer recruited by the time of the Second World War and the regiment consisted of Punjabi Mussalmans, Pathans and Dogras.

Zor from the south might well have failed completely in view of the Vichy superiority in the air. As it was he captured all but two of the enemy's guns, and most of his ammunition and transport. Moreover, he was able to inspire the spirit of taking risks in his garrison commanders. That little column of the 13th Lancers with a platoon of the 2/4th Gurkha Rifles which covered 200 miles from Deir ez Zor to drive the enemy across the Euphrates and Djerablous was the last straw which broke his back and, with the vision of Aleppo lost, made him ask for terms.

The failure of the R.A.F. to provide more than a few fighters which were either shot down or unable to operate against aircraft at once more numerous and more modern was less serious than it might have been because the Vichy French foolishly concentrated their air attacks upon the forward troops. If they had concentrated upon the even more vulnerable administrative organisation in the rear there might have been a different story to tell about that campaign in north-east Syria.

It is an ungracious task for the military chronicler to cast reflections upon the R.A.F., but the fact remains that the R.A.F. did accept responsibility in Iraq, in Burma and most gravely of all in Malaya which it was unable to sustain. We forget the muddles and maladministration in the Crimea and remember the Charge of the Light Brigade at Balaclava. Our future as a nation demands that the Air Ministry should not build its reputation on heroic feats in the air but more solidly upon a co-operation with the service too often called upon in the Second World War to imperil the military situation by trying to defend aerodromes occupying indefensible sites and by counting on help from the air which in the hour of need was wanting.

'It is unfair and unwise,' wrote Slim, 'to push forward mechanised columns without adequate air support. Extreme dispersion (200 yards between vehicles) was forced on units by the scale of air attack. This rendered protection against ground attack as was shown in the night affair at Raqqa most difficult. Dispersion was in fact overdone. Dispersion in a unit area need not be more than 100 yards between vehicles, but it is advisable when tactically possible to have 500 to 1,000 yards between unit areas. If closer, an attack on one unit has an adverse moral effect on its neighbours.'

Slim went on to stress the importance of giving every armoured car an anti-tank weapon. It was not enough to have one anti-tank rifle to a section. The 13th Lancers were operating with wretchedly armed Chevrolets the engines of which were five years old and the

bodies twenty, and they were always singled out for low-flying attack whereas the Harmon Harrington cars of the Royal Dragoons, each carrying a Vickers gun on an anti-aircraft mounting were avoided. The comparatively superior equipment of the British Army, though by no means perfect, was always evident to the weapon-starved Indian Army.

Most of the R.I.A.S.C. and the I.A.O.C. drivers in the campaign were unarmed.

'These men,' wrote Slim, 'had to drive their vehicles for hundreds of miles through desert infested with Arabs on the look out for loot. Many instances occurred of hold ups and sniping. These men should be armed and trained to use their arms. The difficulty was met, with considerable success, by arming them with captured French rifles.'

The problem of transport was continuously acute. Spares were lacking. Wireless sets broke down and there was no margin for replacement. There were no aircraft for communication. Fortunately a number of tyres of the right size were captured in Deir ez Zor: otherwise the armoured cars would have been immobilised.

We may recall the Prime Minister's surprise a year earlier that a ceaseless stream of Indian reinforcements for Egypt was not flowing across the desert route by Karachi, and in recalling it we may wonder what in the military circumstances of the time would have happened to them.

In Vol. III of *The Second World War* Mr Churchill allots barely three pages to the Syrian Campaign of June and July 1941, in the course of which he attributes the fall of Damascus to the Australians after three days of severe fighting, says not a word about Mezze House or Slim's brilliant handling of the Aleppo thrust, and finally awards the credit for saving the Middle East to 'our authorities in London and Cairo.' One is tempted to say with the Duke of Wellington, if you can believe that you can believe anything.

Chapter 11

August–October, 1941. Situation in Persia—Anglo-Soviet decision to occupy country—seizure of Abadan refinery—capture of Kermanshah—abdication of Riza Shah—disposition of occupation forces.

HITLER'S attack on the Soviets dissipated the Indian High Command's recurrent nightmare over many years of Russians on the North-West Frontier, but it made the German menace to the Middle East even more possible as a decisive strategic stroke to influence the whole course of the war. The situation had been saved in Iraq chiefly, it can be asserted, owing to the obstinacy with which the Viceroy and Auchinleck had refused to be diverted from the urgent necessity of establishing Basra as a base. If that had not been done when it was by one of the superlative achievements of administrative units history can record, not merely would Iraq have been exploited by the enemy, but it may be doubted whether Syria could have been saved in time. The signature of that ten years' Treaty of Friendship between Germany and Turkey four days before Hitler turned on Russia was a clear indication of what the Nazi plan was. Those three words of Euripides *Ἄρης στυγεῖ μέλλοντας The God of War abhors procrastinators* were uncomfortably nearer to providing yet another example of their truth in April 1941, and it was Linlithgow and Auchinleck who won a grim smile of approval from Ares.

However, beyond Iraq was Persia, and with at best a flaccid Turkey the German threat to Persian and to Russian oil was grave enough. It was estimated that nearly 3,000 Germans were already in Persia that July. Technicians and commercial agents held key positions in railways, ports, factories, posts, telegraphs and railway stations. They controlled stores of arms, ammunition and explosives; and they had just been reinforced by a huge German mission from Ankara. The atmosphere of Persia was evident from the fact that Rashid Ali and several of his supporters had taken sanctuary in Tehran when they fled from Baghdad. His Majesty's Government pointed out to Riza Shah's Government what an unfavourable impression was being created by this infiltration and asked for the great majority of the Germans to be removed. The Persian Government made excuses, and was obviously playing for time. No doubt Hitler's invasion of Russia followed by that German sweep down

through the Ukraine toward the Caucasus had strengthened the German hold over the Persian imagination. It was clear that the only argument likely to affect the issue was force, and it seemed imperative for the Allies to show themselves as capable of energetic action as the Axis.

On July 22nd Lieut.-General Quinan was instructed by G.H.Q. India to be prepared to occupy Abadan and Naft-i-Shah, and take the oilfields in south-west Persia. Wavell had been with the Russian army in the Caucasus in 1916 and 1917. No general was better able to appreciate what was at stake now, whatever may have been his hesitation earlier over Iraq when his was the responsibility for saving Egypt.

Five days later Quinan was informed that H.M. Government had approved of the proposal to apply Anglo-Soviet diplomatic pressure, backed by a display of force, on the Persian Government. A joint note was to be presented on August 12th and he was to have his preliminary concentration of troops ready by that date. Finally the note was not delivered until August 17th; and the reply received being considered unsatisfactory, it was decided to proceed actively against Persia. On August 25th a simultaneous advance was made by Russian forces under General Novikov from the north and by British and Indian forces from the south and west.

The 8th Indian Division under Major-General Harvey consisting of the 18th Brigade and the 24th Brigade, the 25th Brigade of the 10th Indian Division, the 13th Lancers brought back from Syria, and a squadron of the Guides Cavalry operated in the province of Khuzistan. Westward in the province of Kermanshah the operations were in the hands of Brigadier J. A. Aizlewood whose column known as Hazel Force consisted of the 2nd Indian Armoured Brigade Group and the 4th British Cavalry Brigade (later renamed the 9th Armoured Brigade) which was brought from Palestine. This had been the chief component of Kingcol. With them was the 21st Indian Brigade under Slim himself who presently came from Syria to command the operation.

At the lower end of Abadan about 20 miles from where the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates known as the Shatt-el-Arab flows into the Persian Gulf stood the great oil refinery. The task of capturing it was entrusted to two battalions of Le Fleming's 24th Indian Brigade—the 2nd Rajputana Rifles (Prince of Wales's Own) and the 1st Kumaon Rifles.[1]

[1] The 2nd Rajputana Rifles, once the 120th Rajputana Infantry and before that the 20th Bombay Infantry raised in 1817, were in the Persian Expeditionary

These two battalions of the 24th Brigade embarked in naval craft after dark at the R.A.F. wharf in Basra and landed at Abadan at dawn of August 25th. Some of the boats ran aground on the way down the river with the result that the second wave of troops got ashore first. The landing was a complete surprise to the Persians, most of whom were asleep in their barracks. When wakened by the noise of the naval guns a large number of the garrison boarded lorries and escaped across the Bahamanshir Creek, but well-placed machine-gun posts along the wharves put up a strong resistance, and Lieut.-Colonel Ridley, the commander of the 2nd Rajputana Rifles, was wounded. A certain amount of indiscriminate shooting followed, in the course of which three British employees of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company were killed and several wounded. These were moving to their allotted positions in the refinery on hearing the alarm siren being blown, and some of them being in the blue uniform worn by the Company's janitors the Rajputana Rifles supposed them to be soldiers. Further along the river front where the 1st Kumaon Rifles was moving on the refinery through the fringing groves of date-palms a few more employees were wounded.

Apart from these unfortunate incidents the capture of the refinery was carried out much more quickly and with much fewer casualties than seemed probable when the troops set out. The aerodrome was soon taken, but when the column moved against the town there was a good deal of street-fighting and it was difficult to dislodge the Persian defenders without damaging the precious refinery; they were not driven out of the buildings until evening. It was then too late to clear up the town, and a cordon was formed round the refinery, the troops bivouacking for the night. Next day the whole of Abadan was cleared up. Our casualties were two British officers, one Indian officer and eight Indian other ranks killed and one British officer and 11 Indian other ranks wounded.

Force of 1856 and in the storming of Reshire Captain J. A. Wood won the first Victoria Cross ever won in an Indian unit. The standard captured that day is still preserved by the battalion. In Kut the battalion held the Woolpress village outposts through the 20 weeks of the siege, and after the surrender a new 2nd Rajputana Rifles was formed which went to South Persia. Now here they were in South Persia for the third time.

The 1st Kumaon Rifles was originally raised in 1917 as a battalion of the 39th Garhwal Rifles. Then they became the 1/50th Kumaon Rifles. In September 1918 with the 2nd Guides Infantry they carried three lines of Turkish trenches at Sharon and the Kumaoni made such an impression as a fighter that the battalion was retained after the war and for a year was one of the Jat Regiment, finally becoming a component of the Hyderabad Regiment but not numbered with them, and remaining Rifles.

While Abadan was being rescued the 5th Royal Bn Mahratta Light Infantry, of the 24th Brigade, temporarily attached to Lockner's 18th Indian Brigade advanced from Tanuma in a motorised column and by making a wide sweep across the desert north of the water and tank traps descended on Khorramshahr from the rear at dawn of August 25th at the same moment as the 1/2nd Gurkha Rifles came in from the west. The timing was perfect, and the Mahrattas with great dash captured the important wireless station at the bayonet's point. There was no resistance in the town, the main defences being west of it at Pul-i-Nao to which the Mahrattas now turned their attention. Just as they advanced to the attack the Gurkhas suddenly appeared in the rear of the Persians who at once fled or surrendered. About 500 prisoners and a considerable amount of equipment were taken. Some delay to the process of clearing up in this area was caused by a large number of Arabs who joined in the fighting from the palm-groves on the western outskirts of Khorramshahr, drawn there by the scent of loot. The 2/3rd Gurkha Rifles killed about 30 of them and captured twice as many more.

On August 26th sappers of the 9th Field Company made a ferry at Murid on the Karun about 10 miles from where that river flows into the Shatt-el-Arab. A ferry craft consisting of four flat-topped barges lashed together was improvised and sailed down the Shatt and up the Karun to Murid over which after the 2/3rd Gurkha Rifles had established a bridgehead the 18th Brigade with a troop-carrying motor transport company finished the crossing by the afternoon of August 27th and advanced to concentrate at Doroqain with a view to helping in the capture of the important town of Ahwaz, which is the key to the railway running north and south and a large airfield. Ahwaz is about 75 miles north-east of Basra. Qasr Sheikh west of the Karun some 30 miles north of Khorramshahr was believed to be held in force by Persian troops, and the task of capturing this high ground was given to Mountain's 25th Brigade. Intelligence about the likely opposition was vague beyond rumours of medium tanks and strong artillery; topographical information was unobtainable. Topography has too often been as weak a point with British soldiers as geography with British politicians.

On August 25th the 25th Indian Brigade advanced on Qasr Sheikh. A motorised column with the 2nd Royal Sikh Regt was to attack Qasr Sheikh from the north and an armoured column with the 13th Lancers from the south. After the operation started it was discovered that the Persians were strongly entrenched on a line in the south, and what had been intended to be a pincer movement turned into a

rather ragged enveloping move, with the Sikhs attacking from south and west, and the Lancers after changing their course attacking from north, west and south. In the end the Lancers managed to capture the fort, and the Sikhs fighting as fiercely in attack as their forefathers fought in defence when in 1885 they held off a horde of fuzzy-wuzzies and saved the column from destruction carried the line of trenches in which 58 Persian dead were found after the action. A considerable number of prisoners was taken, and much material. One British officer and one sepoy were killed and 20 were wounded including two British officers.

Before dawn on August 28th the 25th Brigade moved forward along the west bank of the Karun, the 18th Brigade along the east bank toward Ahwaz. The 24th Brigade was drawn into divisional reserve to support the 25th Brigade in whose sector most resistance was expected. The bulk of the divisional artillery also supported the 25th Brigade. The 18th Brigade was to approach Ahwaz from the east and north-east, the 25th Brigade from the west, but on account of the bad going both brigades were late on their first objectives. However, by 8 a.m. the 18th Brigade had gained Kut Abdullah and leaving the 2/3rd Gurkha Rifles to surround it moved on across the railway towards Ahwaz. Here a Persian envoy met them with the news that the Shah had given orders for hostilities to cease. The 25th Brigade which had secured its first objective at 10.30 a.m. was preparing to move on towards Ahwaz when another envoy informed Major-General Harvey of the welcome news. General Harvey at once entered Ahwaz and was received by General Mahomed Shahbakhti, commanding the troops in Khuzistan, with a Persian guard of honour, and all was amicable.

While Abadan and Ahwaz were being secured other operations in the southern sector were successfully carried through. On the morning of August 25th a company of the 3rd Baluch Regt was landed from six Valentines at Haft-i-Khel about a hundred miles from the coast of the Persian Gulf, to protect the oil-fields there and escort the British and Indian women and children from the main fields at Masjid-i-Suleiman to safety there. Three of the Valentines tried to land at the same moment, but although two of them crashed there were fortunately no casualties. Moreover, the situation was completely tranquil and there was no need to move the women and children.

On August 10th the 3rd Baluch Regt had arrived at Basra from India. On the very next day two companies under the command of Major W. E. Maxwell were transferred to the Armed Merchant

Cruiser H.M.A.S. *Kanimbla* which cruised about the Persian Gulf for a fortnight until in the early hours of August 25th it approached Bandar Shahpur and landed one company of the Baluchis who after slight opposition had secured the harbour by the time the second company landed. Bandar Shahpur was of high strategic importance, being the southern terminus of the recently constructed Trans-Iranian railway which ran up to Tehran and ultimately to Russia by way of Ahwaz. Seven out of eight of the German and Italian ships in the harbour were saved from the destructive intentions of their crews who had started fires in some of them and beached others. Only one ship was successfully scuttled. About 60 Germans and 40 Italians were made prisoners. Two small Persian gunboats which had offered some resistance were also boarded, and the day was brought to a genial conclusion by a dinner on board one of His Majesty's ships at which the Persian naval commander was the guest of honour.

So much for the operations which cleared the head of the Persian Gulf and secured the precious oilfields of the south-west. However, the operation which really decided the immediate future of Persia was that based on Khanaqin 300 miles north.

Khanaqin lies just over 100 miles to the north-east of Baghdad and is the last village of the Iraq lowlands. Eastward rise the mountains of Luristan through which the road to Tehran over 400 miles away winds over the Pai Tak Pass. The Persian troops in the Pai Tak area were reported to have been heavily reinforced. The column operating in this area was Brigadier Aizlewood's Haze Force which consisted of the 2nd Indian Armoured Brigade (les two regiments), the 9th British Armoured Brigade (all in trucks an no armour), the 1/5th Royal Gurkha Rifles (Frontier Force)[1] an the 2/7th Gurkha Rifles.

On the eve of launching the operation from Khanaqin Major General Slim arrived from Syria to take over command. Lieut. General Quinan gave him the 2/4th Gurkha Rifles and 4th Frontie

[1] The 1/5th Royal Gurkha Rifles was the third battalion of Gracey's 17th Brigade with a renowned past going back to the Hazara Goorkha Battalion into which in 1858 the 25th Punjab Infantry was turned by transferring hillmen from irregular units of the Frontier Force. As the 5th Gurkha Regt they fought side by side with the Seaforth Highlanders under Roberts in the Kurram Valley and when that great little general was raised to the peerage he chose for the supporters of his coat of arms a Seaforth Highlander and a 5th Gurkha. Years later the 1/5th was at Gallipoli where it fought second to none and when the peninsula was evacuated an officer and 25 men of the 1/5th were the last to stand upon that immortal strip of beach under the tawny cliffs of Anzac.

Force Rifles from the 21st Brigade with the 157th Field Regt to supplement Hazel Force.

Slim approved Aizlewood's plan to capture Naft-i-Shah and its oilfields and then to advance toward Shahbad by the motorable track through Gilan, which lay some 30 miles south of the Pai Tak Pass, with the object of turning the heavily defended Pai Tak position. This Slim prepared to attack with the 21st Brigade Group.

The Naft-i-Shah oilfield was secured against slight opposition in the early hours of August 25th. Qasr-i-Shirim five miles west of the Pass was isolated at dawn by the 14/20th Hussars after a formidable night march, and during the morning it was captured by the column of the 21st Brigade advancing from the south. By 3.30 that afternoon this column had reached Sari-Pul-Zunab five miles west of the entrance to the Pass.

The Pai Tak position, reported to be held by 5,000 troops with artillery, was bombed by R.A.F. Blenheims on the evening of the next day and the approaches were reconnoitred by the 21st Brigade. The welcome co-operation of the R.A.F. was effective. That night the enemy abandoned the Pass and on the morning of August 27th the 21st Brigade advanced without opposition as far as Karind where patrols of the 9th Armoured Brigade established contact with them. These belonged to the column which had captured Naft-i-Shah and after being held up at Gilan by anti-tank obstacles for a while had pressed on to reach Shahabad at the south-east end of the Pai Tak Pass on the Kermanshah road. No doubt this rapid skilful move through Gilan was responsible for the Persian abandonment of the Pai Tak position.

Reconnaissance from Shahabad showed that the enemy was holding the high ground overlooking the village of Zabiri on the road to Kermanshah which was covered by a Persian corps of two well equipped divisions and a cavalry brigade. On the morning of August 28th the enemy was accurately shelling the road west from Zabiri. The assault on their position was timed for 10 a.m., but just before zero hour a Persian officer arrived with a white flag to ask for a truce.

Quinan reached Zabiri while Slim was discussing terms and approved the conditions he had offered. At the same time he instructed him to advance and occupy the town of Kermanshah in order to reach the oil refinery. This was occupied by a detachment on August 29th and next day the rest of the 2nd and 9th Armoured Brigades entered Kermanshah, the Persian commander protesting.

During these operations in Persia the British and Indian casualties

all ranks from August 25th to August 28th were 20 killed and 50 wounded. Such figures are out of all proportion to the influence those operations exerted upon the course of the war, and it is sobering even to speculate what might have happened if India had not despatched those ill-equipped, incompletely trained brigades one after another through that critical summer to Basra. One division was the suggested contribution that India should make to warfare outside India itself just before the Second World War engulfed humanity. When on August 17th 1941 the 19th Indian Infantry Brigade reached Basra the total number of Indian troops in Syria, Iraq and Persia was brought up to seven infantry brigades of three battalions each, one armoured brigade and one machine-gun battalion. There were two divisions in the Near East—the 4th and the 5th. There were two divisions in Malaya—the 9th and the 11th. Seven times the number of divisions asked for in 1939 within two years were outside India. That was a vigorous kick for a cataleptic patient.

General Wavell in his despatch dated September 5th 1941 wrote:

> The Middle East Command owes a deep debt of gratitude to India. During the period of nearly two years while I was Commander-in-Chief, Middle East, I never made any request for men or material that was not instantly met if it was within India's resources to do so.

On August 29th Major-General Slim was ordered to despatch to Hamadan a force under Brigadier Aizlewood consisting of the 14/20th Hussars and the 1/5th Royal Gurkha Rifles for a friendly meeting with the Russians who in two mechanised columns had entered Persia and joined up somewhere near Hamadan. Their advance, rapid and practically unopposed, had covered 200 miles in four days and was now threatening Tehran. A report was received that the Russian troops were advancing on Kermanshah from the direction of Senna and on Hamadan from Kazvin. So detachments were sent along both roads. The Russians were met at Senna at 11.45 p.m. on the night of August 30th and just south of Kazvin on the afternoon of August 31st. The Commander-in-Chief arrived in Baghdad that day from India and confirmed General Quinan's plan for the regrouping of his forces in Persia. The shortage of transport made it impossible to establish any British formation beyond Hamadan, and it was decided to hold Khuzistan with headquarters at Ahwaz, to station troops along the lines of communication to Khanaqin, and to withdraw to Iraq all troops not required in Persia.

The country for which we were making ourselves responsible for order included Persian Kurdistan where the Kurds, having secured some arms and ammunition from Persian deserters, decided that the British invasion was a good opportunity to declare their national aspirations and encourage the Kurds in Iraq and Turkey to do likewise. The Persians hoped that the British would assume responsibility for the Kurdish rebellion: the British preoccupied with the task of getting rid of the Germans in the Middle East refused to be dragged into the business and left it to the Persians. However, finally, active patrolling had to be resumed to give moral support to the Persian commander in Kermanshah, while at the same time remaining on friendly terms with the Kurds.

In Tehran itself matters were by no means satisfactory. The new Prime Minister Farouki produced a policy which was all right on paper, but it remained to be seen if it was to be sincerely implemented. It was agreed that the German Minister and his staff should leave Tehran and that the German, Italian, Hungarian and Rumanian Legations should be closed; it was further agreed that all Germans still at liberty should be handed over to the British and Soviet authorities. The Legations were closed, but the Germans were not handed over. On September 10th a British Note was presented demanding their surrender within 48 hours. Twenty-four hours after the ultimatum expired two trains left Tehran to hand over a third of the Germans known to be in Persia.

At last after some shilly-shally it was decided by the War Office that a joint advance by British and Soviet troops should be made on Tehran as soon as the Russian commander could make his arrangements. Brigadier Boucher,[1] the B.G.S., flew to Tabriz to confer with the Russian commander who agreed that a simultaneous entry into Tehran should be made on September 17th, which was carried out. A day before this entry Riza Shah abdicated and left the capital. The Majliss then met and elected the Crown Prince Mohammed Riza Pahlevi to the vacant throne. Riza Shah was sent to Mauritius by the British Government. It was believed that the ex-Mufti of Jerusalem managed to escape to Rome after hiding in the Japanese Legation. German agents were at work for a long time, but they were gradually eliminated, and by October 17th it was considered safe to withdraw from Tehran after a joint parade by British and Soviet troops.

On the whole the attitude of the population in southern and western Persia was not unfriendly to our troops; but economic

[1] Major-General C. H. Boucher, C.B., C.B.E., D.S.O.

conditions were difficult and had been before the arrival of British and Russian forces, because the Persian Government had exported large quantities of wheat to Germany besides tea, coffee, cocoa and sugar all of which had been supplied to Persia by the British Empire. India came to the rescue by sending 60,000 tons of wheat. Rioting for food was frequent, and general insecurity was rife, but the German menace had been dispelled.

On September 11th the headquarters of the 6th Indian Division commanded by Major-General Thomson[1] reached Basra with the 27th Indian Infantry Brigade consisting of the 1st Baluch Regt and the 5th Frontier Force Regt with ancillary troops, and on October 10th the 26th Indian Infantry Brigade arrived. This consisted of the 1st Hyderabad Regt, the 1/1st King George V's Own Gurkha Rifles (The Malaun Regt) and the 1/9th Gurkha Rifles.[2] The 6th Indian Division which was completed by transferring to it the 24th Indian Infantry Brigade was ordered to relieve the 8th and 10th Divisions in southern and western Persia. The arrival on August 17th of the 19th Indian Infantry Brigade commanded by Brigadier C. W. W. Ford had brought the 8th Indian Division up to its three brigades. It consisted of the 1/1st Punjab Regt, the 3/8th

[1] Major-General J. N. Thomson, C.B., D.S.O., M.C.

[2] The 1st Bn of the Baluch Regt (Duchess of Connaught's Own) was raised in 1820 as the 2nd (Marine) Bn of the 12th Bombay Infantry, and was immediately sent to serve in the Persian Gulf for three years. Later it became the 122nd Baluchis, serving in Persia and Kurdistan during the First World War.

The 5th Frontier Force Regt (Queen Victoria's Own Corps of Guides) had maintained the past glories of the Frontier Force as recently as September 1935 when in a desperate hand to hand fight with hordes of Mohmands all the British officers and most of the Indian officers were either killed or wounded and Captain Geoffrey Meynell the adjutant won the Victoria Cross. This was during the Loe-Agra operations.

The 1st Hyderabad Regt was a survival of the Nizam's contingent which helped the British against the redoubtable Tippu Sultan of Mysore. The contingent was not disbanded until 1902. During the First World War the 1st Hyderabad Regt held detached garrisons in the Persian Gulf for some time and later on played a good part in the Arab and Kurd risings in Mesopotamia in 1918.

The 1/1st King George's Own Gurkha Rifles was originally one of the two first Gurkha battalions raised after Ochterlony took the surrender of Amar Singh and his fortress of Malaun in 1815. They were known as the 1st and 2nd Nasiri Gurkha Bns. They were the first Gurkhas to serve overseas, being sent to the Malay States in 1875.

The 1/9th Gurkha Rifles dated back to the Manipuri Levy in 1823. Later in 1893 they were selected for one of the new single class regiments and were recruited entirely from Khas Gurkhas. The Khas Gurkhas are not of Mongol stock and seem to be Aryan of Rajput origin. T[illegible] went to France with the Dehra Dun Brigade in October 1914.

Punjab Regt and the 2/6th Gurkha Rifles.[1] The 8th Division went to Kirkuk with an eye on the German threat to the Caucasus. The 10th concentrated at Habbaniya for training. The 5th Indian Division which had been brought to Kirkuk returned to Mideast Command, relieving the 50th British Division in Cyprus.

Advantage will be taken in due course to say a few words about these battalions of the 6th Indian Division which were left in Iraq and Persia for the rest of the war, where if destiny had so ruled they might have been called upon to fight as desperate campaigns as any. Destiny ruled otherwise, but we shall return later to the thankless task which the 6th Indian Division did accomplish.

It is now convenient to leave the Middle East itself for some months and return to Middle East Command in the Near East.

[1] The 1st Bn of the 1st Punjab Regt was first in precedence of the Indian Army units, but it should always be remembered that these senior battalions owed their seniority to having been converted in 1903 into Punjabis from those wonderful Madrassi regiments who fought at Seringapatam and Assaye and in many battles when Britain was struggling with France for supremacy in India. So the 2nd Madras Infantry became the 62nd Punjabis which inherited its honours and its antiquity. In the First World War the 62nd was for a while guarding the Canal and an occasion when a detachment charged a body of Turks who had crossed is believed to be the last when British infantry officers used their drawn swords as weapons of offence. Later the 62nd Punjabis in Mesopotamia cordoned the Persian frontier.

The 3rd Bn of the 8th Punjab Regt was descended from one of the old Madras regiments; then it became the 31st Burma Light Infantry and in 1903 the 91st Punjabis. The 3/8th fought with distinction in Mesopotamia and Palestine during the First World War.

The 2/6th Gurkha Rifles succeeded the 65th Carnatic Light Infantry when that regiment was disbanded in 1862, but did not take over the old Madrassi regiment's honours. During the First World War the 2/6th Gurkhas after some time in Mesopotamia went to Salonica, and after that they were on the Black Sea, in Armenia and the Caucasus.

Chapter 12

June, 1941. Plan to forestall Rommel's threat to Tobruk—the battle of Sollum—first appearance of 88 mm. gun—abortive attack on Halfaya Pass—forces disengaged.

WE parted with the 4th Indian Division, many pages back when they were summoned from the great victory of Keren in April 1941 to play their part again in the Western Desert. Immediate reinforcements were so necessary to the situation created by Rommel's Afrika Korps that the Red Eagles now commanded by the dashing Messervy, their late commander Beresford-Peirse being promoted to command XIII Corps in the Western Desert, were given no time to preen their wings in a Cairo rest-camp; they were sent on through the Delta at once, and by the end of April the 4th Indian Division was for the second time concentrated round Baqqush where the defended position they had dug six months ago had to be renovated. In May Lloyd's 5th Brigade went off to Syria; the tale of its tragic glory has been told.

Early in June Wavell decided to anticipate Rommel's attack on Tobruk by trying to destroy his forces east of it, aiming at delaying him while his own supplies and armaments were being built up.

General Wavell wrote in his despatch:

> 10th June was the earliest possible date by which a sufficient force was available to take the offensive with any chance of success, but the Commander of the 7th Armoured Division, Major-General Sir Michael O'Moore Creagh, asked for at least five days to enable his crews to fire their guns and obtain some working knowledge of the new machines they were to take into action, as well as to allow staffs and commanders, many of whom were new since the division had last been a formation, to settle down and become acquainted with each other. I therefore decided to attack on 15th June.
>
> The length of my line of communications, 120 miles from Matruh to the Egyptian frontier across waterless desert, limited the size of the force it was possible to employ.
>
> The course of operations on or near the Egyptian frontier was largely conditioned by the escarpment which runs south-east from Sollum.

A description of the escarpment which cannot be bettered is here included:[1]

> In Eastern Cyrenaica the plateau drops to sea level at the coast itself, and continues to do so until the tiny fishing village of Sollum is reached. From there the escarpment, marking the edge of the plateau, sweeps inland, first south and then south-east until it dies away in broken ground round the old Roman cistern at Sofafi. Between the escarpment and the shore is an undulating area, a veritable hell of dust when the 'Khamseen' wind blows, and reduced to quagmire when rain falls. There are but few passes for vehicles up to the plateau from the plain, the main ones being at Sollum, Halfaya and Halfway House. When Sofafi is reached the scarp becomes less steep and there are numerous places where lorries can make their way to the top.
>
> This escarpment is steep bare rock, but the rim of the plateau is not like the edge of a cliff. Many gullies cut their way inland so that the top of the ridge weaves in and out endlessly. From below the whole presents the appearance of a steep, rugged range of hills, all of which are the same height. On the plateau the ground is comparatively smooth, rolling slightly and very gently. It is passable to vehicles everywhere until, about one hundred miles away to the south, the ground drops steeply again to the Siwa Depression.

The estimated enemy forces in the forward area Bardia-Capuzzo-Sollum were 5,700 Germans with 100 medium tanks, 50 armoured cars, 20 field guns and 70 anti-tank guns, and 7,500 Italians with about 50 guns and 20 anti-tank guns. In the Tobruk-El Adem area there were 11,000 Germans with 120 medium tanks, 70 light tanks, 36 field guns and 80 anti-tank guns, and 16,000 Italians with 120 field guns, 32 anti-tank guns and a few tanks.

The force Wavell had to deal with this formidable opposition was considerably inferior in every branch and in his own words 'the pace and radius of the two armoured brigades was so widely different that it would obviously be extremely difficult.' The air forces to support his attack had not been available for preparatory air action and the reconnaissance of the enemy positions had been 'scanty and disappointing' owing to shortness of equipment and what equipment there was being faulty. The infantry was Savory's 11th Indian Brigade (Briggs' 7th Brigade was immobilised at Baqqush because its vehicles had been distributed to other formations) and the 22nd Guards Brigade under the command of the 4th Indian Division.

The two infantry brigades and the two armoured brigades were

[1] *The Tiger Kills*, p. 12.

divided into two. One column consisting of the 11th Indian Brigade and the Central India Horse with one field regiment and one field company was to move along the coast and capture the Halfaya Pass. The other column was to operate above the escarpment and cut the enemy's communications. This consisted of the Guards Brigade and the I tanks of the 4th Armoured Brigade with the cruiser tanks of the 7th Armoured Brigade to protect its left flank.

Savory's 11th Brigade with the veterans of Keren, the 2nd Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders, 1st Rajputana Rifles (Wellesley's) and 2nd Mahratta Light Infantry, and the 25th Field Regt R.A. and 4th Field Company, Bengal Sappers and Miners, marched all the 130 miles from Mersa Matruh. By the night of June 13th the brigade was in position across the road 15 miles east of the Halfaya Pass; but the Camerons were on top of the escarpment near Sofafi with a squadron of I tanks of the 4th Royal Tank Regt.

In the late afternoon of June 14th the left column set out westward into the night and enemy country, the Guards supported by the 7th Royal Tank Regt being in action round Capuzzo all next day and finally capturing it. The Camerons with the squadron of I tanks and the carrier platoons of the 7th Indian Brigade moved forward on the right flank and soon after dawn of June 15th were near the head of the pass. They then came under heavy fire from the German 88 mm. dual purpose gun, of the existence of which this was the first demonstration, and a deadly demonstration it was. Of the 12 tanks 11 were destroyed in a few minutes. The Camerons undismayed charged forward in an attempt to carry the top of the pass with the bayonet. One company led by Captain Hugo Haig had reached the road when it was overrun by a squadron of enemy tanks. The remaining companies managed to slip over the edge of the escarpment where the tanks could not reach them and there they clung on, watching Wellesley's and the Mahrattas making their way forward over the gullies and ridges below. The two battalions were under heavy fire from the top of the escarpment, but they pressed on. Sepoy Babu Desai, an 18-year-old Mahratta, when his company was held up ran across the open with his Bren gun under heavy fire and bringing it into action from the flank enabled them to move on again. Babu Desai himself was wounded in the leg, but that did not prevent his killing the marksman who had wounded him before he was forcibly laid on a stretcher and sent back to the regimental aid post. Sivaji ka jai! That young Mahratta had learnt to be a man on the old parade-ground in Belgaum where the bare ground is red as the earth of Drake's Devon.

Valour was not enough. Wellesley's and the Mahrattas were baffled by the commanding positions the enemy held on the escarpment. The six I tanks ran on an uncharted minefield at the foot of the pass and four of them were knocked out 500 yards from the enemy. The Bengal Sappers and Miners went forward and under fire removed the mines, enabling the tanks to be rescued in the dark.

In the small hours of that night the Scots Guards stormed into Musaid and at dawn pressed on in lorries to the heights above Sollum which they captured with a bag of over 200 prisoners. However, the enemy was bringing up about a hundred tanks, half of them heavy Mark III and Mark IV types, and it was clear that trouble was on the way unless the 11th Brigade could force the Halfaya Pass before the enemy could capture the passes down the escarpment east of Halfaya and thus cut off the lines of retreat.

So on the morning of June 16th the 11th Brigade tried again, the three battalions making desperate efforts to move forward but finding every approach covered by heavy and accurate enemy fire. At dusk the guns of the 25th Field Regt concentrated on two knolls that commanded the head of the pass.

The Rajputana Rifles managed to cross the spur to the edge of the Wadi Halfaya, but came under fierce fire from the other side of the gully. Their commanding officer, Lieut.-Colonel P. R. H. Skrine was killed and over 40 of his brave riflemen with him. Yet they pressed on for another 500 yards before they were held with only another 500 yards before them to the head of the pass. Down below the Mahrattas reached the bottom of the wadi, but there they too were held by the enemy fire. The 11th Brigade spent that night on the cliffs of the gully waiting to win the head of the pass on the morrow. The stars were against the Red Eagles in that June. Away over in Syria the Royal Fusiliers that very day had been forced to surrender at Quneitra, and the rest of the 5th Brigade was on the brink of the Mezze disaster.

On the evening of June 16th the enemy tanks trying to outflank our forces to the south forced the cruiser tanks of the 7th Armoured Brigade to withdraw from the Sidi Omar to the Sidi Suleiman area; only 20 cruiser tanks were still runners. That night General O'Creagh asked General Messervy to relieve the 4th Armoured Brigade which was covering the flank of the Guards Brigade still in position at Capuzzo and Musaid. The plan was for a joint attack on the enemy column from Sidi Omar by the 4th Armoured Brigade from the south and the 7th Armoured Brigade from the north. The former could not get under way before daylight, and when it began to

move enemy tanks advanced in force against the left flank and rear of the Guards Brigade. Finally Messervy had to tell O'Creagh that the brigade's position could not be held without the support of the 4th Armoured Brigade. Wavell who was at Beresford-Peirse's headquarters in Sidi Barrani on June 16th flew up to the headquarters of the 7th Armoured Division next morning, but before he arrived Messervy had ordered the Guards to withdraw along the top of the escarpment. This decision was approved by the Commander-in-Chief and the withdrawal to Sofafi was effected in good order, with the loss of 25 cruiser tanks and 70 I tanks.

Throughout that day Savory's 11th Brigade hung on at Halfaya. They did reach the top of the escarpment, but were blasted back by the enemy's concentrated gunfire which included some big fortress guns brought from the Mareth Line. Orders came late in the afternoon to withdraw that night. About 8 p.m. lorried infantry of the enemy began to work down the escarpment in the rear in order to cut off the 11th Brigade's retreat, but they were dispersed by a battery of the 25th Field Regt. Armoured cars moving about the ridges and shooting down the gullies harassed the flank and rear of the Camerons and Wellesley's, and to this was added the threat of penetration by enemy infantry. The withdrawal began at 9.10 p.m. and the two battalions made their way down the gullies to the coastal lowland. Havildar Sardara Ram's section stayed to the last as rearguard. The whole of the equipment was brought back safely and even the heavy gear was carried by hand for seven miles at the end of four days without rest. At the bottom of the pass the retreat of the Mahrattas was also being severely harassed. One company was almost surrounded, but Subadar Pandurang Chawan led them out across a minefield where the enemy's fire was weaker.

The carriers of the Camerons could not get down the escarpment with the battalion, but Lieut. A. G. Cameron steered them back through hostile tanks and armoured cars to reach Baqqush in safety. The rest of the 11th Brigade set out to march along the road to Buq Buq, but before it was reached lorries came to gather up the weary troops and take them back to Baqqush.

After the battle of Sollum a piper of the Camerons composed a march in memory of Colonel Skrine of Wellesley's. It was called *With Wellesley's Rifles at Keren*. In all the world only Indian pipers can play like Scottish pipers, and whatever the future may hold one may hope that in India and Pakistan the music of the North will still sound over dusty old parade-grounds in memory of so many Highlanders and Indians who through a century and a half fought

and fell side by side to maintain a tradition of martial fellowship unique in the history of mankind.

In spite of the fact that Rommel was prepared for our attack and able to concentrate the whole of his armour in the forward area unknown to the British Command for lack of air reconnaissance owing to the scarcity of trained pilots, Sollum was for him a Pyrrhic victory. He was unable either to make any attempt to capture Tobruk or any move against the Egyptian frontier. Spellbound by German grand slams when they hold all the cards, we are inclined to forget how well British soldiers play bad hands. The battle of Sollum was not one of the major actions of the war, but it added a little more glory to the glory of the Guards and to the glory of the 4th Indian Division.

> The morale of the troops remained high and they had always well justified confidence that with anything like material equality, they were more than a match for any German troops.

Thus wrote Wavell in his last despatch as Commander-in-Chief, Middle East after conducting six major campaigns between February 7th and July 14th 1941, never less than three at one time and during the month of May five. Wavell was something more than a grea general: he was also a moral force.

Chapter 13

November, 1941. Government pressure for offensive in Cyrenaica—General Auchinleck mounts 'Crusader'—disposition of forces round Tobruk—relative strengths in men and armour.

INDIA was represented in the siege of Tobruk by the 18th King Edward's Own Cavalry[1] which broke out from Mechili when Vaughan's 3rd Indian Motor Brigade was overwhelmed by superior enemy forces on April 8th 1941 and was sent as divisional cavalry to the 9th Australian Division under Major-General L. J. Morshead for the defence of the valuable port. At 11 p.m. on April 10th the Tobruk Defence Force was ordered to withdraw within the perimeter and the regiment became part of the divisional reserve troops. On the following evening the exits were closed and mined, and the siege began.

On April 19th the regiment took over a part of the western perimeter stretching from a mile north of the Derna road to the sea which they held unrelieved until they were evacuated on August 28th. For the rest of that April and throughout May the enemy air force raided Tobruk about 10 times a day and shelling steadily increased. Not much damage from either was sustained on the regiment's front. On April 22nd the troops of A Squadron went out some three miles west to cover a daylight raid by the 2/23rd Australian Regt who were holding the sector of the perimeter on the left of what they called 18 Cav. In the course of this which resulted in a bag of 730 Italian prisoners the Viceroy commissioned officers noticed that the Australian officers went out armed with a walking stick and a

[1] The 18th Cavalry were formed in 1921 by amalgamating the 6th King Edward's Own Cavalry, the 7th Hariana Lancers, and a squadron from the 32nd Lancers at the regimental centre of Risalpur. The 6th were part of the 2nd Indian Cavalry Brigade in France during the First World War and fought at La Bassée, the Somme and Cambrai. The 7th were the heroes of a desperate charge at Shaiba in April 1915 when Major G. C. H. Wheeler was killed in leading them against the Turkish position, for which a posthumous Victoria Cross was awarded.

At Tobruk the regiment consisted of a headquarters squadron and three squadrons drawn from different classes, a squadron of Jats who were agricultural caste Hindus from the Punjab, B Squadron of Khaim Khanis who were Muslims from Jaipur State and C Squadron of Rajputs who were warrior caste Hindus from Jodhpur State.

tommy-gun. This set a fashion and thereafter it became a regimental custom of King Edward's Own.

It is beyond the space available to narrate in detail the exploits of the 18th Cavalry during their months in Tobruk. There were raids by them and counter-raids by the enemy. There were dive-bombing attacks by Stukas. There were many gallant deeds by the men of every squadron.

On January 10th the regiment was reinforced by five officers and 73 other ranks of a commando who formed a fourth squadron. With this commando mostly made up of guardsmen came their naval liaison officer Temporary Commander Cowan, R.N. aged 70. This was Admiral Sir Walter Cowan, Bt., K.C.B., D.S.O., M.V.O., R.N. who retired from active service in 1931. He received his D.S.O. for service on the Nile in 1898: he received a bar to that D.S.O. for service with the commando forces not far from 50 years later. He had commanded the First Light Cruiser Squadron of the Atlantic Fleet: now he commanded the hearts of four cavalry squadrons. To his annoyance he was not allowed by Lieut.-Colonel Fowler to accompany raiding parties, but he was always up in the line with a complete disregard of shells or bombs or bullets. Later the 18th Cavalry made him their Honorary Colonel.

On August 26th the regiment was relieved by a unit of Polish cavalry who took over its sector of the perimeter. On August 27th three of His Majesty's destroyers took the 18th King Edward's Own Cavalry to Alexandria, enemy aircraft bombing them farewell as they left the harbour.

The Australian Division was warmly appreciative of its association with the Indian Cavalry Regt. It was treated in every respect as a unit of the Australian Expeditionary Force and received the comforts from the Australian War Societies on an equal basis with the rest of Australia's battalions in the forward line.

Brigadier Tovell[1] of the 26th Australian Brigade wrote to Lieut.-Colonel Fowler:

> 18 Cav (as you are affectionately known) quietly stepped into position at my right side when, to say the least of it, things were a bit sticky. In the one position, without a relief, you have remained for months solidly in the line and at the same time unceasingly harassing the enemy by night and day. The courage, initiative, and skill displayed by your troops have been a source of admiration and viewed in retrospect cannot fail to be an inspiration to my troops. . . .

[1] Brigadier R. W. Tovell, C.B.E., D.S.O.

It is my hope and wish that during the present campaign we may be once more associated, but if this is not realised, then, on behalf of all under my command I congratulate you and your regiment on past achievements on behalf of all in 26 Australian Infantry Brigade.

Major-General L. J. Morshead[1] commanding Tobruk Fortress wrote:

The regiment held a long and responsible line effectively and confidently; its patrolling and raiding were of a very high order; it was imbued with the fighting spirit and was always dependable. Altogether a splendid regiment and I hope we shall serve together again.

These are heart-warming tributes from veterans; Anzac demands a high standard, and bouquets of wattle are not handed out lightly.

During the lull, if the feverish battle to build up supplies against time can be called a lull, Briggs' 7th Indian Infantry Brigade moved out into the Libyan desert to garrison Siwa and Jarabub. The oases of Siwa, Jarabub and Jalo form a great scalene triangle of which Jarabub is the north-westerly apex about 60 miles from Siwa from which Jalo lies over 240 miles due west. Siwa and Jarabub are the western portion of the Great Qatara depression the existence of which would one day fortify the flank of the El Alamein position. The oasis of Siwa was once the seat of the oracle of the ram-horned Jupiter Ammon whom Hercules and Alexander and such brave men as these consulted. The oasis of Jarabub contains a little Senussi university and the tomb of Mohammed Bir Senussi, founder of the sect which gave us so much trouble in the First World War and the Italians in the Second.

The fort of Jarabub was held by a garrison of a thousand Italian and some Libyan troops when Wavell launched that dazzling campaign in December 1940. The garrison was cut off and it was captured without much difficulty by an Australian force on March 21st 1941. Jalo remained in enemy hands. The Germans and Italians made no attempt to recapture the oases after their successful counter-offensive, but soon after the 4th Sikh Regt entered into possession of Fort Jarabub it was bombed by the Regia Aeronautica and suffered more than 30 casualties. There were many raids after this from a low level, but none was successful after the first, although the shrine of Mohammed Bir Senussi was damaged. The inhabitants

[1] Lieut.-General Sir Leslie Morshead, K.C.B., K.B.E., C.M.G., D.S.O.

of the oasis had all been removed and the Muslim sepoys in the battalion looked after the shrine in their absence.

These oases like all others were plagued by myriads of flies. The water which refreshed their groves of date palms was less attractive to humanity. They were not remembered with affection, and when in October the 7th Indian Brigade was relieved by the 29th Brigade of the 5th Indian Division commanded by Brigadier Denys Reid brought over from Cyprus to which the rest of the Ball of Fire Division had been summoned back from the oilfields of Kirkuk, the Red Eagles flapped their wings with pleasure.

The adventures of the 29th Brigade will be told in due course. Meanwhile, we must turn for a while to the general situation in North Africa, to the inheritance of which General Sir Claude Auchinleck had succeeded General Sir Archibald Wavell in July. The need of taking the offensive in Cyrenaica was considered in the United Kingdom urgent. The rapid German advance in Russia suggested that the road to the Caucasus would soon be open, and that by the spring of 1942 the enemy might be in a position to cow Turkey and strike at Iraq and Persia from the north. That being so it seemed imperative to dispose of the menace to Egypt before trying to meet the menace from the north and north-east.

This was the argument that Wavell had used in the spring; at that date Auchinleck had committed himself to the opinion that the loss of Egypt would be less grave to the future of the British Empire ultimately than the threatened loss of Iraq with the loss of Persia as a corollary. Wavell had fully recognised that danger, but faced as he was with the immediacy of the German threat on his western front, in the Balkans, and possibly in Syria he was not prepared to imperil the situation by weakening his position in North Africa, already too much weakened by the loss of men and material diverted to Greece. He was compelled to gamble on the inability of the Germans to launch a major offensive through Anatolia into Iraq for some time to come. Fortunately India was able to assume a considerable responsibility and fortunately Hitler was obsessed by his planned invasion of Russia.

Now Auchinleck was faced with the immediate Axis threat to Egypt and he in turn was compelled to gamble. Iraq and Persia were now Wavell's responsibility; but Auchinleck had to take the risk of denuding Syria, Palestine and Cyprus of transport and aircraft in order to equip the Eighth Army which was born after he came back to Africa from his talks in August with the Prime Minister, the War Cabinet and the Defence Committee in London. He accepted

the possibility of launching by November 1st an offensive designed to occupy the whole of Libya and if fortune was kind to drive the enemy out of Tripolitania. At the same time he insisted that the date of such an offensive must depend on the arrival of the troops and equipment he considered necessary for the success of such an offensive. In the end the date of the offensive was postponed until November 15th because the 22nd Armoured Brigade did not reach Egypt until October 14th, a month after it was expected. A further three days' postponement was caused by the late arrival of the vehicles of the 1st South African Division and therefore their lack of training in the mobile part planned for them in the operation. In the end the offensive was launched with one and a half armoured divisions and one brigade of I tanks, although Auchinleck's original estimate for the armoured forces required had been three armoured divisions. Moreover, the armoured forces available were not all fully trained for desert warfare. It will be borne in mind that these reinforcements arrived after a 12,000 miles voyage round the Cape. When British cricket teams visit Australia they are given a certain amount of practice against less powerful teams before their first test match.

'We were working to very close margins as regards equipment and training,' Auchinleck wrote in his despatch, 'The same conditions applied to the building up of supplies and the construction of pipe-lines and railways. The essential preparations were barely complete when the campaign was launched, and the standard of training of many of the troops engaged left much to be desired. This was due to no fault of their own, but solely to lack of time and shortage of equipment.'

For some time before the start of the offensive the Axis forces in Libya had been concentrated in north-east Cyrenaica for an attempt to settle once and for all with Tobruk. There were the 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions, the 90th German Light Division, five Italian infantry divisions, two Italian motorised divisions and one Italian armoured division. The whole of this army except the 60th Sabrata Division had been brought across the Mediterranean between March and May when the Royal Navy was occupied in the Aegean. After May the Navy and the R.A.F. destroyed at least a third of their supply cargoes. The fact that Rommel could not stage an offensive after the battle of Sollum before November showed how steadily and how thoroughly the destructive work had been done.

When the British offensive known as *Crusader* started, four Italian infantry divisions were concentrated round the perimeter of Tobruk,

and Rommel's general reserve, the Ariete Armoured Division and the Trieste Motorised Division were on the upper plateau of the desert. His best troops and most of his armour were in the forward areas. It was a temptation to make a direct bid for Benghazi and simultaneously seize the enemy's chief supply port and cut his land reinforcement route from Tripoli; but Auchinleck rejected the temptation because he did not think he possessed enough land and air forces to be safely divided and because the maintenance problem seemed insoluble.

The Eighth Army commanded by General Sir Alan Cunningham[1] was organised for the offensive in two corps. XIII Corps under Lieut.-General Godwin-Austen[2] included the 4th Indian Division, the 2nd New Zealand Division and the 1st Army Tank Brigade. XXX Corps under Lieut.-General Norrie[3] included the 7th Armoured Division, the 4th Armoured Brigade, the 1st South African Division and the 22nd Guards Brigade. XXX Corps' task was to seek out and destroy the enemy's armour. That accomplished the Tobruk garrison, consisting now of the 70th British Division, the 32nd Armoured Brigade and the Polish Brigade, was to sally out and in conjunction with XXX Corps to secure the ridges of Sidi Rezegh and El Duda, which would cut the enemy's communications with the west. Simultaneously XIII Corps, whose first task was to prevent the enemy garrisons in Bardia and Halfaya and other frontier positions from moving east or south, was to move north and cut them off from the west, part of XIII Corps then moving west to help XXX Corps.

For the first three days things went well, after the offensive started at dawn of November 18th, although not nearly so well as it was supposed they were going after the first reports 'had grossly exaggerated enemy tank losses' in the words of General Auchinleck. The Prime Minister naturally elated by the news from Africa told the House of Commons on November 20th that 'all ranks of the British and Empire troops involved were animated by a long pent-up and ardent desire to engage the enemy whom they were now meeting for the first time at least equally well armed and equipped.'[4]

This encouraging but terminologically not quite exact news was broadcast to the nation and the depressing reports following all too quickly undoubtedly lowered public morale which was to receive

[1] General Sir Alan Cunningham, K.C.B., D.S.O., M.C.
[2] General Sir A. R. Godwin-Austen, K.C.S.I., C.B., O.B.E. M.C.
[3] Lieut.-General Sir Willoughby Norrie, K.C.M.G., C.B., D.S.O., M.C.
[4] *Annual Register* 1941.

blow after blow for another year and therefore turned for consolation to the comparative success of the Russian resistance to the Germans, with a corresponding effect on political opinion.

Was the Eighth Army as well armed and equipped as the enemy? The answer is 'No.' The armoured brigades had between them 455 tanks, of which 165 were of the light Stuart type soon to be classed not as a tank but as a reconnaissance vehicle: the other tanks were mostly Crusaders. Besides these the 1st Army Tank Brigade with XIII Corps had 120 Valentines and Matildas, and the 32nd Army Tank Brigade had 90 of these in Tobruk. One of Wavell's problems had been the combination of Cruisers and I tanks in manoeuvre. 'The Cruiser tanks had a speed of 15–20 miles an hour and a radius of action of 80–100 miles, whereas the I tanks had a radius of action of only 40 miles and a speed of no more than about five miles an hour in action,' he had written in his despatch.[1]

Against the 665 tanks of all types at the service of the Eighth Army the Axis had 505; but half of these were German Mark III's and Mark IV's both much superior in armament, armour and mechanical trustworthiness to any British tanks at that date, none of which had a gun heavier than the 2-pounder, whereas the powerful German tanks had nothing lighter than a 4½-pounder and in the Mark IV's a 14-pounder.

In other words the claim that the Eighth Army was as well armed and equipped as its opponents was to claim that a superior number of light cruisers is equal in potency to an inferior number of battleships, which was a sanguine computation for a former First Lord of the Admiralty to reach.

Add to this the lack of transport for the infantry which was numerically inferior to the enemy's, the lack of anti-tank guns capable of knocking out the enemy's tanks, whereas the enemy had his deadly 88 mms., and finally the lack of training from which many of the British and Imperial units suffered. In the air the enemy were slightly inferior, but the disadvantage as the battle progressed was offset by lack of landing grounds and aviation spirit in the forward areas.

A measure of ill-luck entered into the final decision about the day to launch the offensive. Rommel was planning to attack Tobruk on November 23rd and had this date been chosen the enemy would have been caught at a disadvantage. Auchinleck had, indeed, considered the postponement of his date, but the almost continuous pressure from home to get going was always at the back of his mind

[1] Despatch of General Sir Archibald Wavell.

and without any knowledge of the imminence of Rommel's attack on Tobruk he could not gamble on an operation which might be weeks away. Rommel was equally surprised by our offensive, but it is permissible to doubt whether we gained anything from that surprise. The fact that for 48 hours he believed it was only a reconnaissance in force gave him time to consider his tactics for a full scale armoured battle. The ground occupied by us in that first night advance of 90 miles to Gabr Saleh was not vital to him, and his counter-stroke was deliberately and skilfully planned.

However, it is beyond the scope of this book to relate all the details of those anxious days except so far as they affected the 4th Indian Division to which we must now turn.

Chapter 14

November–December, 1941. Rôle of 4th Indian Division in the offensive —battle for the Omars—heavy losses at El Gubi—the fight at Alem Hamza—pursuit of the enemy.

ON that morning of November 18th when after a night of heavy rain the advance was begun under a strong fighter cover, Briggs' 7th Brigade of the 4th Indian Division was in the forward area with the Central India Horse and Messervy's Divisional Headquarters. Russell's 5th Brigade was on lines of communication duty being short of vehicles. The 1st Royal Fusiliers had been left behind in Syria and its place was appropriately taken by the 1st Buffs (East Kent Regt), which like its predecessor enjoys the privilege of marching through the City of London with drums beating and colours flying, dating back as it does to a regiment raised in 1572 by the London Guilds to help the Dutch revolt against Spain. The 11th Brigade, also without troop-carrying transport, was near the coast watching Halfaya which it had so nearly succeeded in capturing the previous June. Its present rôle was to deceive the enemy into expecting an offensive along the coastal plain. Brigadier Savory had gone back to India to command the 23rd Indian Division now being raised and had been succeeded by Brigadier A. Anderson, D.S.O., M.C.

The task set to the 7th Brigade was the capture of the Omar defences on two humps of the desert about a couple of miles apart by the frontier wire 15 miles south of Capuzzo. Libyan Omar was on the west, Omar Nuovo on the east; five miles north-east of the latter was Cova, another strong position, and these were succeeded by others in a north-easterly direction as far as the fortress of Halfaya. Six miles due north of Omar Nuovo was Bir Ghirba, another defended locality. The Omar defences were held by the 55th Savoia Division with a cement of Germans. At this point it may be stressed that the strength of the German cement was much more in its officers and N.C.O.'s than in the other ranks. The rank and file of German infantry in Cyrenaica were not noticeably superior to the Italians.

The object of reducing the Omar defences was to deny Rommel a base for operations across the rear of the Eighth Army.

The optimistic reports of the offensive's opening success seemed to General Cunningham justification to give the signal for the Tobruk garrison to break out and for XIII Corps to begin operations.

At noon on November 22nd the 1st and 25th Field Regts concentrated on Omar Nuovo while smoke shells were dropped on Libyan Omar to obscure the vision of the enemy's artillery. Then the armoured carriers of the Royal Sussex followed by two squadrons of I tanks of the 42nd Royal Tank Regt and the 1st Bn of the Royal Sussex Regt in lorries went forward to attack Omar Nuovo from the north, Bir Ghirba being masked by part of the 5th New Zealand Brigade and Cova by the 4th Sikh Regt. The enemy had laid a new minefield since yesterday. Four tanks and three carriers were blown up, and the attack seemed halted; but Lieut. D. W. Gaylard who was leading the carriers reorganised his force and charged through the minefield on to the first line of trenches followed by the tanks and infantry. Resistance on Omar Nuovo began to collapse, and at 3.15 p.m. Briggs ordered the 4/16th Punjab Regt to attack Libyan Omar. These were the old Bo Beeps, heroes of Neuve Chapelle and Festubert. The battalion passed through Omar Nuovo in its lorries with tanks in front of them and fired at by posts not yet mopped up. They went through the minefield in single file on the western perimeter. Then they extended to cross the 4,000 yards between them and Libyan Omar. The leading squadron of tanks was stopped by a battery of 88 mm. guns 800 yards from the objective, several being knocked out. The second squadron turned aside and made for an already reconnoitred gap in a minefield; unfortunately the enemy had closed it with the result that four tanks and three carriers were destroyed. There were only five tanks in action when the 4/16th jumped from the lorries and went forward through the heavy machine-gun fire to reach the first line of trenches, which they attacked with the Italian hand-grenade captured in such quantities last winter. Subadar Ghulam Rasul led his company half a mile into the enemy's position on the south. The Punjabis had penetrated 200 yards on the north. 500 prisoners had been taken, but when darkness came three tanks were in action, and nothing more could be done that night except to consolidate the ground won.

While the battle for the Omars had been proceeding the 4th Sikh Regt was occupying the attention of the enemy in Cova. Two platoons under Captain Mohammed Siddiq M.C. started off to capture an observation post under the impression that the sight of their bayonets would cause the small Italian garrison to surrender. The garrison had other ideas, and 200 yards from the post the Sikhs

were held up by mortars and machine-guns, and the guns in Cova. There was also a minefield round the post.

Captain Mohammed Siddiq decided that it was better to be killed fighting than on the ground. So with two havildars and a naik he rallied his two platoons and then the four of them sprang up and charged across the fire-swept ground followed by their men to capture the post. Naik Chanan Singh after disabling two heavy machine-guns was killed by a third.

So far the Royal Sussex and the 4/16th Punjab Regt had taken between them over 1,500 prisoners. At 4 p.m. on November 23rd the latter tried again to clear the enemy from the rest of Libyan Omar. They made good progress at first and captured over 1,000 prisoners; but resistance hardened and the position was found to be more extensive than it had been supposed and night fell with the Bo Peeps holding about a third of Libyan Omar. Their casualties had been heavy. General Messervy decided that reinforcements would be required to deal with the Omar defences and called for the 5th Indian Brigade. The brigade was attached to the 1st South African Division and was scattered on the lines of communication. Brigadier 'Pasha' Russell received other orders at the time the call came from Messervy, but he naturally wanted to be with the Red Eagles and started off with the 3/1st Punjab Regt leaving orders for Outram's and the Buffs to follow as soon as they could be mustered.

On that gloomy evening of November 23rd the general situation was bad. The break out from Tobruk was stuck; the New Zealand Division was held up; Sidi Rezegh and Bir el Hamed were lost; the 5th South African Brigade had been overrun; the 4th Armoured Brigade was disorganised; the 21st Panzer Division had linked up with the Ariète Armoured Division south-east of Tobruk and was well placed to destroy the forward troops of the Eighth Army as Rommel directed. General Auchinleck and Air Chief Marshal Tedder flew to confer with General Cunningham at his advanced headquarters near Maddalena.

The commander of the Eighth Army was naturally worried about the tactical situation and expressed his opinion that a continuation of attack might find us presently without any serviceable tanks at all in which event Egypt would be in peril. He considered that the operation should be abandoned and all the troops engaged withdrawn for re-grouping. Auchinleck agreed that the enemy had managed to secure the tactical initiative, but he insisted that the strategic initiative was still ours and that the enemy's tactical

advantage need only be temporary. Whatever the risks, the offensive must go on because an admission of defeat would have disastrous repercussion all over the East.

The moral courage Auchinleck displayed on that gloomy November night has hardly been appreciated. Moreover, next day the worst that Cunningham had feared seemed likely when news came that Rommel had already pushed his armoured divisions eastward to the frontier and beyond; Cunningham's anxiety for his communications already sharp became sharper. Auchinleck went back to Cairo to take a decision which to a man of whom ruthlessness was not a characteristic must have been agony. That decision was, in his own words, that 'in so critical a situation, he could not retain in the field a commander in whose ability to carry out his intentions he had not complete confidence.' Accordingly on November 25th he ordered his Deputy Chief of Staff Major-General N. M. Ritchie[1] to take over command of the Eighth Army next day. In his despatch General Auchinleck records:

> Throughout this critical time and indeed at all times, until he went to England in March to take up a command, I received the greatest possible help and support from my Chief of General Staff, Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Smith.[2]

In time to come General Sir Arthur Smith was to be Deputy Commander-in-Chief, India in the year 1947 and to be the last commander of British forces in India and Pakistan.

Rommel's attempt to cut the supply columns of XXX Corps depended for its ultimate success on his ability to hold the frontier defences in which the 11th Indian Brigade had already made a big hole. It looked as if the Red Eagles would presently be called upon to perform against panzers the same kind of desperate resistance as the annals of many Indian regiments record being made against overwhelming odds on their own North-West Frontier.

November 24th was an unpleasant day for the 11th Brigade. The first indication advanced divisional headquarters at Bir Sheferzen received that the situation in XXX Corps was grim was the arrival during the morning of survivors of the 5th South African Brigade—South African Irish, Transvaal Scottish and the Botha Regt—which had been destroyed by over a hundred tanks. During the afternoon intercepts of reports from armoured car patrols of XXX Corps indicated that some enemy tanks were near the frontier and that a

[1] General Sir Neil Ritchie, K.C.B., K.B.E., D.S.O., M.C.
[2] Lieut.-General Sir Arthur Smith, K.C.B., K.B.E., D.S.O., M.C.

large enemy column 30 miles away was approaching from the west. Trucks and lorries of XXX Corps in increasing quantity passed through eastward. Then headquarters XXX Corps arrived to say that all their soft-skinned vehicles were being withdrawn. The confusion was increased by the appearance of a considerable number of R.A.F. fighters flying low and machine-gunning the unlucky transport. Divisional H.Q. was not touched thanks to its identification strips, but vehicles close to it suffered casualties, and the briefing of those pilots must have lacked common sense.

The second line vehicles of the 7th Brigade waiting south of the Omars did not make off as they might well have in the confusion. They remained all day, harboured at night in close formation, and in the morning brought in the water and the food to the fighting men. German tanks were prowling round them in the dark like man-eaters; but they suspected a trap and made no attempt to try conclusions with the B Echelon vehicles which were armed with nothing more powerful than one anti-tank rifle of doubtful efficacy.

When darkness fell that night the flares of leaguer[1] signals showed how close the enemy was to advanced divisional headquarters and how near it was to being surrounded. Soon after 10 p.m. that night it was decided that headquarters should seek the comparative security of Omar Nuovo and the move through the leaguers was carried out 'almost on tip-toe.' So near was the enemy that one column overran the dressing-station of the 17th Indian Field Ambulance which remained in enemy hands until next morning when British patrols arrived in strength and the guards made off.

At sunrise on November 25th the 4th Sikh Regt and the 1st Field Regt with a column of New Zealand transport were near Qineiqina some four miles south of Cova, which was still in enemy hands. An armoured car brought news that 25 panzers were approaching from the south. There had been no time to dig gun pits and the only cover was slit trenches which had been prepared against air attack when the regiment moved into action north-east of Bir el Hurush. At 8.40 a.m. 28 Mark III and Mark IV tanks were observed 3,000 yards away advancing from the south. At 2,000 yards' range they began to fire, concentrating chiefly on the 52nd Field Battery which was holding the east flank of the regiment's position and advancing in lines of four and five with 30 yards between tanks and 70 yards between lines.

[1] 'Leaguer' will be used for the enemy's vehicles in formation for the night; 'harbour' will be used for our own. Both terms were used by our armoured units, 'leaguer' more often in Africa, 'harbour' in Burma.

The gunners held their fire until the tanks were within 800 yards. Then the 52nd Battery and a troop of the 11th Battery opened fire. At 500 yards the tanks halted and for 10 minutes tanks and guns shot it out until the tanks moved west 400 yards, where from a hull-down position they continued the fight for another 10 minutes when they attacked the 52nd Battery head on, getting to within 300 yards of the guns. Then the Germans withdrew, pursued by two troops of the 2nd South African Anti-Tank Regt which had arrived on the scene.

Eighteen devoted gunners were killed; 44 were wounded. Out of 73 all ranks the 52nd Field Battery suffered 42 casualties. They destroyed seven panzers and damaged four more of which the South Africans knocked out one. Five guns were put out of action, but these were soon repaired. Unless the 1st Field Regt had made this gallant defence the 4th Sikhs and the New Zealand transport must have been overrun.

The records of The Royal Regiment of Artillery are too bright with deeds of valour to want a writer's praise, but Red Eagles, scattered now, will wish to salute their 1st Field Regt.

That afternoon another column of panzers, 28 strong, approached Omar Nuovo from the north-east over mine-fields laid by the enemy himself. This time it was the turn of the 25th Field Regt to show what British gunners could do. Five tanks were destroyed, and then the others circling the area to make west came under fire from all the artillery in the Omars, six more being destroyed before the remainder, many of them badly damaged, escaped southwards out of range. Later that day 12 tanks, possibly the survivors of the attack on the 1st Field Regt, attempted to get into Libyan Omar. Subadar Ghulam Rasul M.C. directed the artillery fire and the attack was halted. Farther east Major R. B. Scott with a small mobile column of Outram's destroyed a tank. That evening the Bengal Sappers and Miners of the 4th Field Company went out and finished off all the derelict panzers.

During that day the Germans lost 20 tanks, and many others were badly damaged.

The early morning of November 26th started unpropitiously with a raid by R.A.F. Albacores on both Omars which lasted for an hour and a half. It did not do much damage, but the troops did not enjoy shivering with cold in slit trenches and did not appreciate the air communiqué which reported 'a successful attack on some 2,000 motor-transport.' However, later on news reached divisional headquarters of a large and genuine collection of enemy motor

transport west of the frontier line and the R.A.F. was asked for bombing action. It was prompt and effective.

On November 27th the 4/16th Punjab Regt with a company of the 4th Sikh Regt made a dawn attack on the part of Libyan Omar still holding out, but it was unsuccessful. Later the welcome news came that the New Zealand Division had completed their advance on Sidi Rezegh and joined up with the Tobruk garrison, thus making a corridor between Sidi Rezegh and Belhamed. It is fair to claim that this gallant effort by the New Zealanders coupled with the denial to the enemy of the Omar area by the 4th Indian Division were the chief contributions to the failure of Rommel's counter-stroke and his decision to recall his armoured forces west.

On November 30th an attempt was made to finish off the enemy still holding out in Libyan Omar; the 3/1st Punjab Regt of the 5th Brigade were brought up to attack the position before dawn while the Bo Peeps occupied the enemy's attention on the other side. The 3/1st at this date lacked training and leaders with experience: the Syrian campaign had cost them heavily. Fire was opened prematurely and the enemy was able to direct a deadly fire on the approaches. The commanders of the two leading companies were killed and there was much confusion in the darkness. At dawn the attack stopped. Subadar Fatteh Singh walked about in the open, trying to get his company formed. He was twice wounded, but he continued his efforts until he was shot to pieces. During the day the 4/16th Punjab Regt fought steadily on, being helped by three tanks and carriers in the afternoon. Many brave deeds were done, and by dark there remained only a hundred Germans still holding out. Next morning these remnants had gone, but armoured cars were sent after them and they were all captured.

A German officer called Schön who had been ordered by Rommel to hold the position to the last man and the last round was responsible for the stout resistance of Libyan Omar. He stuck at nothing, shooting the Italians if he suspected they were wavering and using them as a screen for the movements of his Germans.

The capture of Libyan Omar cost the 4/16th Punjab Regt 215 casualties in eight days. The 3/1st Punjab Regt lost 105 men in the one day, and the casualties of the 4th Sikh Regt were 36. However, the whole of the garrison of Libyan Omar was killed or taken prisoner, and that was very nearly 3,000.

Auchinleck wrote in his despatch that the enemy's counter-stroke 'might have succeeded had the 4th Indian Division shown less determination and the mobile columns less offensive spirit, or had

the Royal Air Force not bombed the enemy's principal concentrations so relentlessly.'

One of those mobile columns commanded by Colonel Goulder and consisting of the Central India Horse, a battery of the 31st Field Regt and a troop of the 65th Anti-tank Regt gave a good example of that offensive spirit. On December 3rd the Central India Horse was spread out in a wide screen across the Trigh Capuzzo about 12 miles west of Sidi Azeiz when an armoured car patrol was sighted two miles ahead by one squadron. The C.I.H. sent its only armoured car forward to find out if this was an enemy patrol. It was. The C.I.H. car came back quicker than it went, and eight tanks appeared over the rise and opened fire. Colonel Goulder signalled the trucks of the C.I.H. to lure the tanks on to his guns. So off went the trucks with the tanks rumbling after them and behind the tanks over a couple of hundred lorries, no doubt with infantry and guns. After being chased for nearly 12 miles the Central India Horse came over a rise to see the guns in position just beyond. They hurried to the flanks on either side to give the battery of the 31st a clear field and when the enemy tanks appeared over the skyline the 25-pounders let go and knocked out four of them. The others turned and made off. Then the guns were directed on the lorries, many of which were damaged. The German infantry started to attack, but they could not face it and soon the whole force was in retreat.

Farther north two other squadrons of the Central India Horse lured a number of tanks and lorries on to the guns of the 5th New Zealand Brigade with satisfactory damage to the enemy.

The next day, December 4th, a column of 20 German tanks manoeuvred about all day round Goulder's force, but they would not close with the guns and at dusk they retired. That abortive engagement was the last contact on the frontier with the enemy in any force. At dawn of that December 4th Rommel launched a great assault on the Tobruk salient from every side. Things went hardly for the 32nd Army Tanks Brigade, which lost most of its few remaining tanks. The enemy made deep penetrations into the salient and counter-attacks by our troops did not succeed in capturing all the ground lost. And then just when they were preparing for attempts that night to regain the lost ground it was found that the enemy had gone, the 25th Bologna Division making a disorderly retreat from the eastern sector of the siege lines all through the night. The Germans attached to the division and many of the Italian officers got away in vehicles, leaving the rank and file to walk. Many of them preferred to give themselves up.

Rommel's tactics now were to keep the fighting in the open desert south of Tobruk and pivot his manoeuvre on El Adem and El Gubi, the latter of which was on Trigh el Abd, a desert track of immense antiquity, about 40 miles south of Tobruk. Anderson's 11th Indian Brigade had been put under command of the 7th Armoured Division and given this objective to clear. The position had not been reconnoitred and the air photographs taken of it were a failure.

The orders for the attack on El Gubi next day were received on the afternoon of December 3rd and the brigade was called upon to make a night march of 47 miles in order to approach its objective from the west.

Captain Robertson, a Cameron Highlander and the brigade intelligence officer, was given the task of navigating the brigade across difficult unreconnoitred country on that cold winter's night, and he was allowed three-quarters of an hour's daylight in which to make all his arrangements. The march was accomplished in six hours and included a complete circuit of El Gubi. If the Camerons had had a Captain Robertson to lead them on that night march before Culloden the end of the story might have been different.

There were reported to be two strong points facing the brigade—Point 174, believed to be weakly held, and Point 182; 10 minutes after a bombardment by the artillery the 2nd Camerons with three Valentine tanks advanced against Point 174 on the right and the 2nd Mahratta Light Infantry with nine tanks advanced against Point 182 on the left. As events turned out Point 182 was the weaker, and the Mahrattas were able to drive up to within a few yards of the position before they left the lorries and went in with the bayonet. 250 Italians were captured and a petrol dump of 50,000 gallons.

Meanwhile, the Camerons had encountered very strong opposition from the supposedly weak Point 174. They had had to leave the lorries on the start line and fight their way forward on foot against machine-guns; the front and flanks casualties were very heavy and the Camerons were held. One of the companies of the Mahrattas tried to get across to help them, but Captain Palande was killed at the head of his men and the mortar and machine-gun fire immobilised the gallant effort.

The Highlanders and the Mahrattas made another attempt that afternoon, but they were finally stopped 400 yards from the enemy position. Casualties were again heavy, and it was decided to attack next day at dawn. If strong resistance was met a green Verey light was to be fired and the attackers were to retire. At 6 a.m. of Decem-

ber 5th a company of Camerons and a company of Mahrattas set out, but the opposition proved as strong as ever and the companies were withdrawn. One of the Mahratta platoons did not see the signal and pushed on to within a couple of hundred yards of a machine-gun post six strong. A runner was sent to recall the platoon, but Naik Samullah Khan and his section were too near the enemy for the runner to reach them, and they charged into the enemy post, captured it, and held it.

Half an hour after noon two companies of Wellesley's with the right company of the Camerons helping attacked the position from the south, preceded by an artillery smoke screen and four Valentines. The tanks could not deal with the defences, and another company of Wellesley's went in further round the flank, but the enemy's fire was too hot for progress. Lieut.-Colonel A. G. Butler was killed by a mortar-bomb, the second commanding officer of the 1st Rajputana Rifles to give his life in the desert.

During this costly fighting a huge dump of ammunition, petrol, oil and food was found six miles away to the north-west, and the 12th Field Company of Madras Sappers and Miners with some Royal Engineers of the 7th Armoured Division set about its destruction—a formidable task, the stores being scattered over a large area. While the work was in progress enemy tanks refuelled, the sappers withdrawing temporarily and returning to go on with their laborious destruction, the effect of which contributed a great deal to the result of that first long battle between Rommel and Auchinleck and was certainly a major influence upon Rommel's decision to withdraw to the west.

At 4 p.m. that day 25 tanks from the 15th Panzer Division with a large force of lorried infantry appeared on the Mahrattas' front and as dusk fell overran two companies, a troop of British anti-tank gunners and a platoon of the brigade anti-tank company having all but one of their guns knocked out. The two companies in their slit trenches fought as Mahrattas knew how. In the dying light Subadar Laxuman Chawan, the commander of C Company, could be seen moving from post to post exhorting his men and Jemadar Govind Desai leading all that was left of his platoon in a last charge. For a while the noise of battle was heard in the dark. Then silence fell. The two companies by their devoted resistance had saved the rest of that battalion which had marched into Khartoum, just after Italy declared war, two months before any other as heralds of help to come from India.

Nobody in the 11th Brigade slept that night. The sound of

panzers was all round them, and the leaguer flares were bright. The Mahrattas were isolated, but the telephone wire was cut only once and then it was mended by an Indian signaller within 50 yards of two German tanks. One panzer column passed within 600 yards of brigade headquarters, another within 200 yards of Wellesley's. The B Echelon vehicles were sent south during the night. Just before dawn the surviving Mahratta companies and the Madras Sappers made their way through the German leaguers and followed in lorries. Then the Camerons moved, Wellesley's being left to cover the withdrawal.

At 7.30 a.m. on December 6th panzers with lorried infantry advanced against the battalion. The riflemen were ordered to retire and get into the lorries. The tanks roared forward, their guns firing. The Royal Army Service Corps drivers were as cool as if they were on the North Circular Road, driving forward to pick up the Indian infantry, the last of them swinging round to safety when the tanks were not 600 yards away.

With two panzer columns converging on them from both flanks the 11th Brigade moved south. Shells were bursting among the British and Indian transport, but the damage was trifling. At about 10.30 a.m. the brigade passed through the screen of the Guards Brigade about six miles south of El Gubi and had disengaged itself from a nasty position with courage and skill. Casualties were heavy. The Camerons lost 16 officers killed and wounded.

Meanwhile, divisional headquarters with the 5th and 7th Brigades of the 4th Indian Division had moved to an area 12 miles south-east of the battle of El Gubi. When the 11th Brigade joined them the Red Eagles were gathered together for the first time since they came back from Eritrea in April. The Guards Brigade now came under the command of the 4th Indian Division, and the 4th British Armoured Brigade was brought north of the line of battle to prevent any more panzer attacks on the infantry.

For the next two days the armour of both sides fought a series of actions in which the enemy air forces were very active, the R.A.F. being unable at this stage to give fighter cover because their landing grounds were now too far in the rear.

On December 8th the 4th Indian Division was able to advance again, the 5th Brigade leading followed by the 7th and the 11th. The 5th Brigade moved west towards Acroma, the 7th moved east of El Gubi upon El Adem. The Central India Horse ranged in front to report the movements of the enemy.

Late in the afternoon of December 9th advanced troops of the

7th Brigade came over the low ridge south of El Adem and saw the airfield empty. That evening El Adem was occupied and contact was made with the 23rd British Infantry Brigade from Tobruk.

Twenty miles westward the 5th Brigade found the Central India Horse held up by enemy rearguards in the neighbourhood of what was one day to be called Knightsbridge. One squadron had managed to get through north to the escarpment which overlooks the coastal thoroughfare where the enemy withdrawal was busy. The squadron in the best tradition of a cavalry regiment in the van of Allenby's great offensive took their trucks down into the plain and shot up the enemy's transport making a number of prisoners. That was all right, but the squadron had to get back, and completely surrounded in the darkness it was swept westward in the stream of retreating enemy. However, all of it except one section managed to break out with a bag of 150 Germans. Next morning Lance-Daffadar Janak Singh and his two trucks had to retreat with the enemy. Then he was chased for 12 miles by armoured cars, and finally found his progress blocked by 20 of them. Lance-Daffadar Janak Singh decided that he must shoot his way through and out. So the old Chevrolet trucks with Bren guns and rifles blazing charged the armoured cars. One truck was lost, but Lance-Daffadar Janak Singh burst the barrier, dodged pursuit, and five days later was with the regiment again.

That same night the rearguards in front of the 5th Brigade moved off, and the brigade moved on. The 7th Brigade reached the stone fort at Acroma. Their arrival had been anticipated by the dashing Messervy and some officers of divisional headquarters who had outrun even the cavalry screen. They captured two Italians asleep in the fort, and then went back to meet the Central India Horse and Colonel George on their way to seize Acroma.

The 5th Brigade advancing on the left struck enemy defences west of Acroma. The Buffs captured one point with over a hundred prisoners. Outram's seized another. The 3/1st Punjab Regt went through the middle to reach the main escarpment.

Orders were received by XIII Corps to press the retreating enemy hard with the 7th Armoured Division, the 4th Indian Division, the 5th New Zealand Brigade and the Polish Brigade. The New Zealanders were to advance directly to Gazala and hold the enemy there while the Red Eagles moved to Halegh el Eleba and Tmimi to block his retreat. The 7th Armoured Division was to advance and protect the flanks of the infantry and be ready to cut the enemy's lines of withdrawal.

Administrative difficulties were formidable; the heavy casualties sustained by the 11th Indian Brigade led General Messervy to ask for the 2nd Cameron Highlanders and the 2nd Mahratta Light Infantry who had suffered most to be left in Tobruk. The 1st Rajputana Rifles went forward with divisional headquarters. The pursuit could not start till the afternoon of December 11th when the 5th Brigade moved on the right about a couple of miles below the ridge and the 7th Brigade on the left each with a squadron of the Central India Horse. The other squadron was with Wellesley's and D.H.Q. in the centre and rear. Next morning when the advance continued at 5 a.m. Messervy (it is tempting to write as usual) found himself and his headquarters leading the advance and had to wait all day 14 miles west of Bir Ucheda having gone on ahead in the dark between the two brigades which had been delayed by lack of petrol. Stukas were disagreeably active all that day, for the R.A.F. was preoccupied with the heavy job of making the captured airfields capable of operations. Eleven dive-bombing attacks were made on the headquarters column, and divisional signals had a particularly bad time. The wireless operators of the Royal Corps of Signals and the Indian Signal Corps behaved with exemplary courage, holding on to their headphones and sets when others were able to take cover from the enemy bombers.

On December 13th reconnaissance showed that the enemy was holding a strong line from Gazala through Alem Hamza to Sidi Breghisc which at one time was contemplated as a permanent position but was probably rejected as such because, although the low ridge running east and west commanded the ground southward, it sloped northward to the coast without a break and therefore was completely lacking in depth.

At Alem Hamza Outram's and the Buffs of the 5th Brigade attacked two points. Outram's after a partial success were held up and suffered many casualties. The Buffs seemed luckier with the point they tackled and occupied almost without opposition. Later that afternoon German tanks and lorried infantry approached the low hill from the north and when fired upon hastily made off. Clearly this force was intended to hold a vital position and had been late on arrival.

South-west of Alem Hamza lay Sidi Breghisc by which the 7th Brigade was faced; it was decided to attack the position with the 4th Sikh Regt supported by the guns of the 25th Field Regt and 12 Valentines of the 8th Royal Tank Regt.

Reconnaissance by the Sikh carriers for this attack was in progress

that afternoon and the 25th Field Regt, protected by the anti-tank guns of the R.A. and the 7th Brigade anti-tank company, had begun registration when 39 panzers followed by over 300 lorries of infantry and guns appeared from a slight dip in the dreary waste of landscape about 4,000 yards away.

The Sikhs who were waiting for the attack were taken back into the lorries and slowly withdrawn to leave the field clear for the guns. Ten Valentines and more anti-tank guns were sent up.

The batteries of the 25th Field Regt were in echelon, the 31st in front, the 12th behind, holding their fire until the enemy was within 1,200 yards. Meanwhile, the Mark IV tanks advanced in bounds and firing at long ranges to give cover to the Mark III tanks and lorried infantry to attack the gun positions. The 31st Battery was overrun and every gun silenced, but not before the 'quads' (the tractors that draw the guns and carry the crews) had come right in to pick up the wounded. The 12th Battery and the anti-tank guns kept on and the Valentines drew some of the panzers to fight it out with them on the left flank. Then suddenly the panzers stopped and wheeled away and the lorries turned northward.

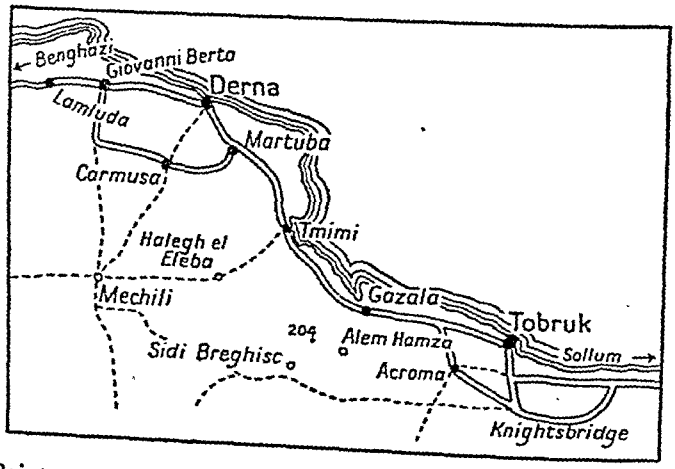
The gallantry and devoted discipline of the gunners had saved the 7th Brigade, but it cost the 25th Field Regt 58 officers and men, and the casualties of the anti-tank gunners and Sikhs were not light. Fourteen panzers were stopped; when the Indian sappers and miners went out at dusk to finish them off German recovery parties managed to get eight of them away. All the eight guns of the 31st were recovered. On December 14th the 7th Brigade were only able to do patrolling through shortage of ammunition. It is necessary always to bear in mind that by this time the supply problems were continuously multiplying, and would presently become acute.

At Alem Hamza the 5th Brigade had another try at Points 205–8, but Outram's could make no progress against the fire of heavy machine-guns and the position appeared to be stronger than it was on the day before. Indeed, it was, for the enemy attached much importance to this part of his line. During the day the Buffs at Point 204 were twice counter-attacked, and though both attempts were repulsed it was becoming increasingly clear that the situation was a far from easy one. It was hoped that the 7th Armoured Division would now draw off the enemy armour and relieve the pressure on the Alem Hamza front. The plan was for it to move round south of the enemy and secure Halegh el Eleba by 11 a.m. of December 15th and afterwards exploit toward Tmimi and attack the rear of the enemy holding up the 4th Indian Division. To

coincide with this the 7th Brigade was to attack Point 201 and the 5th Brigade was to have another try at Points 205–8.

So on the morning of December 15th Outram's were reinforced by the 3/1st Punjab Regt, but as the Punjabis were forming up they were heavily shelled and both battalions were pinned down in the open by machine-gun fire while the few tanks supporting the attack were all knocked out. Wellesley's were brought from divisional reserve and placed under the command of the 5th Brigade for a night attack.

Then at 2 p.m. news came that Point 204 was being attacked in force and that the 4th Armoured Brigade whose activity was expected to have borne fruit that morning was still 30 miles away.



Point 204 was held by the 1st Buffs, the 31st Field Regt R.A., a squadron of the Central India Horse, one battery of the 73rd Anti-tank Regt R.A., one troop of the Light Anti-aircraft Regt R.A., one section of the 18th Field Company Royal Bombay Sappers and Miners, and ten I tanks.

There is uncertainty about details of this action because the commander and most of the officers were killed. The enemy began with an intensive bombardment by Mark IV tanks and artillery at a range of 2,000–3,000 yards, and at the same time the 115th Lorried Infantry Regt (equivalent to a British brigade), with orders to destroy all the British forces in this part and exploit their achievement to the utmost, began to infiltrate through the flanks and bring the gun-positions under machine-gun fire. This long

preparation was followed by a surge of Mark III's which penetrated the position. Simultaneously Mark III's and Mark IV's came in from different directions and the gunners under close range machine-gun fire were unable to load, sight or fire their guns. It would appear that the gun positions had not been properly constructed, that the I tanks had tried a long-range duel during the enemy's preliminary bombardment and so had run short of ammunition by the time the panzers attacked, and finally that the dispositions of other arms had not effectively protected the field gunners from close-range small-arms and machine-gun fire.

The Buffs and the Gunners fought to the end and beside them fought the Bombay Sappers and Miners. The great panzers with tommy-gunners riding on them surged over, but when the German infantry came in some of the Buffs and the Sappers were still firing. Two or three miles away brigade headquarters in their vehicles heard Lieut.-Colonel L. E. King of the Buffs give a commentary on the action. A message over the wireless came at 3.30 p.m. to say that this would be his last because the enemy was on top of his headquarters. Then the Sikh operator announced: 'Last message, Sahib. I am breaking the set. Sat Siri Akal (To God be the glory).' And upon this slogan, the dread of how many enemies of the Sikhs through the centuries, fell the silence of the end.

About a hundred of the Buffs and enough of the 31st Field Regt to reform on a weak one battery basis managed to escape after dark; but the rest of those gallant defenders of Point 204 were taken away from Benghazi by sea to captivity just before the Red Eagles reached it.

Eleven Mark IV tanks were destroyed, and the enemy losses were so heavy that the German commander was heard over an intercept reporting his inability to continue the fight, which was a relief to Outram's and the 3/1st Punjab Regt lying in the open opposite Points 205–8.

By next day the 4th Armoured Brigade was on the warpath on the enemy's rear, and the Polish Brigade had penetrated the enemy line south of Gazala. The 5th New Zealand Brigade was pressing on along the coast. The 1st South African Brigade and the 42nd Royal Tank Regt were brought forward to help the 4th Indian Division next day, but by the morning of December 17th the enemy was gone. By 10 a.m. the 5th Brigade was bound for Martuba and the 7th Brigade for Carmusa in the fertile Djebel Akhdar, while the 7th Armoured Division was following the retreating enemy across the desert by way of Mechili.

Rommel had lost his chance of clipping the wings of the Red Eagles at Alem Hamza, and all his concern now was to extricate his Germans at the expense of the Italian troops who had fought as dourly as their uncomfortable allies in those recent actions.

The going was very bad for Russell's Brigade on the right and that evening Briggs' Brigade which was 12 miles ahead was told to go as fast as possible next day and after reaching Carmusa to race for Martuba and Derna, the 5th Brigade being ordered to incline westwards, take over Carmusa on arrival there, and exploit the north-west.

This change of plan was a brilliant success. The 7th Brigade was in Carmusa by 11 a.m. on December 18th, and leaving the 4/16th Punjab Regt to secure the Derna by-pass the Royal Sussex hurried to capture Martuba and its airfield 12 miles east. Here they found large dumps of bombs and stores, and destroyed three aircraft. The 4th Sikhs were close behind the Royal Sussex and passing through them hurried on toward Derna. By the afternoon they were sweeping down upon enemy transport withdrawing along the road through the Derna airfield and protected by four M.13 tanks. The enemy taken completely by surprise lost five 88 mm. guns, many vehicles, and 300 prisoners. As this engagement came to an end 12 Ju 52 troop carriers landed on the aerodrome. The Sikhs held their fire until the last aircraft was down, and then destroyed eight of them; the four which managed to get away probably crashed later for lack of petrol.

An enormous quantity of supplies and equipment was captured on the aerodrome from which it was supposed that the beleaguered Axis garrisons in Halfaya and Bardia were being maintained. 183 enemy aircraft put out of action were evidence of good work done by the R.A.F. By nightfall Sikh patrols were looking down over the escarpment at Derna.

The 5th Brigade in which Wellesley's had taken the place of the Buffs south of Martuba was dive-bombed by aircraft, using the landing ground there before it was captured by the 7th Brigade. During the night a battalion of the 1st South African Brigade relieved the 4/16th Punjab Regt at the Carmusa cross-roads, and the latter were ordered to push forward a mobile column at once along the main road to Giovanni Berta. As they approached their objective they were held up by an enemy rearguard. There was no way of turning the flanks and until the rest of the brigade came along it looked like being a deadlock.

The 5th Brigade pushed forward another mobile column before

dawn on December 19th, and this was held up by a strong enemy position in the hills about five miles south of Giovanni Berta. Wellesley's were ordered to attack this rearguard from the west and by dusk, except for one small pocket of resistance, the position had been cleared.

Meanwhile, Outram's with a battery of the 1st Field Regt and some carriers had been despatched to make a wide movement across country to secure the important cross-roads at Lamluda behind the retreating Italians. The country they had to traverse was believed by the enemy impassable and the achievement of the R.A.S.C. drivers of 309 General Transport Company was truly remarkable. It was almost dusk when the leading company reached the main road and raced on to the cross-roads where it caught a column of enemy transport and took several hundred prisoners. Road blocks were at once built on all four cross-roads. At 9 p.m. a heavy tank leading a train of lorries crashed the eastern road block and made for the cross-roads. The anti-tank guns could not be brought to bear on the tank which escaped, but the riflemen of Outram's boarded the lorries and compelled them to surrender. By noon on December 20th the 4th Rajputana Rifles held 650 prisoners and a way out west from Derna, which had been occupied by the 4th Sikh Regt, was denied to the enemy. One British officer was killed and four Indian riflemen were wounded.

The 3/1st Punjab Regt had taken on that rearguard position south of Giovanni Berta; all day a small number of Italian infantry and gunners held out, but when night fell a bayonet charge ended the brave resistance. 110 prisoners were taken and 40 dead were counted. This was the last rearguard action the Italians, deserted by their allies, bothered to fight, and while the 7th Brigade stayed to establish order in the Derna area the 5th Brigade and the Central India Horse continued the pursuit, reaching Barce by the afternoon of December 23rd. Bands of Arabs were looting and murdering isolated Italian colonists and the troops were kept busy restoring and maintaining order. The cold and heavy winter rains now aggravated administrative difficulties already difficult enough. The south road from Barce to Benghazi was impassable for motor transport. A squadron of the Central India Horse was sent on by El Abiar to take over Benghazi from the King's Dragoon Guards.

After Christmas the 7th Brigade moved forward and took over from Barce to Benghazi, leaving the rest of the Djebel to the 5th Brigade. On the night of December 30/31 Briggs received orders to hold the positions prepared by the enemy south of Benghazi to

stop his attempt to move south foreshadowed by the heavy fighting in the Antelat area in which the Guards Brigade had suffered serious losses in an engagement with the panzers.

So at half an hour's notice the 7th Brigade was placed to occupy these positions, which were already partially mined, and the 31st Field Regt and 65th Anti-tank Regt were ordered forward to come under command of the 7th Brigade. At the same time forward patrols of the Central India Horse made contact with patrols of the Guards Brigade. However, Rommel had other plans, and evidently intended to hold a position at El Agheila for the time being.

On December 30th Major-General F. I. S. Tuker[1] (2nd Gurkha Rifles) arrived to take over the command of the 4th Indian Division from Major-General F. W. Messervy who was appointed to command the 1st British Armoured Division now in North Africa.

The 4th Indian Infantry Division since December 1940 had fought in the Western Desert, Cyrenaica, Syria and Eritrea. During the last campaign of six weeks their total casualties had been 2,633 British and Indian officers and other ranks killed, wounded and missing. They had destroyed in action 51 Mark III and Mark IV tanks and 27 enemy aircraft. They had taken approximately 6,000 prisoners.

General Auchinleck telegraphed to General Wavell:

> General Ritchie, in a letter to me just received, says: 'The 4th Division have really done the most magnificent work. No praise can be high enough for their achievements.' I wholeheartedly endorse this praise.

A British officer would write home that February to Bristol:[2]

> There are some fine fighters out here, but most of them will agree that the cream of the lot is the 4th Indian Division. . . . All these Indian regiments still have their quota of British officers, and they have put up a fine show as all the Indians are born soldiers: smart as paint.
>
> It's a definite handicap working in their area, as one always has to be ready to acknowledge salutes which they never forget. . . . Their training has obviously been as thorough as any German's. Some of them have seen four campaigns, yet they come back from a week's hard fighting in direct contact, spend a day digging in, and then immediately crack straight into a training programme. It really is an amazing sight.

[1] Lieut.-General Sir Francis Tuker, K.C.I.E., C.B., D.S.O., O.B.E.
[2] *Bristol Evening Post*, April 2nd 1942.

Chapter 15

1941. Position in the Middle East—feat of maintaining Russian supply route through Persia—impending strain from Japanese onslaught—India's growing industrial output.

WE must now leave Cyrenaica to tell the melancholy tale of events in the Far East where, about the time that all three brigades of the 4th Indian Division began to advance after Rommel had withdrawn his panzers from the frontier, the Japanese were advancing like a relentless column of safari ants against the Gin-drinkers Line on the mainland opposite Hong Kong and the Nippon transports were approaching the Malay Peninsula through a strange, unholy and disastrous lull in the north-east monsoon.

On our way to the Far East it will be convenient to pause and chronicle a little of what was happening in the true Middle East and in India.

At the end of September 1941 Lord Beaverbrook and Mr Averell Harriman with various British and United States delegates visited the Soviet leaders in Moscow. Three days later it was announced that an agreement had been reached to fulfil almost every request for material made by the Soviet military and civil authorities. When we remember the last stand by the Buffs at Alem Hamza, when we remember the overrunning by panzers of the 2nd Mahratta Light Infantry at El Gubi, when we remember our glorious field gunners shooting it out with the monstrous Mark IV's at Libyan Omar, it is difficult to feel much elation over the comparative enthusiasm of the factory workers of Britain in building tanks for Russia, though let it be added that the military and political authorities were much to blame for this mental attitude, the military through their insensate secrecy about units, the political through their professional optimism about the future. The Prime Minister's broadcasts were loved and revered by the people of Britain because they believed he was telling them the worst not the best; it was a pity he encouraged them to suppose that at this date we had tanks equal to the panzers.

In October General Quinan, G.O.C. in Iraq and Persia, was given a new directive:

> You will take steps to develop such road, rail and river communication as are necessary to ensure . . . the maximum possible delivery of supplies to Russia.

In the feverish, the almost delirious activity in Persia to enlarge the port, to extend and improve the roads and railway, and to provide the necessary transport India played a very big part.

> Actually, the shortest road distance from the south Russian border to Basra is over a thousand miles, and is about equal to the distance from the west Russian border to Antwerp. Within this sleeve of land are nearly all the obstacles which Nature devises against travel: deserts with no water and no landmarks, deserts with soft and treacherous sands, malarious bogs; not one range but a series of ranges of high, precipitous mountains, often piled with snow or drenched from the snow thawing, the home of bears and eagles; sandstorms, rainstorms, blizzards of snow and hail; the highest and the lowest temperatures that man can survive, sometimes hard against each other in space or in time. To these hazards humanity has added its own: nomadic herdsmen whose weapons belong to the twentieth century A.D. and whose politics to the twentieth B.C. In mitigation man had made, by 1938, one suckling railway line; there was still no proper road from north to south at all. To build, across these wastes of steepling rock and mapless sand, a traffic route which would carry in vast quantities all the implements of war, appeared to need something like a five-year plan. But the Russians were not in a position to wait five years; from the time the Germans crashed across their western border they wanted supplies within five weeks, or a good deal sooner if it could be done.[1]

While work to develop the existing port of Basra proceeded apace under superhuman difficulties the construction of a new port at Umm Qasr was undertaken. A large fleet of inland water craft had already been collected and organised with base depots at Shaiba. Supplies from India to Russia now went from Karachi to Basra by sea and thence along the Baghdad railway to Mosul which was linked by road with Tabriz, the terminus of the railway line from the Caucasus. Another route of supply was the Trans-Iranian railway from Bandar Shahpur through Tehran to Bandar Shah on the Caspian Sea whence the supplies were either sent by ship to Baku and thence by rail through the Caucasus, or shipped to the north coast of the Caspian Sea. There was a road route in the extreme east of Persia which started from Duzdan, the terminus of the Baluchistan railway and joined up with the Russian Trans-Caspian railway at Ashkabad. There was a road route from the port of Bushire in south-west Persia to Tehran through Isfahan. An alterna-

[1] *Paiforce.* The official story of the Persia and Iraq Command 1941–1946. His Majesty's Stationery Office. 1948. pp. 75–76.

tive to this was the Ahwaz-Khurrambad road reaching Tehran by way of Qum and Kazvin through Mamadan. From Iraq Kazvin, Tehran and the Caspian Sea were reached by the Khanaqin–Kermanshah road.

When all these names have been set down communication by road seems almost abundant, but it must not be supposed that those lines of communication either separately or together were anything but utterly inadequate for the traffic proposed for them; intensive work on the improvement and development of ports, railways and roads had to be undertaken immediately. By January 1942 a new length of railway between Zenjan and Tabriz was completed, which gave direct rail communication through Tehran between the Persian Gulf and the Caucasus. In October 1941 the Trans-Iranian railway could carry only 200 tons a day, and if it was to serve as a life-line to the Soviets it would have to carry out at least 12 times as much tonnage to Russia alone. This meant more rolling-stock, more locomotives, more marshalling stations, more sorting yards, more crossing stations, more signalling equipment, more fuel and more water. The railway itself crossed mud-flats and desert to climb by tunnel after tunnel across fearsome bridge after bridge through the mountains of Luristan. Then it dropped from 7,000 feet to reach Tehran 500 miles from where it started. From Tehran another 300 miles of difficult country brought it to the Elbuz mountains with more steep gradients, spirals, tunnels and bridges until it reached the mudflats of Bandar Shah a thousand miles from the mudflats of Bandar Shahpur.

The Inland Water Transport which supplemented the railway owed much to India for the gift of twin-screw tugs, 500-ton barges and a small fleet of steamers that used to paddle up and down the Ganges and the Brahmaputra.

These paddle-steamers had a draught of six feet, a freeboard of two. The voyage from Calcutta to Basra was over 4,000 sea-miles. They were escorted as far as Bombay by H.M.I.S. *Pansy* commanded by a lieutenant of the Royal Indian Naval Volunteer Reserve.

The decks were specially boarded for the voyage, the paddles were bolted to the wheels and sea-rudders were fitted. One of the steamers did not get beyond Calcutta Roads: another was sunk by a Nippon submarine. Their naval orders were to attack any enemy submarine 'vigorously on sight,' for which attack they were given two rifles each and a hundred rounds. The distance from Karachi to Bahrein is about 850 miles, and 850 miles would see every one of those craft without any coal in their bunkers. Each could carry

22 tons of drinking water and the after-peaks were filled with water to feed the boilers. The *Chakrata* was commanded by Captain Martin of the Corps of Sappers and Miners with a British sub-lieutenant R.I.N.V.R. as his first officer and an Indian midshipman. The fireman and the engineers were Indian soldiers, the carpenter was Chinese, and the crew was made up of Indian bandarees or toddy-gatherers, sweepers, trimmers and seacunnies or helmsmen mostly from Chittagong. Captain Martin wrote in his log, a few days out from Karachi:

> Forepeak full of water and leaking into chain-locker. Ship pitching heavily and shipping water. Slow ahead . . . Midnight, heavy westerly swell and strong wind and rough sea. Ship again pitching heavily and shipping more water. Slow ahead on engines . . . 4 p.m. wind and swell increasing . . . 6.30 p.m. Eased down to Slow. Ship pitching and straining heavily. . . .

In a little over three weeks the paddle-steamers reached Basra. Salute those mariners of India. Captain Keates might have dipped the White Ensign of the old *Superb* to such men.

The roads provided problems just as formidable:

> The routes went through several of the highest passes in the world. Those to the east traversed hundreds of miles of desert where hard gravel tracks alternated with sand-dunes and with 'kavir'—dangerous ground covered with salt or with yellow slime. In the west the roads had a hard crown, about ten feet wide, made either with soling (large stones) or with a good deal of road metal well beaten in by the traffic of years: parts were the work of British sappers in the previous war. But for years past the only maintenance these roads had received was from small parties working near their own villages who believed that the term 'road metal' meant a mixture of very fine stones with dirt, and the surface had become so corrugated that the motorist using them felt very much as if he was being shaken in a steam-operated sieve. Nearly everywhere the berms (sides) had been so worn away that to pass another vehicle was a dangerous enterprise, and many of the bridges and culverts were too narrow or were dilapidated and weak. These roads, however, were almost good in comparison with those on the eastern side, where Irish bridges (paved fords) were the rule and where long sections running in the dry beds of streams had to be freshly constructed whenever the streams filled. As a basis of calculation it was assumed that these roads would have to carry a continuous stream of ten-ton lorries passing in both directions at an average density of three to the mile, and for this purpose the standard specification to be aimed at was a

twenty-foot width of metalling with three-foot earth berms on both sides. Extra soling was to be laid where necessary.

Stone of varying qualities was to be had near parts of the roads. Water, generally, was not. A limited number of shovels and wheelbarrows was available. There were reputed to be nineteen rollers in Persia, but this proved to be a flight of fancy.[1]

The first columns to travel with their loads up and down those roads were found from 51, 203 and 204 General Purposes Transport Companies of the Royal Indian Army Service Corps, and it was a tough assignment. There were no staging-posts beyond Takistan, and the crews slept on the road. If a vehicle broke down it might have to be towed for 300 miles. Significant of the dangers of the route every column took its own doctor and ambulance-car.

The hardships of the earlier drivers were equal to any that were suffered in Persia and Iraq, and in the shining history of Indian service in the second war there can be fewer examples of sustained endurance. Some of these men were Moslems who during the days of Ramadan, refused to profit by the indulgence which their Faith gives to travellers and would drive all day without even drinking a cup of water. Some were Madrassis who had never experienced cold weather and whose education in driving had been limited to six hours' instruction in a small vehicle on the left-hand side of an ordinary South Indian road. And now they were driving 5-ton Studebakers and 10-ton Mack Diesels up the ice-paved gradients of the Shah Pass, where, if you miss your gear change, your lorry has only to slip back a few feet and it will topple over and crash down a thousand feet into the gorge below.[2]

Through icy air with the thermometer 10 degrees below zero, through hot blasts that crackled in the ears, through dust and snow and fog and heat, in temperatures that could vary as much as 50 degrees in a few hours, and often liable to attack by the marauders of this wild land the columns drove on for six days and seven nights to reach Tabriz. Here sometimes they would rest for 36 hours, but sometimes only for 12, and even in that time the vehicles had to be unloaded and serviced. Then back on the five days' journey to Khanaqin where the men were given four days to rest and service their vehicles. In nine months many drivers of the 51 G.P.T. Company who came from the warmth and beauty of Mysore did the double journey 16 times.

When a company of the R.A.S.C. arrived to share in this work

[1] *Paiforce*. His Majesty's Stationery Office. pp. 105–6. [2] *ibid.*, p. 114.

they were generous in their admiration of what the Indian drivers accomplished on this run.

> 'We get a bit of cold at home,' said one of them, 'and I reckon we can take what's handed out in Persia. But these Indian blokes, they'd never known anything like it. If I was Joe I'd give the Red Star to the whole blooming lot.'[1]

This was Nottingham's comment on the award of the Order of the Red Star to three of those drivers when in seven months over 18,000 tons of supplies to Russia had been carried from Khanaqin alone.

We get an indication of what aid to Russia was meaning to Middle East Command in a telegram from the Middle East Defence Committee to the Minister of Defence on December 18th 1941:

> The contemplated diversion of expected air reinforcements will be serious if it is finally decided to transfer to Far East six light bomber squadrons from our existing force . . . In view of the proposed diversions, we have already advised against promise of an air contingent to Russia; and we consider that the reduction contemplated may well make it impossible to meet in full our commitment of 24 squadrons to Turkey.

And again in a telegram of December 27th to the Minister of Defence and Chiefs of Staff:

> We are not in a position to assess the minimum requirements for security in the Far East. But in the Middle East we are already deficient of our minimum requirements of naval, land and air forces for security in the spring of 1942.

On January 1st 1942 the Chiefs of Staff telegraphed to the Commanders-in-Chief:

> Security of Singapore and of sea communications in the Indian Ocean is second only to the security of the United Kingdom and the sea communications thereto . . . *Crusader* should be exploited to the greatest possible extent subject to the condition that it must not prevent the despatch of essential reinforcements to the Far East.

On January 4th 1942 the Middle East Defence Committee telegraphed to the Chiefs of Staff:

> You will appreciate that operations in Cyrenaica are at a delicate stage and that we have not yet completed *Crusader*. If we

[1] *Paiforce*, p. 115.

are to secure Cyrenaica we must get forward at least to the area Agheila-Marada. It is quite impossible to stay where we are . . . if we fail to get forward to Agheila-Marada the alternative will be to withdraw to the frontier area . . . we have of course every intention of exploiting *Crusader* . . .

We consider it is of first importance that a decision should be reached immediately on date by which we must be prepared for attack on Northern Front (*i.e.* through Anatolia or the Caucasus) and that resources actual and expected, which are diverted to Far East should be replaced at least one month before that date. . . .

We agree Far East must have prior consideration at present time, and realise you are well aware of risks involved in respect of Northern Front. We would like to stress, however, three factors which accentuate urgency of early replacements:—

(a) The effect upon Turkey when she hears, as she undoubtedly will, that considerable forces are being sent from Middle East to Far East. Her attitude is already lukewarm.

(b) The extreme importance of the Persian and Iraq oilfields, now that we can expect interference with supply from Burma and Netherlands East Indies.

(c) The supreme importance of keeping open the Persian supply route to Russia.

It is doubtful whether any historian will ever be in a position to assert positively on incontestable evidence that either the Persian supply route or the Arctic supply route to Russia was of 'supreme importance' to victory in the Second World War, but none will deny the supreme importance of what was achieved by British and Indian troops in Iraq and Persia in preparing lines of resistance to a German invasion of either, which if successful would have cost us victory over Germany and Japan. Toward that achievement no body of troops contributed more than the Elephants of the 6th Indian Infantry Division, and we shall come back to them during the tale of that dark year of 1942 on the edge of which this chronicle now stands.

It may be asked how India was able even to contemplate fulfilling the demands which were made on her capacity for production by the need to prepare against a German invasion of the Middle East either by way of Anatolia or the Caucasus and to facilitate supplies to 'our Russian allies,' as they were called in the propitiatory tone one uses to say 'good old fellow' to a large and unreliable Alsatian dog.

The answer is the zeal with which Indian industry got down to business after that first experience of the Eastern Group Supply

Council in the autumn of 1940. By the middle of 1941 the Chief of the General Staff in India could declare:

> The organisation adopted by India for the supply, distribution and maintenance of military stores both on the military and civil sides has proved itself thoroughly sound in all respects and might be taken as a model for future war organisation.

At that date 1,270,000 were working in Indian industry on the production of war supplies. This may seem a small figure compared with British industry, but it must be remembered that the British policy had not encouraged the development of Indian industry until the need for its help became acute. If a year or two before the Second World War an industrialist had prophesied that by 1941 India would be undertaking the supply of 800 miles of metre and standard gauge rails for Iraq he would have been laughed at. If he had forecast the production of armour plate by the great firm of Tatas at Jamshedpur he would have been derided. Yet by the middle of 1941 Tatas was pondering for the first time armour plate which though 'not yet machinable or weldable is a very satisfactory bullet-proof armour comparable to that produced at home.'

India had never been imagined as a producer of steel. Yet by August 1941 when control of iron and steel first began steel in continuously growing quantities was under production for vast overseas orders as well as the growing needs of India itself. When it was decided to double the metre gauge from Basra to Baghdad India was able to supply 575 miles of track, 132 locomotives and 9,800 rolling stock besides an ambulance train. This being possible in 1941, it may well be asked if India could not have prepared better for war and been earlier in a position to supply the needs of the three Services. The answer is the steady discouragement of such production by H.M. Government.

Such little modern equipment as India possessed was sent with those first three brigades overseas under a promise of early replacement which could not be and was not fulfilled for several years. But might not India have made an effort before the outbreak of war to ensure that her demands for equipment and vehicles were met?

India did offer to expand her forces before the war started; but no expansion was agreed until May, 1940, and even then the conditions to which it was subject crippled the effort. India had no voice in priorities. It was only when India's aid was vital to the future of the war's course that her needs began to be met, and even then more

with promissory notes than hard cash. The defence of India itself had to be planned on a scale which accepted risks unwarrantable except on the principle of needs must when the devil drives.

British planning has always underestimated the scale of the enemy's action. Hence the improvisation when the moment comes. Hence the hand to mouth supplies and vamped strategy.

Neither Germans nor Russians did come surging up the valley toward Thal on the North-West Frontier. It was probably just as well. Toward the end of 1941 a realistic exercise of the defence of the Frontier was carried out. An 'unnecessarily optimistic' estimate of the power of the German attack was revealed, and one critic observed:

> If the German undertakes this operation at all he will produce the force he considers necessary for the purpose.

We shall see presently how fatally underestimated was the potential scale of the Japanese attack through Malaya and Burma. Alas, the British appreciation of the enemy's strength is usually based on British standards and methods of maintenance and not on those of the enemy. All too often we hear the complaint from the operational side that it was let down by the Intelligence; evidence is wanting that Intelligence is usually heeded either by soldiers or politicians before it is too late, and whatever mistakes Intelligence made before the Second World War and during the first two years of its course Intelligence can console itself with the reflection that if it had been infallible it would not have made the least difference.

Before they come to the tragic story of military events in Burma in 1942 readers may be reminded that when Burma was politically separated from India in 1937, which was inevitable sooner or later, it was at the same time separated militarily. In vain did successive commanders-in-chief urge the unified command of India and Burma, pointing out that if Burma were awarded the responsibility of defending itself it would fall on India and predicting disaster unless India was allowed to prepare for such a contingency. No practical steps were taken. The strategic necessity of links by road and rail between the two countries had often been examined in the past when India and Burma were united; but vested interests had always been successful in obtaining a postponement of action, and civil administration had always gratefully availed itself of any excuse for such postponement. It was argued that the absence of communications enhanced India's security. That might have been a better argument if no Indian troops were to be committed to the defence of

and the encouragement of an international outlook made Hong Kong what it was, and throughout all the vicissitudes of China during the 20th century the island had been a refuge from strife until December 8th 1941.

The whole colony, including Hong Kong itself, its sister island Lantao, Kowloon, the New Territory and a number of small islands covers an area of nearly 400 square miles. The mainland except for a broad strip of marsh and irrigated land running south-west from the boundary is mostly mountainous, rugged and uncultivated. A dozen heights reach 2,000 feet and one, Tai Mo Shan, exceeds 3,000. Between them are numerous steep grassy ridges strewn between boulders of ochreous granite and intersected by valleys and ravines covered with scrub. The coast line is indented with salt-water creeks and sandy coves of which Tide Cove on the eastward side is the most considerable, the head of it silted up and become a stretch of paddy fields.

The Kowloon peninsula which at Kowloon Point is just under a mile from Hong Kong is densely populated and forms the focal point of the New Territory's road system. From the southern tip a railway runs north through Beacon Hill and a number of small tunnels, round the coast along Tide Cove, up to Fanling and then onward across the frontier to Canton 90 miles away to the north-west. The colony's one aerodrome, used only by commercial and training planes, was at Kai Tak, east of Kowloon City. As an aerodrome it was unsatisfactory on account of the hills cupping it and a project was afoot after the war to level one of the small islands round Hong Kong and construct a less perilous aerodrome.

At Kowloon a good road turns west to run along the south coast for about 10 miles before it turns north and east through flat irrigated land to Fanling, where it rejoins the east road which follows the route of the railway round the coast. The westerly road passes the head of Gindrinkers Bay which is four miles from the head of Tide Cove passed on the easterly road. This neck was the base of what was called Gindrinkers Line, of which more anon. A mere 500 yards separate the island of Hong Kong from the mainland at the strait of Lei U Mun below the Devil's Peak on the south-east promontory. The island is less than a sixth the size of Singapore in extent and consists mostly of a jumble of wooded hills between 500–1,500 feet high, but is divided into two almost equal sectors east and west by the Wong Nei Chong Gap, through which runs a first class road connecting the northern and southern parts of the island.

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spread along the coastal lowland, much of it reclaimed from the sea, and round the lower slopes of Victoria Peak (1,804 feet). The population is over a million, mostly Chinese. Between the island and Kowloon lies Victoria Harbour and the naval base which in peace time was of major importance to the Colony because all except the largest ships could be accommodated there. However, early in December 1941 the area was practically cleared of shipping, and the small harbour of Aberdeen, the home of Hong Kong's pirates and smugglers once upon a time, became the base for the few small naval vessels that remained in these waters.

There were several good reservoirs both on the island and on the Territory, but the larger ones on which the city of Victoria depended all lay in the Tytam region east of the Wong Nei Chong Gap, and their capture by the Japanese was one of the reasons that led to the final surrender.

In the days when the Maginot Line was still influencing military opinion a defence plan was adopted in 1937. This provided for a chain of redoubts and fortified positions on a slightly convex line between the head of Gindrinkers Bay and Tide Cove, and then running south-east from the south side of Tide Cove to Port Shelter. There were certain disadvantages such as lack of depth and the fact that Tai Mo Shan north-west and Needle Hill north-east overlooked the high ground in the Smugglers Ridge and Golden Hill region, and thus offset its command of the roads and mule tracks running south from the frontier.

South of the great Jubilee Reservoir the Shing Mun Redoubt at the north-western end of the Smugglers Ridge country did cover a wide exposed area and the precipitous Shing Mun ravine running east from the reservoir did provide a formidable obstacle to hostile transport.

However, after a certain amount of work had been done on the Gindrinkers Line the defence plan was changed to one which abandoned the notion of a prolonged defence of the mainland. Probably the Japanese occupation of Canton in October 1938 brought home to the planners how difficult it would be to hold a back to the sea position against the large forces Japan would be in a position to use. It was realised that with the forces likely to be available it would be impossible to retain the harbour for the use of the Royal Navy, but it was also realised that so long as Hong Kong itself remained in our hands the use of the harbour could be denied to the enemy. So it was decided that a couple of infantry companies should carry out for two or three days a delaying action between the

frontier and Kowloon while certain demolitions and evacuations were in progress, and that Hong Kong itself should be defended by the four battalions of the garrison with a chain of concrete pillboxes interspersed with prepared platoon positions all round the island.

When war broke out with Germany the garrison consisted of the 2nd Royal Scots, the 1st Middlesex Regt (Machine Gun Battalion) and two Indian battalions. In October-November 1940 these two battalions were relieved by the 5th Rajput Regt and the 2/14th Punjab Regt.[1]

Both the Rajputs and the Punjabis came out to Hong Kong on the Indian 'peace time' establishment and were without carriers or mortars until the end of 1941 when in October they received a 40 per cent. increase in strength. This added considerably to the task of training, and of course like every other Indian battalion 'milking' to provide experienced officers, V.C.O.'s and N.C.O.'s to keep pace with the expansion of the army almost emptied the ranks of instructors. However, for two months training of the battalions for the part they had to play in the defence of the island was carried on steadily.

Then on November 16th 1941 two Canadian battalions, the Royal Rifles of Canada and the Winnipeg Grenadiers, arrived in Hong Kong. They were well armed and well equipped, but unfortunately the whole of their transport had been sent to Australia by mistake.

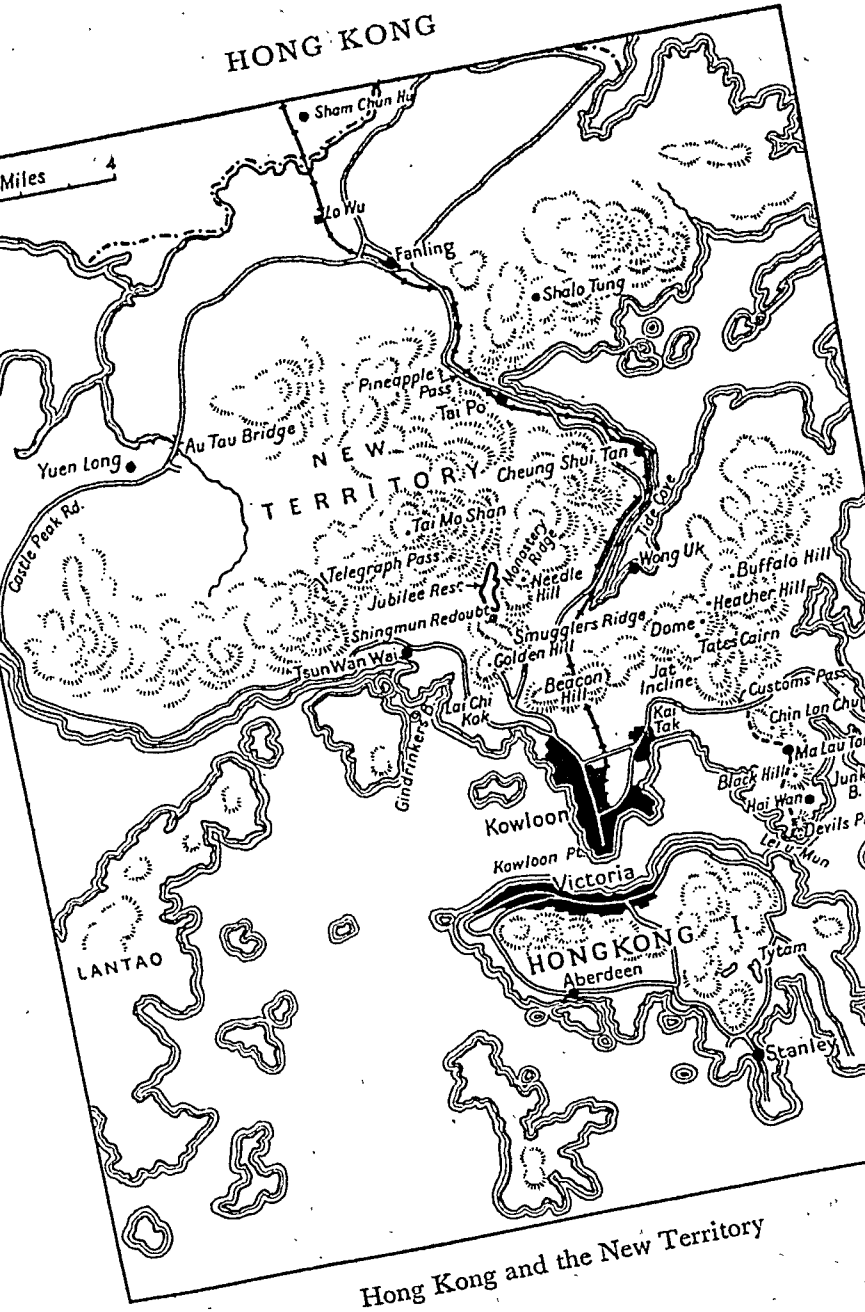
Major-General Maltby[2] who commanded the troops in Hong Kong was puzzled to know how best to use these reinforcements,

[1] The 5th Rajput Regt was once the 11th Rajputs and fought round Canton in 1858-9. It was the unlucky battalion of the Rajputs in the First World War, being on duty in Mesopotamia without action for four months and then going to Persia on column duty. However, it covered itself with glory in the Afghan War of 1919, being the mainstay of the Chitral force when they stopped the enemy's advance.

The 2/14th Punjab Regt was formerly the 20th Duke of Cambridge's Own Infantry (Brownlow's Punjabis). The battalion was called Brownlow's after Field-Marshal Sir Charles Brownlow who raised it when he was a subaltern.

Brownlow's Punjabis volunteered as a body for service in China in 1860 and took part in the storming of the Taku Forts. In the combined Franco-British advance on Peking Brownlow's Punjabis was the first unit to plant its colours on the walls of the city. In 1863 it defended the Eagle's Nest piquet with much gallantry, and performed many another feat on the North-West Frontier. In 1882 it fought at Tel-el-Kebir and became the Duke of Cambridge's Own on its return. It fought in Mesopotamia during the First World War and was with the 7th Lahore Division in the advance through the Vale of Sharon.

[2] Major-General C. M. Maltby, C.B., M.C.



Hong Kong and the New Territory

but finally decided to go back to the 1937 defence plan and form a mainland infantry brigade to defend the Kowloon and Devil's Peak peninsulas from the high ground stretching between Gindrinkers Bay and Port Shelter. If the brigade was compelled to abandon the Gindrinkers Line it would retire to the island.

It is permissible to wonder whether it was wise at the last moment to put the Royal Scots, the Rajputs and the Punjabis in that line after training them to defend the island and use the Canadian battalions to man the island defences for which they had not been trained. Might it not have been better to put the Canadians on the Gindrinkers Line which could only be held for a time, seeing that they would be unfamiliar with the terrain, wherever they went? Probably their lack of transport influenced General Maltby's readjustment, and it must be remembered that he did not expect the Japanese attack so soon. His intelligence was received from the Far East Combined Bureau, Singapore, and it was poor. It was indeed very poor. He was told that the Japanese did not like going out at night, that they preferred main roads on which to advance, that their combined operations were well carried out but that the feebleness of the Chinese opposition flattered their ability, and that the Japanese air force would not go up at night and was no good at bombing. On top of this feeble stuff from the Far East Combined Bureau, the British Embassy in Tokyo and the consular reports did not suggest the slightest reason to anticipate hostile action by Japan in the near future. Therefore Maltby felt justified in changing the defence plan as he did because he supposed that he had much more time before him than in fact he had. Since June 1940 Japanese troops had taken up positions on the frontier avowedly for the purpose of stopping the flow of arms and ammunition then reaching China through Hong Kong.

The flow of arms and ammunition to our own forces was less generous. The 2/14th Punjab Regt for instance had only been able to have a single demonstration of a few rounds of how a 3-inch mortar worked. No ammunition had arrived until November 1941 and even then only 70 rounds for each battalion with which to practise and to fight. So these 3-inch mortars were fired and registered in their battle positions for the first time 12 hours before they were in action against the enemy. There was neither pack mule nor carrying equipment for these 3-inch mortars, which meant that the weapons and the ammunition had to be moved everywhere by hand. Not a Rajput or a Punjabi had been instructed in detonating because no dummies ever arrived. So without any preliminary

practice the 3-inch mortars were handed round after the battle had started.

It is the personal opinion of the writer that, with such a shortage of arms and ammunition for which the shortage everywhere else is too facile an excuse, General Maltby would have lost nothing and possibly gained something by putting the Canadians on the mainland and leaving the island garrison as it was; but the present writer knows that between the landing of those Canadians, some of whom had hardly seen a tree let alone a hill, and the Japanese attack there would be only three weeks. General Maltby did not know that, and therefore he cannot be criticised for the decision he took.

Between November 11th and November 22nd the Rajputs and Punjabis were withdrawn from the frontier training camp at Lo Wu in order to renovate the Gindrinkers Line built three or four years previously. The old pillboxes and the Shing Mun Redoubt were reoccupied. Former sited positions were re-wired and mined. By the end of November the whole of the Mainland Brigade was living in its battle positions on the Gindrinkers Line.

As December came in it was clear that the situation in regard to Japan was acutely menacing, and three Japanese divisions were announced to be round To Kat, only eight miles from the frontier. On December 7th news was received that Japanese troops were concentrating in the Sham Chun Hu, covering the railway to Canton, and eastward near the North Gap where the road to Fanling enters the New Territory from the province of Kwantung. The company of the 2/14th Punjab Regt entrusted with the final demolitions and delaying action was in position.

At 4.45 a.m. on December 8th a Tokyo broadcast was heard notifying their nationals that war with Great Britain and the United States might be declared at any moment. Major Gray commanding the Punjabi frontier company was ordered to blow the forward demolitions, and at 8 a.m. 12 Japanese bombers and 36 fighters of that Japanese air force whose bombing the Far Eastern Combined Bureau at Singapore had derided dived down to 60 feet over the Kai Tak aerodrome and destroyed most of the grounded planes—training planes of the R.A.F. and civil craft. At the same hour the Japanese began bridging by Lo Wu and on their left a battalion deployed into what was called Laffan's Plain.

That morning Major-General Maltby and command headquarters moved down the 13 flights of 102 steps to the Battle Box from which the defence of Hong Kong was to be conducted. This

underground battle headquarters was constructed in 1937 when the Maginot Line was still a military maidenhead intact and was dug into the heart of Victoria City.

Brigade headquarters of the Mainland Brigade commanded by Brigadier C. Wallis was at the north end of Waterloo Road in teeming Kowloon. The left of the Gindrinkers or Inner Line as it was called was held by the 2nd Royal Scots, the centre by the 2/14th Punjab Regt, and the right by the 5th Rajput Regt. A look at the map will show how the companies were disposed. It should be noted that at the beginning of hostilities there was a gap along the Shing Mun ravine between the Royal Scots and the Punjabis, and that D Company of the 5th Rajputs in reserve by the Customs Pass was brought up on December 9th to fill this gap. C Company of the 2/14th Punjab Regt had been the forward troops company and after withdrawing from Fanling it took up its positions to the left of D Company (2/14th) on the evening of December 9th.

At Kai Tak aerodrome was No. 1 Company of the Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps, a sort of Home Guard who behaved magnificently throughout their ordeal by battle. Four troops of the 1st Hong Kong Singapore Regt of Artillery were at the Filter Beds with four 4.5 howitzers, at Tai Wai and the Customs Pass with eight 3.7 howitzers, and at Kowloon Polo Ground with four 6-inch howitzers.

The headquarters of the Island Brigade commanded by Brigadier J. K. Lawson was on the western slope of the Wong Nei Chong Gap. The Royal Rifles of Canada manned the beach defences of the south-east sector of the island, the Winnipeg Grenadiers were in the south-west. The 1st Middlesex Regt manned the vital beach defences opposite the mainland with their machine-guns. In the event the Middlesex and the 2/14th Punjab Regt which had been the original mainland battalion intended to delay the enemy's advance for only 48 hours were the only two battalions that had had any practice in the part they would have to play in the defence. The others were all unfamiliar with the ground in their rear, and again the handicap of that last minute change in the defence plan by the arrival of those two Canadian battalions without their transport must be emphasised.

Companies of the Hong Kong Volunteer Defence were widely dispersed inland; three or four medium batteries of the 1st Hong Kong and Singapore Regt of Artillery, and coastal defence and anti-aircraft batteries were at various points inland and round the coast.

The R.A.F. detachment at Kai Tak was never intended for active operations; its planes were grounded on the first day and re-

mained grounded until the Japanese destroyed them. There were no anti-aircraft guns on the mainland and very few on the island.

The naval units were too small and too few to affect the operations. Two destroyers, several motor torpedo-boats and some converted steamers were available, and these in the words of General Maltby 'carried out their duties in very difficult circumstances with the utmost gallantry and in the true tradition of the Royal Navy.'

By 9 p.m. on December 8th the forward troops began their pre-arranged withdrawal down the Fanling Road towards Tai Po. Demolitions were carried out in the narrow Pineapple Pass, and south of the Tai Po ravine the 2/14th put in some good shooting on the Japanese infantry moving in close column down the Shalo Tung track on the other side of the pale aquamarine water that washes the bay at the head of which stands the village of Tai Po. However, the enemy pressed on and infiltration on the left flank of the Punjabis compelled two further withdrawals to the high ground south-east, where Major Gray hoped to be able to remain for the night. Heavy casualties were inflicted on an attacking party, but the Japanese were making the most of the bright moonlight by which our intelligence supposed they would be bewildered, and in small columns, led by local guides, in one case by three Chinese women, along cross country tracks, they developed their pressure. Some time before midnight about 150 Japanese landed from sampans near Cheung Shui Tan behind the Punjabis, which involved a further retirement. Finally just before dawn of December 9th the forward company, its task accomplished, withdrew to Monastery Ridge just forward of the Gindrinkers Line and east of the Jubilee Reservoir. Here it remained all day until withdrawn by orders at dusk.

While the forward company of the 2/14th was falling back before enemy forces estimated at three battalions other enemy troops were advancing down the Castle Peak road which runs round the west of the New Territory. The Au Tau bridge had been blown, which held up the enemy transport. Patrols of the Royal Scots after a clash with the enemy at Yuen Long were withdrawn to positions west of Tsun Wan Wai just above Gindrinkers Bay; but by dawn of the 9th the enemy moving rapidly through Telegraph Pass had closed up on these positions and the Royal Scots retired to their positions in the Line. About the same time the Rajput reserve company was moved up to fill the gap along the Shing Mun ravine.

For the rest of the day activity was confined to patrols and scattered shelling. Small bodies of the enemy were reported to be crossing Tide Cove toward Buffalo Hill. Lieut.-Colonel Rawlinson of the

5th Rajputs ordered a day and night standing patrol on Heather Hill as a precaution, but no serious attack from this direction developed for another two days. There were frequent low level machine-gun attacks by the enemy's air force and crude propaganda leaflets addressed to the Indian troops were dropped.

At dusk the forward troops withdrew from Monastery Ridge under mortar and small arms fire to a reserve position in the left rear of their battalion. C Company of the 2/14th Punjab Regt had carried out 16 major road and rail demolitions just ahead of three battalions of Japanese on whom they had inflicted some 100 casualties without loss to themselves.

The whole of the Mainland Brigade was now in position behind the convex line from Gindrinkers Bay to Port Shelter. It was expected that the Mainland Brigade would hold this line for at least a week or ten days; what advantage would have accrued to Hong Kong itself if this dream had been fulfilled is not apparent. In the event the dream was not fulfilled, but the danger of high-lighting minor failures is that it blinds the eyes of the public and prevents their recognising the major responsibility of those in England whose myopia, mental laziness and moral cowardice presented Hong Kong, Singapore and Rangoon to the Japanese years before a platoon of the Royal Scots was bombed out of the Shing Mun Redoubt on that moonlight night in December 1941.

The Redoubt was attacked late on the evening of December 9th. At 11 p.m. the commander of the Rajput company which had been moved in to fill the gap between the Royal Scots and the Punjabis reported that enemy could be heard moving about in the Shing Mun ravine on his immediate front, and a little later the 'nearest 2nd Royal Scots Company reported hearing explosions from one of the pill-boxes constituting Shing Mun Redoubt. Within the hour it was clear that the Shing Mun Redoubt had fallen, including the artillery observation post and the H.Q. of 'A' Company 2nd Royal Scots.'[1]

The Shing Mun Redoubt stood on a saddle of land above an angle of the road less than half a mile south of the great dam of the Jubilee Reservoir 280 feet high. It was a concrete tunnel in the hillside from which steps led up to various firing points and it was ventilated by large chimneys which offered assailants a perfect opportunity to drop grenades down them. The Japanese did not neglect such an opportunity and that was the end of the Shing Mun Redoubt. 'The capture by surprise of this key position which dominated a large portion of the left flank and the importance of which had been so

[1] Major-General C. M. Maltby's Despatch, January 1948.

frequently stressed beforehand, directly and gravely affected subsequent events and prejudiced Naval, Military and Civil Defence arrangements.'[1]

That being the case, it is difficult to understand why such a vital position was left at first with a 1,500 yards' gap before the reserve Rajput company was called up. The garrison of this key position consisted of one platoon, A Company headquarters, and an observation post party from the Hong Kong and Singapore Regt of Artillery with one British and half a dozen Sikh gunners. The action began at 8 p.m. and by midnight communications with higher formations were cut. Two sections of the platoon managed to retire from the Redoubt and join the Rajputs on their right. Company headquarters surrendered at 4 a.m. on December 10th and the forward pillbox held out until 7 a.m. The Sikhs to quote an eyewitness 'behaved with calm valour and suffered correspondingly heavily.'

An attempt by the enemy just after dawn to exploit his success by pushing south-east along Smugglers Ridge was smashed by Captain Newton's company of Rajputs, and this coupled with Major Gray's Punjabis' taking up positions covering the junction of the Golden Hill and Tai Po roads south of Smugglers Ridge, stabilised the situation for a time. A company of Winnipeg Grenadiers had been sent over from the island during the night and placed in Mainland Brigade reserve at the Kowloon Polo ground.

It was clear by now that a vigorous counter-attack was necessary if the mainland defences were to hold much longer. This was considered impossible because of the serious gap that would be made between the Punjabis and Shing Mun if Captain Newton's Rajputs were used, and because the Royal Scots were in no condition to undertake one. With their right flank and centre dangerously exposed the Royal Scots were withdrawn at dusk to the Golden Hill line running down to the sea in the Lai Chi Kok peninsula.

All that day the four companies of the 2/14th Punjab Regt and C Company of the 5th Rajput Regt were shelled by enemy batteries on the Tai Po road, and many forward pillboxes at Wong Uk and on the slopes to the south were destroyed. 'Pillboxes, for the most part camouflaged, were yet known to the enemy,' Major Gray of the 2/14th noted. 'They were shelled in turn, and the flimsiness of their construction . . . became apparent. They were little more than death-traps. In most cases the roofs were blown off by direct fire.'

The crews were ordered to occupy their alternative positions during daylight which prevented heavy casualties; even those

[1] *ibid.*

alternative positions were often made untenable, and both the forward crews of C Company 5th Rajput Regt were ordered back to Dome Hill that evening. In spite of everything the crew of one Punjabi pillbox at Wong Uk had the satisfaction of sinking two sampans full of disguised Japanese, and only a few survivors managed to reach the shore and scramble away to Buffalo Hill.

At 8 a.m. on December 11th Brigadier Wallis held a routine conference to explain the plans for a general withdrawal from the mainland should it be necessary in the course of the next two days. Two hours later news came that the left flank of the Royal Scots had broken under mortar fire and that they had fallen back in disorder as far as the pencil factory which meant that the junction of the Castle Peak and Tai Po roads was now exposed.

So grave was the situation this created that Maltby did not feel justified in taking the risk of having the greater part of the Mainland Brigade cut off by Japanese forces advancing on Kowloon south of Golden Hill, and he gave orders for all troops to be evacuated from the mainland at dusk except the 5th Rajputs and a troop of the 1st Mountain Battery R.A.

The general plan of the withdrawal was for the 2/14th and Captain Newton's Rajput company to retire down the Devil's Peak peninsula covered by the main body of the 5th Rajputs and Major Hunt's troop of 3.7 howitzers. This move had never been practised. As the country was difficult and in many parts impassable to motor transport, the mule corps was to help in this part of the evacuation. The remainder of the Mainland Brigade was to cross over to Victoria from Kowloon.

Ever since dawn on that December 11th the Punjabi post had been shelled almost continuously and communications were becoming seriously disrupted. All cables and lines with A Company were broken, and every section had to be informed of the withdrawal by runner. It was 1.30 p.m. before the last section at Shati Pass had received the order. D Company was brought back to fre positions in the Beacon Hill area where battalion headquarters a C Company were already established. Just before it moved D Company damaged two light tanks of the enemy near to the Tai Wai level crossing with anti-tank rifles, and in combination with B Company destroyed two truckloads of Japanese troops in the same area.

During the afternoon A Company 5th Rajput Regt was ordered to occupy the position north-east of Kai Tak which had originally been held by D, the reserve company. This move was made

to provide cover for the retiring Punjabis. The road to Hang Hau was blown and by 5 p.m. the first two companies of the 2/14th (A and B) were beginning to pass through, both being embarked at the Devil's Peak pier between 1 a.m. and 2 a.m. of December 12th.

Throughout the afternoon and evening of the 11th there was a good deal of confusion on the Kowloon peninsula. Armed fifth columnists were moving about the streets where there was much rioting and looting. Many of the Chinese launch-crews and lorry drivers were deserting, but in spite of all difficulties, the guns, motor-transport and heavy equipment were successfully evacuated by dusk; at 7 p.m. the Royal Scots and Winnipeg Grenadiers began to embark, and they were both back on the island before midnight. A small party of Punjabis commanded by Lieut. Forsyth was stranded for the night at Kowloon Point and at dawn was joined by 20 stragglers from D Company 2/14th. Soon afterwards, just as a ferry-load of refugees was leaving, the first Japanese troops appeared. Three of them were killed and the patrol was driven off, but firing continued until the ferry-boat returned and the Punjabis could board it. Then they were able to turn one or two light machine-guns on the enemy and the ferry-boat crossed over to the island in safety.

Meanwhile, the other two Punjabi companies with D Company of the Rajputs set out from the Tai Po Reservoir area for the Devil's Peak at nightfall on what was to be a most exhausting march. The moon now waning to a decrescent would not rise till after midnight, and the night was black. No mule transport had arrived and therefore blankets and rations had to be abandoned in order to carry as much in the way of arms and ammunition as possible. The last meal had been eaten in the early hours of the morning and the men had no iron rations.

Lieut.-Colonel Kidd of the 2/14th Punjab Regt was in the lead and following the line of a water catchment the party reached Shatin Pass without difficulty. Then they lost their way.

Lieut.-Colonel Rawlinson of the 5th Rajput Regt with his headquarters at Customs Pass had been expecting the 2/14th to arrive by about 2 a.m. At 3.30 a.m. there was still no sign of them when he received orders to begin the planned withdrawal to the Ma Lau Tong line where the Devil's Peak peninsula narrows between Kowloon Bay and Junk Bay. Heavy small arms fire was now heard from the direction of Tate's Cairn which had been seized earlier by the Japanese coming from Tide Cove and Buffalo Hill. However, C

Company was able to disengage from the enemy with light casualties and the whole battalion was able to move toward its new line without mishap.

At 4 a.m. the 2/14th had still not arrived, but at last they appeared in Hai Wan three miles south of Ma Lau Tong where they were met by Rawlinson. The fear that they had been cut off by the enemy at Tate's Cairn was relieved. In the darkness they had by-passed Customs Pass and had come down Jat Incline and Anderson's Road. The whole party was utterly exhausted by its march of nearly 18 miles with arms and equipment, all carried by hand. Two anti-tank rifles had been abandoned by order; but all the medium machine-guns and mortars were brought back, and that march was one more example of the spirit of that wonderful Indian Army led by officers who these stout-hearted men knew would not let them down.

At Hai Wan D Company of the Rajputs in the rear of the Punjabis was sent into reserve, while the latter went on down to the jetty area to lie up during the day. C Company was placed on Devil's Peak to protect the 3.7 howitzer troop and give depth to the defence of the Ma Lau Tong line.

At daybreak A and B Companies of the Rajputs were holding forward positions south-west and east of Ma Lau Tong with C Company and battalion headquarters at Hai Wan. Three positions had already been prepared by the Rajputs in case of the abandonment of the Gindrinkers Line, and during December 12th improvements were made. Major Hunt's howitzers were able to make things unpleasant for Japanese parties seen moving about at Kai Tak and in Customs Pass.

Late in the afternoon the enemy began to close up on the Rajput line, and enemy patrols were reported in contact with the forward positions. A Japanese battalion was working its way down the westerly slopes of Chin Lan Chu above Anderson's Road, and shortly before 6 p.m the two forward companies were attacked. The attack was broken up by machine-gun and artillery fire, and within half an hour the enemy was retiring in disorder with heavy casualties and without having penetrated the frontal stretch of wire at any point. A 6-inch howitzer battery at Tytam on the island shelled the retreating Japanese with effect; by 9 p.m. all was quiet.

The Punjabi headquarters with C and D Companies were now embarking for the island, and it was decided to withdraw the Rajputs to the Hai Wan position where they would be concentrated and where their flanks would be less exposed to water-borne attack

This necessitated the evacuation of the howitzer troop which had been doing such good work. By midnight A and B Rajput companies covered by a platoon of D Company on Black Hill were clear of their Ma Lau Tong positions, and after the Punjabis had crossed the Lei U Mun Strait, A Company of the Rajputs and the howitzer troop less their baggage and mules prepared to follow them over to the island. Then B Company moved to a position on the right of C Company at Hai Wan.

By 4 a.m. on December 13th the bulk of Major Hunt's troop had been evacuated, and the question arose of the advisableness of withdrawing the whole Rajput battalion. Desertion by the Chinese crews of the launches was imperilling the water-transport, and as the Rajputs were not in close contact with the enemy Maltby ordered their immediate withdrawal to the island.

Four motor torpedo-boats and H.M. Destroyer *Thracian* were sent to help the W.D.V. *Victoria* which was evacuating men and equipment; by 7.30 a.m. battalion headquarters and the last covering troops of the 5th Rajput Regt were withdrawing from the Devil's Peak peninsula in broad daylight without interference from the enemy. The 2/14th had already disembarked at Pak Sha Wan and were occuping their new positions in Victoria City. The Rajputs were taken by sea right round to Aberdeen whence they were sent to the Tytam area to rest for 24 hours and refit. Ten sepoys who had been stranded on Devil's Peak managed to get hold of a sampan and cross over during the day, rejoining the battalion that evening.

120 mules were abandoned on the mainland because the mule-lighter's crew had deserted and the lighter holed by enemy fire could not put to sea. This loss was destined to have a serious effect on the island fighting when several guns fell into the hands of the enemy for lack of mule transport. Much ammunition and equipment was also lost, but casualties were fortunately light.

The two Indian battalions had not been heavily engaged with the enemy, but they had carried out with exemplary discipline all that had been asked of them, and their morale was high in spite of what must have seemed to them a curiously hasty withdrawal from positions they had spent so much time and labour in preparing. That the last minute decision to attempt to hold the Gindrinkers Line shortened by a little the time that Hong Kong was able to hold out is possible, but whatever plan of defence had been adopted to defend the island it was doomed and its garrison was expendible.

Chapter 17.

December, 1941. New positions of garrison—Japanese secure a footing—heavy bombardments, and severe losses to defenders—their capitulation—was Hong Kong defensible?

WITH the finish of operations on the mainland the whole garrison was now on the island, which involved a reorganisation of the dispositions. By noon of December 15th the 2nd Royal Scots had taken over the north-east sector of the island from the 1st Middlesex Regt, the 2/14th Punjab Regt occupied positions along the Victoria water-front and on the high ground at the back, the 5th Rajput Regt was resting and reorganising at Tytam, the two Canadian battalions remained in their original sectors to the south-east and south-west of the island, and the 1st Middlesex Regt held a small area at Leighton Hill on the right of the 2/14th in addition to manning the pillboxes all along the much indented south coast.

During the evening of the 15th the Rajputs relieved the Royal Scots in the north-east sector between Pak Sha Wan and Causeway Bay, and the Royal Scots moved to the Stubbs Road area, south of the Race Course, to refit and reorganise. The battalion had lost many of its best officers; malaria had accounted for a quarter of its effective strength; Dunbarton's Drums were muffled. In the original defence plan the Royal Scots had been entrusted with the south-west sector of the island, and that was another reason against leaving them in the north-east sector.

Now, to suit the new dispositions, the island was divided into two brigades, divided in their spheres of operation by a line running from Tai Hang village on the north coast through the Wong Nei Chong Gap along the road below the westerly slope of Violet Hill to Repulse Bay on the south coast. The East Brigade commanded by Brigadier Wallis consisted of the 5th Rajput Regt, the Royal Rifles of Canada and two of the 1st Middlesex Regt companies. The West Brigade commanded by Brigadier Lawson consisted of the 2/14th Punjab Regt, the 2nd Royal Scots and the Winnipeg Grenadiers battalion headquarters; the three companies of the Middlesex at Leighton Hill and in the south at Little Hong Kong were a part of Fortress Troops, taking their orders from Fortress Headquarters. In support of each brigade were the mobile batteries of the 1st Hong

Kong and Singapore Regt of Artillery, and the coastal defence forts with guns ranging from 4-inch to 9·2-inch. The latter were directly under command of the officer commanding 8th Coast Regt R.A. and Fortress Headquarters.

It was considered impracticable to concentrate any part of the garrison in one spot as a mobile reserve ready to counter-attack in any direction on account of the paucity of troops and the liability of the island to combined attacks from the north and south simultaneously. No doubt several enemy landings on Lamma Island, two miles south-west of Aberdeen, during December 11th and 12th suggested a likelihood of such a method of attack by the enemy. Nevertheless, the lack of such a mobile reserve does appear as a very grave handicap, and one may fancy that, if General Maltby had had more time to consider how to use the Canadian reinforcements and if their transport had reached Hong Kong instead of being sent to Australia, the dispositions would have been different. Much depended on the pillboxes round the coast manned by machine-gunners of the Middlesex whose task it was to inflict maximum casualties on the enemy while he was most vulnerable on the water. On the high ground behind the pillboxes the five infantry battalions with their own reserves were entrusted with the counter-attack where enemy penetrations should be successfully made. The north-east sector was considered the most favourable to a hostile landing and here the Rajputs held two companies (B and C) in reserve. In the north-west sector, where a boom had been laid off shore between Green Isle and Sheung Wan, the Punjabis held one company only (B) in reserve. The Royal Scots, less one company which held a narrow platoon post between the Punjabis and Middlesex south of Mount Parish, were retained in West Brigade reserve until they were reorganised.

In the interval between the evacuation of the Territory and the first Japanese landings on the island the enemy's shelling and bombing were almost incessant. On the morning of December 13th a launch reached Victoria Pier with a staff officer of Lieut.-General Sakai, commanding the Japanese forces, who was the bearer of a letter to Sir Mark Young, the Governor, in which the surrender of Hong Kong was demanded under threat of severe shelling and air bombardment if it was refused. The demand was rejected, and the artillery fire from Kowloon and other parts of the Territory at once increased in severity and accuracy. The coastal defence and mobile batteries could not reply with any effect because the enemy batteries were too well hidden and too numerous.

On December 13th and 14th the Japanese fire was mainly directed against guns and communications in the north-west sector. Batteries on Mount Davis and at Belcher Point were put out of action. Serious fires were started at Kennedy Town and West Point in the area of A Company of the 2/14th. There was a particularly heavy concentration on Magazine Gap, about half a mile south of Fortress Headquarters which cut eight main cables and knocked out 195 telephone circuits. The Royal Signals restored communications within 24 hours, but the problem of cut communications was acute throughout Hong Kong's ordeal. Food distribution in the thronged city was another complication, and the civilian population under the terror of the bombardment was becoming disorderly in some parts. Fifth columnists attached to the Chinese quisling Wang Chong-Wei were active, spreading alarmist rumours, stirring up discontent, and even sniping from buildings. Signalling from the hilltops to direct the enemy's artillery on to motor transport and concealed gun positions was frequent.

By the end of the day on December 15th Indian troops were manning pillboxes and occupying positions right along the northerly face of the island, and these pillboxes were shelled all that day and the next. Alternative positions were prepared in basements and godowns on the landward side of the coastal road, but these were shelled and often hit. By the evening of the 16th more than half of the pillboxes in the north-east sector had been smashed up or badly damaged, and all crews in this area were ordered to occupy their alternative positions during daylight. Dive-bombing attacks were made on different parts of the island.

In such conditions the Rajput reserve companies (B and C) were called upon to plan their counter-attacks, the former to prevent enemy penetration between Tai Hang village and Braemar, the latter between Braemar and Sau Ki Wan. On December 17th two air attacks on Sau Ki Wan and the city area were succeeded by a brief but extremely severe shelling of the central district, and the coastal road between Braemar and Sau Ki Wan. Then at 11 a.m. the bombardment ceased and soon afterwards two Japanese launches arrived with renewed demands for surrender. To these Sir Mark Young replied:

> The Governor and Commander-in-Chief of Hong Kong declines most absolutely to enter into any negotiations for the surrender of Hong Kong and he takes this opportunity of notifying Lt.-General Takaishi Sakai and Vice-Admiral Masaichi Niimi that he is not prepared to receive any further communications from them on the subject.

At 2 p.m. the shelling began again, and much enemy activity seawards was observed on both sides of the island, but particularly what looked like a concentration of small transport craft at Kai Tak and the Kowloon shipyards. However, for the first time several enemy batteries and three mortars were silenced by counter battery action from the island, and that was some compensation for having to withdraw to new positions two 18-pounder beach defence guns at Braemar because a large paint factory close by had been set on fire that night.

On the morning of December 18th the shelling of the north-east sector was ominously heavier than usual. The petrol and oil storage tanks at North Point were set alight. The two 18-pounders in their new positions at Braemar police station were destroyed by direct hits. Battalion headquarters of the Rajputs was knocked about. By afternoon the road between Causeway Bay and Sau Ki Wan was an embranglement of tram wires and fallen standards almost impassable even to despatch-riders.

Repeated air raids added to the confusion. In a particularly heavy one on the Central District a bomb hit an underground miniature range in which 80 sepoys of the Punjab headquarters company were taking shelter. The walls collapsed; 24 were killed and 36 injured. Stanley Barracks and the Sai Wan observation post were dive-bombed during the afternoon.

Just before 6 p.m. a party of 200 Japanese was seen moving down from Hai Wan to the Devil's Peak jetty. The island batteries opened up, and soon afterwards the enemy using guns and mortars of all calibres began a terrific bombardment of the north-east coastal area.

By this time Brigadier Wallis and Lieut.-Colonel Rawlinson were convinced that the enemy would attempt a landing in that sector during the night. A mass of smoke from the burning fuel tanks and paint factory was drifting easterly across the Tai Koo Docks area and blanketing observation, while 12 of the 16 Lyon searchlights had been blotted out and the North Point fixed beam, close to the burning oil tanks, was dead. Then a rubber factory at Sau Ki Wan was set on fire to thicken the smoke, and at 7.30 p.m. the Sai Wan Redoubt was reported unable to stand up to further shelling.

Half an hour later the shelling suddenly stopped. Then above the comparative silence was heard the rattle of machine-gun fire. From Pillbox 43 and Pillbox 44 the Rajputs at Tai Koo Docks were engaging Japanese troops in small boats towed by ferry-steamers across the narrow strait between Devil's Peak and the island. Reports were

received from other Rajput pillboxes of trying to stop the enemy's approach, and all too soon of Japanese footholds at North Point and Lyemun. These landings were achieved at Tai Koo Docks and Aldrich Bay. Pillbox 44 was surrounded and destroyed: the crew of Pillbox 43 was still holding out and taking toll of the swarm all round it.

A concentration of 6-inch howitzer fire on the sugar factory and the dock area of Tai Koo held up the enemy for a while, but within an hour of first landing there had been considerable penetration through the company areas. With a view to checking this the Rajput reserve company (C) was ordered to take up positions on the high ground between Tai Koo and Braemar. The other reserve company (B) at Tai Hang was out of communication with battalion headquarters and therefore could receive no orders where and when to counter-attack. So the enemy after breaking through D Company between Tai Hang and Braemar was able to penetrate as far as Jardine's Look Out unopposed. South of Aldrich Bay the Japanese were able to circumvent the position occupied by A Company and thereby establish themselves on the northerly and north-easterly slopes of Mount Parker. The anti-aircraft position on Sai Wan Hill was captured, and the fixed beam at Lyemun after resisting two attacks was finally abandoned.

By midnight the situation in the north-east sector was beyond control. The Rajput battalion headquarters had been forced to withdraw a couple of hundred yards south of Tai Koo by hard fighting round it, and when it was able to return it was unable to get into touch with either B or D Company. Pillbox 43 remained in communication and was continuously engaged with the enemy until just before midnight when, with every single man in the crew killed or wounded, Pillbox 43 was overrun.

The scope of this book prevents any detailed account of the valour displayed by the 1st Middlesex Regt in the defence of the pillboxes they held. Let it be said that the Middlesex in Hong Kong were worthy heirs of the old 57th Foot, the Die Hards of Albuhera, and let it be added that in Pillbox 43 the Rajputs showed themselves noble heirs of the noble Rajput race.

As the last communication from Pillbox 43 came through, battalion headquarters was again in danger of being surrounded, and Lieut.-Colonel Rawlinson after connecting Captain Ansari of A Company by telephone direct to Fortress Headquarters withdrew towards the south. The party was attacked twice on the easterly slopes of Mount Butler, and Rawlinson, all touch having been lost

with his battalion, decided finally to make for Tai Hang village with a nucleus headquarters and sent the rest of his party farther south to Tytam. It was then 3 a.m. of December 19th.

Meanwhile, a company of the Royal Rifles of Canada on the eastern slopes of Mount Parker had been falling back toward the Tytam Gap. A and C Companies of the 5th Rajput Regt had held doggedly on to their positions above Aldrich Bay until in the early hours of that winter's morning they were overrun. Pillbox 40, away by itself on the nearest point to Devil's Peak, continued firing until 3 a.m. when its ammunition was exhausted; other isolated Rajput units round Sau Ki Wan fought hard until shortly before dawn they had to surrender. D Company of the Rajputs fought on in the North Point area where a small group of the Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps, all men over 55 years old, battled with superb gallantry to hold the Power House with employees of the Hong Kong Electric Company. Throughout the ordeal of Hong Kong the volunteer companies proved themselves in the words of Major-General Maltby 'stubborn and gallant soldiers.'

B Company of the Rajputs and a platoon of the Middlesex reconnoitred the area north of Tai Hang village, but were unable to help the hard pressed D Company or the Volunteers. Then Captain Newton commanding D Company was killed, and only a few stragglers from his company managed to reach the Middlesex positions south of Causeway Bay.

When day broke on December 19th the Japanese were in possession of Jardine's Look Out, Mount Butler and the northern slopes of Mount Parker. The small force in the power house was still holding out, but effective resistance in the north-east sector was finished. The 5th Rajputs who had borne the brunt of the enemy's first landing alone were now reduced to one company (B) almost complete at Tai Hang and a few odd survivors from the rest of the battalion, some of them at Tai Hang, the rest at Tytam. About 7 a.m. Lieut.-Colonel Rawlinson trying to reach Tai Hang with his nucleus headquarters and resume command of his shattered battalion was turned back by heavy fire from the Japanese on Jardine's Look Out and had to retire south to the Tytam Tuk Reservoir. What was left of the Rajputs at Tai Hang was placed under command of the Middlesex at Leighton Hill.

At 7.30 a.m. strong enemy reinforcements were observed crossing over to North Point in light craft of various types and six motor torpedo-boats were ordered to attack them from Green Isle. One enemy launch was sunk, another set on fire and a third compelled to

turn back—each of them carrying about 40 troops. The ferrying was temporarily held up by this action, but nothing was gained by it, for one M.T.B. was sunk with all hands, another ran aground at Kowloon, and a third was severely damaged.

By 9.30 a.m. the fighting was concentrated round the Wong Nei Chong and Tytam Gaps in which the two brigade headquarters were placed. At the latter East Brigade H.Q. was under small arms fire, and the brigade widely dispersed over the south-east portion of the island. It was decided that Brigadier Wallis should concentrate all his forces in the Stanley peninsula south of the Twins and Notting Hill. The little Rajput battalion headquarters party at Tytam Tuk Reservoir—four British officers and 10 Indian other ranks—was ordered to hold the Tytam cross-roads until the last troops had passed through at 1.30 p.m. It was then relieved by a platoon of the Canadian Rifles, and by dusk the whole of East Brigade, including about 50 Rajputs, was in its new positions. Seven of the eight mobile batteries in East Group R.A. were either destroyed or abandoned in this withdrawal for want of the mules left behind at Devil's Peak. The subsequent lack of artillery support in counter-attacks was one of the main causes which kept East Brigade finally separated from West Brigade.

The strategic importance of the Wong Nei Chong Gap has already been noted, and the enemy well aware of its vital importance to the defence of the island had advanced against the Gap soon after dawn on the 19th and managed to seize a police station on a prominent knoll within the Gap itself.

At 10 a.m. Brigadier Lawson telephoned to Fortress H.Q. that his shelters were surrounded and that he was about to go into action. In those concrete excavations the gallant Canadian must have felt a wild desire to meet death under the open sky. He was killed almost immediately and buried where he fell. The Chinese used the cross at his head for firewood during the Japanese occupation. Lawson's brigade major was wounded. The whole of the H.Q. of West Brigade's Royal Artillery was either killed or captured. Lieut. Kerfoot of the 2/14th Punjab Regt was sent with three carriers to cover the evacuation of West Brigade Headquarters, but he arrived a few minutes too late to be of any help and was himself killed when about to withdraw. All three carriers were brought back safely despite the severe head wounds of the driver and gunner of Kerfoot's own carrier.

Meanwhile, B Company of the 2/14th after bombing the enemy off two small features north-west of the Gap with hand grenades had

occupied them and thus filled a space between the Middlesex on Caroline Hill and the Royal Scots. When these flanking units were withdrawn the Punjabis were isolated and subjected to heavy mortar and shell fire. However, Major Kamta Trasad held on to this position until the afternoon of December 21st when he had no alternative to retirement.

That morning Lieut.-Colonel Kidd of the 2/14th received orders to attack east from Leighton Hill in order to help the Rajput D Company withdraw from the North Point area. After a preliminary reconnaissance which provided no information of any value Kidd moved off with A and D Companies to seize Caroline Hill, abandoned by the Middlesex but not yet occupied by the enemy. From here the two companies advanced up a steep hillside to a col about 1,000 yards to the north-east, which was their final objective. When they were only a few feet from the top they met the enemy and there was fierce hand to hand fighting. One or two Punjabis who managed to reach the col were able to get a glimpse of the North Point area, but could see no sign of any Rajputs, and without assurance of their still requiring aid it was not considered worth the heavy casualties it would have entailed to force the Japanese position. Therefore the Punjabis withdrew to Caroline Hill and thence about 7 p.m. that evening to the Race Course where transport was waiting to take both companies back to their Victoria positions. Thirty men were killed and wounded in the attack on the col, and afterwards it was learned that the few survivors of the Rajput D Company had managed to get through the Japanese lines and rejoin what was left of their battalion at Tytam.

During that night West Brigade helped by some 100 Indian gunners and two armoured cars sent by Brigadier Wallis from Repulse Bay managed to reoccupy the Wong Nei Chong Gap. All attempts to recapture the police station, however, were frustrated; just before dawn the Gap was abandoned and positions were taken up on Mount Nicholson.

By the morning of December 20th the strategic situation on the island was looking grim, for the enemy had thrust a double-pronged fork between the East Brigade on Stanley and the rest of the island. He had reached as far as Brick Hill during the night, thus threatening Aberdeen on the south-west coast and when East Brigade tried to advance north to the Wong Nei Chong Gap the enemy was found to be in possession of Violet Hill, Middle Spur and even of buildings south-west of the Repulse Bay Hotel. Repeated attempts to drive him out of his positions all came to nothing, and when darkness fell

the brigade withdrew to its positions in Stanley, leaving a company of the Canadian Rifles in the Hotel area.

At 10 a.m. A Company of the Punjabis was ordered to clear the road from Aberdeen to the Repulse Bay Hotel, in order to link up with East Brigade in the Middle Spur area. A Company commanded by Captain Thomson and mustering 25 of all ranks advanced east from Aberdeen at 11 a.m. but was held up at the foot of Shouson Hill, a steep scrubby tor above the coastal road, by an enemy post strongly entrenched. C Company of the Middlesex at Little Hong Kong had already had a try to expel the Japanese from this position without success, and the Punjabis, using the fire of the one mortar and one light machine-gun, were equally unsuccessful. Having suffered several casualties, A Company took up positions astride the coastal road until next day.

That morning Fortress Headquarters was informed by Admiral Chan that General Yu Han Mou had wirelessed that 60,000 troops were at Shan Chun on the frontier and were about to attack.

The following message was issued to all units:

> There are indications that Chinese forces are advancing towards the frontier to our aid. All ranks must therefore hold their position at all costs and look forward to only a few more days of strain.

The sole news of troop movements that reached the strained and weary garrison that afternoon was of continuous landings from craft of every kind loaded with Japanese troops at the Tai Koo Docks. Those rescuers of Chiang Kai Shek's were *ombres chinoises* which would be a familiar shadow-show to strained and weary troops in Burma all too soon.

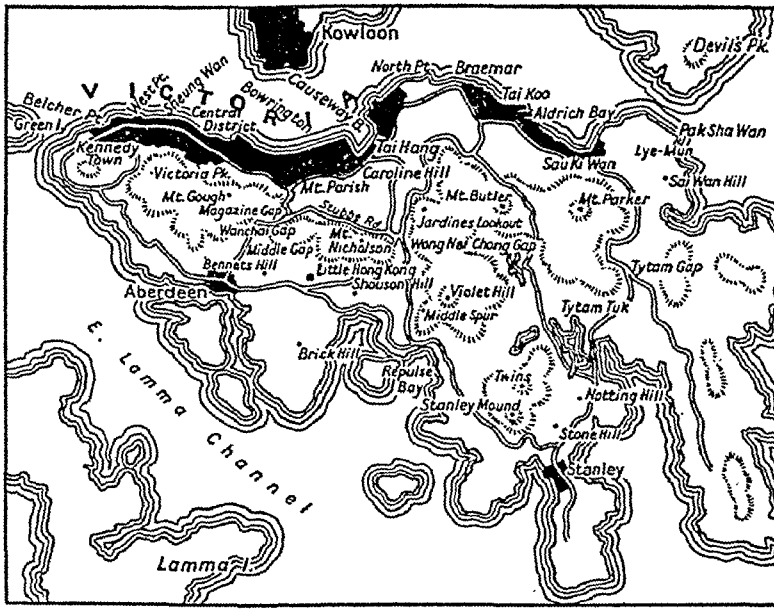
That long night was dark with heavy rain. The troops who had fought on the mainland had had hardly any proper sleep for nearly a fortnight. They were now lying in the dripping tangled hills of Hong Kong, many of them without having eaten a meal for nearly 24 hours and most of them without overcoats. They had provided the Prime Minister with a phrase of rhetorical encouragement, the newspapers with a line or two of dim information that could be spared from the space devoted to the American defence of Manila; they with their opposite numbers in Malaya and in a month or two to be followed by their opposite numbers in Burma were expended like instalments of hire-purchase to keep an Empire.

Just before darkness fell on that intolerable night the Royal Scots and the Winnipeg Grenadiers were driven from their positions

on the eastern slopes of Mount Nicholson, and by dawn the enemy had reached Middle Gap.

During the morning of December 21st H.M. Gunboat *Cicala* after a fortnight of scarcely interrupted action was asked to help the Middlesex who were being attacked from Brick Hill. The ship came into Deepwater Bay and shelled enemy mortars and artillery; the Japanese sent aircraft against her, and after being badly hit she sank later in the Lamma Channel.

A Company of the 2/14th Punjab Regt was still held up on the road



south of Brick Hill, and Maltby ordered a senior officer to be sent immediately from the battalion in Victoria. Three general staff officers including Major C. R. Boxer had already been wounded in that locality the previous day. Lieut.-Colonel Kidd decided to go himself, and after collecting a few naval ratings in Aberdeen on the way joined the 20 of his Punjabis that were left. Fresh supplies and ammunition were distributed, and preparations were made to attack the enemy who had withdrawn to Shouson Hill after dark. There was no artillery or machine-gun fire available to support the Punjabis' assault, and about 25 yards from the top of the fairly steep hill the attackers came under heavy fire from the Japanese in the

scrub round the summit and also from a gaunt square house which commanded the whole slope. The gallant Kidd himself, who was giving his 20 men covering fire from lower down the hill, was killed, and after fierce fighting only eight of the Punjabis were able to reach headquarters of the Middlesex C Company at Little Hong Kong. Major Gray took over command of the 2/14th Punjab Regt. At 9 a.m. one more attempt was made by East Brigade to break through the Wong Nei Chong Gap in a series of attacks; but the Tytam crossroads marked the limit of any advance, except a small-scale attack that evening north of Repulse Bay which got to within 30 yards of that fatal police-station in the Gap. From now on the West and East Brigades operated independently of one another; the division between them was insurmountable.

By midday of December 21st in the north-west sector the Royal Scots and Winnipeg Grenadiers were falling back along the northerly slopes of Mount Cameron towards the Wanchai Gap, and D Company of the Punjabis was rearranged to face south-east and link up with the forces at Wanchai Gap on their right. The Punjab pillboxes on the north shore repeatedly hit by high velocity shell fire were evacuated and their crews placed in reserve at battalion H.Q. Pillbox 59 of the Middlesex received 30 direct hits, but a Diehard sergeant, after withdrawing the crew, temporarily carried on alone with the firing. Two 3-inch mortar teams of the 2/14th were sent to help the Royal Scots in Stubbs Road.

That morning Lieut.-Colonel Rawlinson and the remnants of his battle H.Q. were brought round from Stanley by boat for him to take command of the little Rajput force at Leighton Hill to the right of the Middlesex. Rawlinson reorganised the Rajputs into one composite company with two platoon groups from what was left of B and D Companies. The Punjabis provided a medium machine-gun section, and there were machine-gun sections from the Middlesex and Royal Scots as well.

At 4 p.m. the Military Attaché in Chungking telegraphed that the Chinese attack could not start before January 1st but 'it was hoped that twenty bombers would operate at once against Japanese aerodromes.' And hope was all that exploded.

No further advances in the west half of the island were made by the Japanese after noon. When darkness fell Wanchai Gap, the southern portion of Mount Cameron, Bennet's Hill and, most vital of all, Little Hong Kong, where most of the remaining ammunition was stored, were still held by British and Canadian troops. The Little Hong Kong area was held by Major H. Marsh of the Middle-

sex, a subaltern and a surgeon with 18 Diehards, five Winnipeg Grenadiers, and 14 Chinese of the Hong Kong Volunteers. Major A. J. Dewar R.A.S.C. with 20 naval ratings placed himself under Major Marsh's command and these 60 heroes entirely surrounded by the enemy held out until the final surrender.

All through the afternoon large numbers of Japanese reinforcements were crossing from the mainland to North Point, and at midnight a cable arrived from the War Office 'emphasising the need to destroy all oil installations.' We must not gibe at such evidence of last minute foresight, but when we remember that bombed, shelled, hungry, exhausted, ill-equipped and desperate garrison, we may be allowed to wish that such foresight could have been granted earlier, and about the future of men as well as of oil.

On December 22nd East Brigade was being forced back toward the prison and fort at the narrow end of the Stanley peninsula: by 6 p.m. both Stanley Mound and Stone Hill had been lost.

The enemy made a few fresh gains west of the Wong Nei Chong Gap, but the Winnipeg Grenadiers on Mount Cameron held on to their positions all day in spite of heavy dive-bombing and mortar fire. On the northern slopes of Mount Nicholson, however, Japanese troops were digging in hardly 100 yards from the Royal Scots H.Q., and Lieut.-Colonel Rawlinson rearranged the right platoon group on Leighton Hill to face south-east. This drew a heavy mortar concentration on the new positions, during which Lieut. Offer was wounded, when Subadar Mehar Khan took over command of the two Rajput platoons, and battalion H.Q. withdrew to a house in Bowrington.

Between midnight and dawn of December 23rd things went badly at the Wanchai Gap. The whole of Mount Cameron was taken by the enemy, and at daybreak the vital ground between Wanchai and Magazine Gaps was held by a few Marines and Volunteers.

During the morning 25 Rajputs discharged from hospital reported at Leighton Hill, and Lieut.-Colonel Rawlinson formed a reserve platoon under Jemadar Shah Mohammed. In the afternoon a heavy concentration of artillery fire was put down on Leighton Hill followed by a powerful infantry attack on the Middlesex sector. The attack was driven back, but part of the Middlesex right flank had to be pulled in, and Rawlinson was compelled to withdraw both the Rajput platoons to the north-east corner of the Race Course, leaving a strong outpost some 700 yards to the south-east.

Bennet's Hill resisted a Japanese attack during that afternoon; but at Stanley Wallis had to relinquish Stanley Mound and Stone

Hill which he had recaptured earlier in the day, and at dusk he reorganised East Brigade on a line of small hills between West Bay and Tytam Bay. Shelling of the peninsula was very severe throughout that day and the next, but as yet there was no serious shortage of water, food or ammunition, and the new line was held until the evening of the 24th.

On the night of December 21st eight officers and 120 other ranks of the R.A.S.C. and the R.A.O.C. with some Canadians had sheltered for the night in a private house called Overbays on the edge of Deepwater Bay after being ordered to evacuate the Ridge where the Advanced Ordnance Depot was situated. Lieut.-Colonel R. A. P. Macpherson remained and with a few administrative details, entirely surrounded by the enemy, held out like the 60 heroes at Little Hong Kong until the final surrender. At about 7.30 p.m. on December 22nd most of the isolated troops at Overbays who had been in contact with the enemy all day managed to get out of the place and slip through the Japanese. At 8 p.m. a warrant officer of the R.A.O.C. telephoned Fortress H.Q. to say that he and four wounded were alone in the house; he was instructed to surrender. This warrant officer did not know that there was a party of 30 others upstairs. Indeed, nobody knew. Next morning (December 23rd) this party tried to surrender, but the Japanese flung hand-grenades into their room and bayoneted all the survivors except a corporal and six men who got away, leaving 28 dead including four Japanese in the room. The warrant officer and the four wounded were burnt to death by the Japanese when they set fire to the house.

This kind of horror might happen at the Repulse Bay Hotel which a company of Canadians was holding with the responsibility of women and children on their hands. When at midnight of December 23rd the troops left the hotel the women and children fell into the hands of the Japanese; they were not murdered.

At 4.45 p.m. on December 23rd the last Army W/T set was destroyed by shell fire, and all communication with the United Kingdom and Singapore ceased except that military messages could be and were transmitted by Royal Navy W/T.

From December 23rd until the end the positions of the 2/14th Punjab Regt in Victoria City were little changed. Early on the morning of that day the eight survivors of A Company at Little Hong Kong were recalled to battalion H.Q. B Company was in reserve. C and D Companies remained in their original positions near Fortress H.Q. as local protection and to die in the last ditch if this was ordered.

The night of the 23rd produced no change in the general situation, but the desperate outlook was beginning to seem devoid of any hope to the tormented garrison. Even water was beginning to run short. Yet during that hopeless night six ammunition lorries with the help of an armoured car of those wonderful Volunteers managed to reach the Ordnance Depot at Little Hong Kong and bring back some gun and mortar ammunition badly needed. The hand grenades wanted urgently for the street fighting that was now developing in the area north of the Race Course were in the Reserve Depot at the Ridge, and the Ridge could not be reached.

Throughout the 24th the enemy from his dominating positions on Mount Nicholson and Jardine's Look Out was able to make things most unpleasant for the Middlesex and the Rajputs, and at 3.30 p.m. after very heavy artillery and mortar shelling with a good deal of dive bombing Leighton Hill was almost surrounded by the swarming enemy. The Diehard garrison was authorised to escape, if it could, through the streets leading to Canal Road. Two officers and 40 other ranks of the Middlesex managed to do so, losing a quarter of their strength in the effort. These men of the old 57th were Captain Man's Z Company, and consisted of spare men of the machine-gun companies with battalion cooks, bandsmen and storemen. If the glories of regimental tradition are to be maintained, as alas, when these words are being penned, seems uncertain, in the British Army of to-day, the name of Hong Kong may stand in the Die Hard chronicle of valour beside Inkerman and Albuhera itself where the King's Colour was cut to ribbons by the French bullets and out of 595 of all ranks 447 were killed and wounded. 'Die hard, my men die hard,' Colonel Inglis exhorted his 57th on that bloody field of Spain, and his spirit exhorted their successors all through the nightmare of Hong Kong.

The Rajput post south-east of the Race Course had to be withdrawn, but the other positions remained as they were, and shortly before midnight an attack on Mount Parish was repulsed by Jemadar Shah Mohammed's platoon of wounded men.

About this time Christmas greetings were sent to all ranks by H.E. the Governor and Fortress H.Q.

Sir Mark Young wrote:

> In pride and admiration I send my greetings this Christmas Day to all who are fighting and to all who are working so nobly and so well to sustain Hong Kong against the assaults of the enemy.

Fight on. Hold fast for King and Empire. God bless you all in this your finest hour.

Fortress H.Q. wrote:

Christmas greetings to all. Let this day be historical in the grand annals of our Empire. The order of the day is Hold Fast.

During that night the enemy penetrated deeply into the Stanley peninsula, occupied the northerly slopes of Bennet's Hill and was in fast increasing numbers in the Race Course area, where the isolated Rajput platoon at the cross roads north-east was withdrawn to a position west of the Canal.

Soon after 9 a.m. on Christmas morning Major C. M. Manners, a retired Gunner living in Hong Kong, who had been captured by the Japanese when the Repulse Bay Hotel was overrun by them, and Mr A. L. Shields, both men well known in the Colony, came across from the enemy's lines under a white flag and reached Fortress H.Q. Here they told Major-General Maltby of their march with men, women and children from the Repulse Bay Hotel through the Wong Nei Chong Gap to North Point, and of the 'incredible' number of guns and troops seen during the last half of their 'trek.' They had been told by the Japanese that they could talk freely, and then went on to urge as their own opinion not suggested by the Japanese that it was useless to continue the struggle. They added that the Japanese commander would not begin any hostilities until noon while the garrison decided whether or not to surrender.

An emergency meeting of the Defence Council was summoned for 10 a.m. at which it was decided to fight on.

The 'truce' was not strictly observed by the enemy because Japanese planes operating from Canton bombed Stanley, Aberdeen and Mount Gough. Japanese artillery also bombed the Gaps. However, in the city area all was quiet until noon when Japanese artillery opened up on a large scale. At 12.30 p.m. the Rajput platoon on Mount Parish was surrounded but managed to break out to the north-west after savage hand to hand fighting, and Mount Parish was occupied by the enemy.

Communications by now had broken down almost completely. Stanley, Wanchai Gap, Magazine Gap and the Royal Scots were cut off. The coast road north was so knocked about by shell fire that none but runners could now pass along it. Only six guns of the mobile artillery were still in action, with an average of 160 rounds to a gun available.

By 1 p.m. the O'Brien Street line, established in the Canal area, was held by 60 of the Middlesex with small parties of Royal Navy, Royal Engineers and Rajputs; with the enemy's attacks growing more intense all the time two officers and 50 other ranks of the 2/14th's B Company were despatched to reinforce Lieut.-Colonel H. W. M. Stewart of the Middlesex who had sent several warnings that 'his men though in good heart, were being slowly but surely overwhelmed.' Wanchai Gap was captured by the enemy between 2 a.m. and 2.30 a.m. The hillside by Magazine Gap was set on fire by incendiaries and the field cables were burnt. The commander of West Brigade reported that the area could not be held for more than 24 hours at the most.

At 2.50 p.m. Lieut.-Colonel Stewart reported that his forward positions were being shelled from Kowloon and North Point and that Captain Man of Z Company had telephoned, 'the line is breaking.'

At 3 p.m. Major-General Maltby considered the situation. East Brigade and Little Hong Kong had been out of communication for some hours, but whatever their situation it could not affect that on the north-west of the island. Bennet's Hill had been surrounded and even as he was considering the situation news came that the garrison had been forced to capitulate. Two companies of the 2/14th Punjab Regt and a handful of exhausted troops were all that stood between the enemy and the densely populated central district of Victoria. The enemy was still bringing in fresh troops. The garrison was worn out by 16 days of continuous fighting without relief for anybody; the ammunition for the few guns left was running out; the water supply was failing. Was he justified in exposing the garrison to certain slaughter by holding out longer? Was he justified in exposing the civilian population to the risk of retaliation by a barbarous enemy? Was there anything he could order that would avert the final collapse and fall of Hong Kong?

Major-General Maltby picked up the telephone and asked Lieut.-Colonel Stewart how much longer in his considered opinion the men could hold the line they now occupied.

'One hour,' Stewart replied.

And those two words decided Maltby to demand no more of men who had already given all that they could give.

At 3.15 p.m. Maltby with the concurrence of the Commodore advised Sir Mark Young accordingly, and at 3.23 p.m. commanding officers were ordered to cease fire and surrender to the enemy as the opportunity presented itself.

The formal surrender of the garrison took place at the Japanese Headquarters in Tai Hang at 6 p.m., and Lieut.-Colonel Lamb R.E. was sent to notify Brigadier Wallis of the capitulation. East Brigade was still holding Stanley Prison and the high ground to the south, and it was not till 2.30 a.m. of December 26th after Wallis had received written confirmation of the surrender from his brigade major that the white flag was hoisted at Stanley.

The Japanese forces available for the attack on Hong Kong consisted of two first line divisions and another division in reserve numbering in all about 50,000 men. They were abundantly supplied with guns and mortars, and were supported by at least 70 planes based on Canton but under the orders of the military commander of the operation against Hong Kong. The combined forces of the garrison amounted to 12,000–13,000 including the sea and air forces. The Japanese casualties were heavy. Soon after the surrender a ceremony was held at the Kai Tak aerodrome to commemorate the 1,895 Japanese troops who were killed. This figure is believed to be underestimated; but even if it be accepted the Japanese casualties in killed and wounded must have been at least 6,000. Allied casualties amounted in all to 1,111 killed, 1,167 missing and 1,362 wounded —a total of 3,640 of which 1,164 were Indian other ranks. Of the 17 British and Indian officers of the 5th Rajput Regt all were casualties, of the 15 British and Indian officers of the 2/14th Punjab Regt eight were casualties, of the 24 British and Indian officers of the Hong Kong and Singapore Regt of Artillery 13 were casualties. These figures do not include the casualties of the Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps, all of whom British, Eurasian, Portuguese and Chinese fought so bravely and so well. Special mention must be made of the officers and men of the R.A.F. who when their machines were destroyed on the first day of the attack volunteered for service on land and fought gallantly beside the naval ratings at Aberdeen with 17 casualties out of a total strength of 86.

In view of the fact that the Japanese were able to launch powerful forces against Malaya and the Philippines simultaneously with their assault on Hong Kong it is difficult not to question the military expediency of defending Hong Kong.[1] That those responsible at home for the conduct of the war were completely confused about the situation in the Far East is obvious from the acceptance of the Canadian offer to send those two battalions across the Pacific in

[1] Mr Churchill opposed the sending of reinforcements to Hong Kong, but later allowed himself to be drawn from this position. *The Second World War*, Vol. iii, p. 157.

November. If all their officers had been Napoleons and all their men veterans of the Guard they could not have affected the issue. It is not being wise after the event to assert that Hong Kong should have been declared an open town if not in 1939 at any rate when the collapse of France offered Indo-China to the exploitation of Japanese strategy. The alternative which was to make it defensible was out of the question, once the Second World War had started. One of the prime necessities was to give the island adequate air support, and that would have meant constructing at least two aerodromes. The existing aerodrome at Kai Tak was completely unsuitable for anything except civil traffic and it was not satisfactory for that. Aircraft carriers to-day might take the place of aerodromes, but in December 1941 there were no aircraft carriers available for Eastern waters. It was known before the war began that the Royal Navy would withdraw from the China Station in the event of hostilities; it was known that defence of the island from the air was impossible. To what purpose were British and Indian troops sacrificed without even the consolation of feeling that they had not given their lives, their health and their liberty in vain? No attempt was made at home to let the people of Great Britain know what the defenders of Hong Kong had to endure before they surrendered, and a tale of superb heroism was soft-pedalled for fear of public morale. The excuse of concealing from the enemy what he wanted to know was of course absurd. It was not fair to let it be supposed that in some way the commander and the garrison had failed. They did fail as human nature must always fail to achieve the impossible. What would have happened on the beaches of Dunkirk without the Royal Navy and without the little ships? The British Expeditionary Force would have surrendered. There was no Navy and there were no little ships at Hong Kong. The garrison of Hong Kong was nearly 1,500 miles from the nearest British base, and Singapore by Christmas Day, 1941 was well on the way toward another inevitable surrender. The fortress of Hong Kong, with a million civilians under incessant bombardment, with troops outnumbered by a ruthless and skilful enemy, with ammunition running low and water running out, with the hospitals crowded with wounded, and with no possible hope of relief, for all knew that Chinese help on any scale was an illusion, and with an exhausted garrison which had been fighting for 18 days a battle for which they knew there was only one outcome—the fortress of Hong Kong! There were some, indeed there were too many, who dared to wonder at the time why the white flag was hoisted so soon. The answer is because the white flag had been flapping from every flag staff in

Whitehall and from Parliament itself, for eight years before war came.

What cannot be charged against those responsible for the loss of Hong Kong is the abominable behaviour of the Japanese to their captives. This was really unpredictable, even if their behaviour in China had already shown of what the race was capable. The misery undergone by the prisoners of war and the interned in Hong Kong and at Kowloon was unalleviated. There were many deeds of heroism performed by Indians, British and Chinese during those dark three and a half years of captivity. One must stand for all those which cannot be recorded here. In a grave of the cemetery at Port Stanley lies all that is mortal of Captain Ansari of A Company 5th Rajput Regt who endured fearful tortures rather than reveal the names of the Chinese in the British and Allies Aid Group that were associated with him in the work of helping escaped prisoners and obtaining intelligence about the enemy. With him are buried 20 of those he tried to save by his own death. Captain Ansari had already been recommended for the Victoria Cross for valour in the field before he was taken prisoner, and for his martyrdom he was awarded posthumously the George Cross.

On the night of the surrender D. R. Holmes who was in Z Force operating behind the enemy with Chinese guerillas blew up a park of Japanese munition lorries just west of Kowloon, and this was typical of the indomitable spirit which fired the Volunteers of Hong Kong, the chronicle of whose gallantry awaits a pious hand.

Chapter 18

1940–1941. Malaya—its terrain and communications—plans for defence—'rubberitis'—operation 'Matador'—siting of aerodromes—inadequate air strength.

THE Malay Peninsula is some 400 miles long and varies in breadth from about 250 miles in the middle to about 60 miles in the north and south. In area it is about equal to England and Wales with Cornwall and Devon cut off. In size, shape and position the Island of Singapore resembles the Isle of Wight. The population was about 5,000,000 of which 2,000,000 were Malays, 2,000,000 Chinese and 1,000,000 Indians, mostly Tamils from the south.

The middle of the peninsula is taken up by a great ridge of granite mountains completely covered to the summits with dense jungle and devoid of communications. On either side of this massif are coastal plains through which run the roads and railway and in which the rubber is grown and the tin is mined that made Malaya the dollar arsenal as it was called. At the northern ends of these two plains there is extensive cultivation of rice.

On the west coast a good motor road runs 585 miles from Johore Bahru on the mainland opposite Singapore to the Siamese frontier and thence on for another 52 miles to Singora, on the east coast of Siam. The railway runs parallel with this road. The coast itself is mostly mangrove swamps penetrated by many rivers. On the eastern lowlands there is no through motor road, but there are stretches of good road between which in dry weather the country is motorable. The railway at Gemas forks. The eastern branch runs through to Kuala Krai, the railhead for Kota Bahru[1] and on into Siam where it meets the western branch of the railway at Haadyai near Singora and continues as one to Bangkok. The east coast consists of an almost continuous series of sandy beaches, not unlike the west coast of the Adriatic.

Lateral communications are scarce. There is a road from Patani on the coast of Siam to Sungei Patani in Kedah, 150 miles south-west; there is a road about 200 miles long running due east from

[1] This is wrongly spelt Bharu in most of the books about the Malayan Campaign. Bahru means 'New.' Kota Bahru means New Castle.

Kuala Kubu on the trunk road to Kuantan on the coast; and there is a road from Mersing right across the peninsula to Batu Pahat, 90 miles long. Finally at Kroh on the Siamese frontier a road branches off the Patani road and runs by Grik to Kuala Kangsar, 50 miles south.

The topography of Malaya is not complicated and the potentialities of strategy were limited although they favoured the attacker. The administration of Malaya was a cat's-cradle.

First of all there were the Straits Settlements of Malacca, Penang, Province Wellesley and Singapore, the last three acquired by purchase, the first by exchanging a bit of Sumatra for it with the Dutch. These formed a British Colony and were administered from Singapore by a Governor acting through an executive and legislative council. Secondly there were the Federated Malay States of Perak, Selangor, Negri Sembilan, and Pahang administered by a Federal Government at Kuala Lumpur and governed each by its own Sultan with the help of a British Resident. Finally, there were the Unfederated Malay States of Johore, Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan and Trengganu, each governed by its own Sultan with the help of a British Adviser. The Governor of the Straits Settlements was the High Commissioner for the Malay States Federated and Unfederated; he could never deal with the Federated States as a whole, but had to consult each of them through its Federal Secretariat. It could happen that the Governor and High Commissioner had to deal with 11 separate bodies all of which had to be in agreement before a measure affecting Malaya as a whole could be introduced. Those who have run obstacle races for the sport of bureaucrats at home will not fatigue their brains by imagining what a military command was faced with in obtaining permission to make some attempt to put the defences of the country in order.

The problem was not simplified by the fact that nobody at home seemed perfectly clear how Malaya was to be defended or even if it were necessary to defend it at all.

When in September 1940 the Japanese took advantage of the collapse of France to occupy Haiphong and Hanoi in French Indo-China and to support Siamese claims to Cambodia, the Indian Government strained its resources to despatch to Malaya a divisional H.Q., two brigades, a number of sapper and miner companies, and some administrative units. It could not send any artillery or signals because it did not have them to send.

On September 10th 1940 the Prime Minister notified General Ismay:

The prime defence of Singapore is the Fleet. The protective effect of the Fleet is exercised to a large extent whether it is on the spot or not. . . . The fact that the Japanese had made landings in Malaya and had even begun the siege of the fortress would not deprive a superior relieving fleet of its power. On the contrary the plight of the besiegers, cut off from home while installing themselves in the swamps and jungle, would be all the more forlorn.

The defence of Singapore must therefore be based upon a strong *local* garrison and the general potentialities of sea-power. The idea of trying to defend the Malay peninsula . . . cannot be entertained. . . .

The danger of a rupture with Japan is no worse than it was. The probabilities of the Japanese undertaking an attack upon Singapore . . . are remote; in fact, nothing could be more foolish from their point of view. . . .[1]

On September 24th 1940 the Prime Minister notified the Secretary of State for War (Mr Eden):

The General Staff continue to press for diversions from the Middle East, such as the Seventh Australian Division to be used for garrisoning the Malay Peninsula. Now the two Indian Brigades are to be employed in these jungles against a possible war with Japan, and a still more unlikely siege of Singapore. The paper on Indian reinforcements . . . was considered . . . by me and the Chiefs of Staff . . . a division is to be provided for Malaya, another for Basra, and a corps for Iraq, thus absorbing all the Indian reinforcements available in 1941 . . . It was explained to me that . . . they could all go to the Middle East[2] if required . . . The paragraph dispersing these divisions without regard to our needs made an unfavourable impression upon me.[3]

On December 23rd 1940 the Prime Minister sent a reassuring letter[4] to the Prime Minister of Australia. He told him that the danger of Japan going to war with the British Empire was now definitely less than it had been in June. He was hopeful of sending strong naval forces to Singapore after knocking Italy out of the war. 'We must try to bear our Eastern anxieties patiently and doggedly until this result is achieved.' However, he went on to assure Mr Menzies that if Australia was seriously threatened by invasion 'we should not hesitate to compromise or sacrifice the Mediterranean position for the sake of our kith and kin.'

[1] *The Second World War*. Winston S. Churchill, Vol. ii, pp. 591–2.
[2] Middle East Command is meant.
[3] *The Second World War*. Winston S. Churchill, Vol. ii, p. 442.
[4] *ibid.*, p. 629.

> The only way in which a naval squadron could be found for Singapore would be by reviewing the Mediterranean situation. . . . As regards air reinforcements for Malaya, the Conference at Singapore recommended the urgent despatch of considerable numbers of aircraft . . . it is difficult to commit ourselves to the precise number of aircraft which we can make available for Singapore, and we certainly could not spare the flying-boats to lie about idle there on the remote chance of a Japanese attack. . . .[1]

Elsewhere in this letter the Prime Minister makes it clear that his confidence about Malaya is due to a conviction that if Japan should enter the war the United States must come into it also on the other side and that this in his own words 'will put the naval boot very much on the other leg.'

In spite of the Prime Minister's insistence on the Royal Navy's primary importance in the protection of Singapore the appointment of Air Chief Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham[2] to be Commander-in-Chief, Far East in October 1940 suggests that this notion was already questionable. Before war broke out the defence of Singapore was founded on the prospect of naval relief in 70 days. This was extended after war came to 180 days. A year later it was extended indefinitely.

The Commander-in-Chief, Far East was responsible to the Chiefs of Staff for operational control in Malaya, Burma and Hong Kong, and he was told that the two main principles to govern his actions were the policy of the Government to avoid war with Japan and reliance on air power to defend the Far East until the fleet was available. Being Commander-in-Chief did not give him any control over such naval forces as there were in his command. In case Brooke-Popham should suppose that operational control implied more than it did, it was defined as meaning 'the higher direction and control as distinct from detailed operational control.' To this was added the responsibility for keeping the double-headed Governor of the Straits Settlements and High Commissioner for the Malay States fully informed of what was going on, and for maintaining touch with His Majesty's representatives in foreign states in the Far East. To fulfil his task the Commander-in-Chief was given a staff of seven officers, and the Far East Combined Intelligence Bureau was put at his service, although it remained under the control of the Admir-

[1] *The Second World War.* Winston S. Churchill, Vol. ii, p. 629.
[2] Air Chief Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, G.C.V.O., K.C.B., C.M.G., D.S.O., A.F.C.

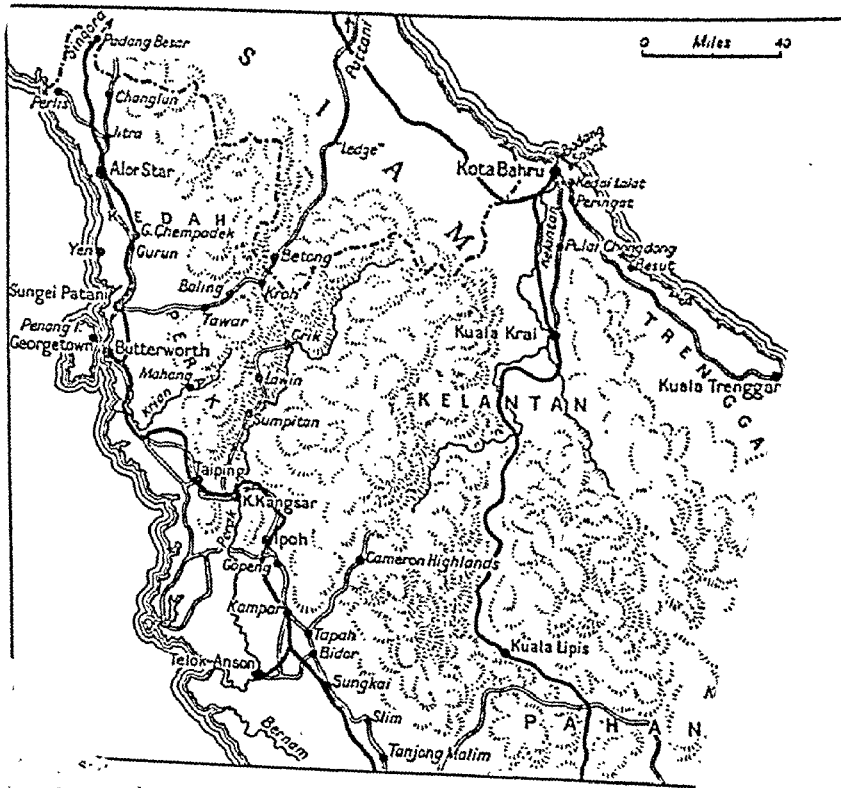
alty. In effect the Commander-in-Chief was a buffer, and the hostile criticism to which he was exposed after the fall of Singapore was entirely unjustified.

In August 1939 when the international situation in Europe was darkening rapidly the 12th Indian Infantry Brigade Group (Brigadier A. C. M. Paris) to honour a secret understanding to reinforce Singapore with a brigade group if necessary was sent to Malaya at the same time as the 11th Indian Infantry Brigade Group went to Egypt. It consisted of the 2nd Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, the 5/2nd Punjab Regt and the 4th Hyderabad Regt.[1]

In August 1940 the necessity for holding the whole of Malaya with air power as the chief implement was recognised by the Chiefs of Staff in that Far Eastern Appreciation which made the Prime Minister notify General Ismay that the Fleet was the prime defence of Singapore. It was then laid down that the land forces in Malaya were to be responsible for the close defence of the naval base and the aerodromes and for dealing with any enemy land forces that might succeed in gaining a foothold in spite of the action of the Air Force. For this action to be effective it was estimated that a minimum of 336 first line aircraft would be required, and it was accepted that this programme should be completed by the end of 1941. It was considered that when it was complete six brigades with ancillary troops would be enough for the total land garrison, but that meanwhile three divisions were necessary. This strategic appreciation was made before the Japanese moved into Indo-China, and therefore when the tactical appreciation required for the Chiefs of Staff from the commanders in Singapore was made in October 1940 it was estimated that 566 first line aircraft would now be wanted and that they should be supported by 26 battalions, *i.e.* at least four divisions with supporting arms and ancillary services. The Chiefs of Staff accepted the Army estimate but would not go beyond the previous estimate of 336 first line aircraft.

Meanwhile, further reinforcements began to reach Malaya. The 1st Leicestershire Regt came from India in April 1941, the 2nd

[1] The 5/2nd were the old 87th Punjabis who inherited the honours and seniority of the much older 27th Madras Infantry. One of their most famous exploits was their march of 670 miles over the Persian mountains to reach the frontier in time to stop a Bolshevik invasion, and in 1927 they were the first troops to reach Shanghai when it was in danger from the Civil War in South China. The 4th Hyderabad Regt was originally the 5th Infantry of the Hyderabad Contingent and then became the 98th (Indian) Infantry as which they rendered great services in East Africa for over ten years from 1914 afterwards spending over three years on the East Persia Cordon.



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[1] *The Second World War.* Winsto
[2] Air Chief Marshal Sir Robert
D.S.O., A.F.C.

East Surrey Regt from Shanghai when it was evacuated in August 1940. In October the 6th Indian Infantry Brigade (Brigadier W. O. Lay)[1] arrived followed in November by the 8th Indian Brigade (Brigadier B. W. Key, Sikh Regt)[2] as the first two brigades of the 11th Indian Division commanded by Major-General Murray-Lyon.[3] The division had no artillery and no signals. These were the two brigades from India whose proposed employment in the jungles of Malaya instead of in the desert of North Africa had inspired that sharp note from the Prime Minister to the Secretary of State for War.

In March 1941 the 15th Indian Brigade (Brigadier K. A. Garrett, Frontier Force Regt) arrived and was put into the 11th Indian Division in place of the 8th Brigade, which was put into the 9th Indian Division commanded by Major-General A. E. Barstow, the headquarters of which also came in this month. In April the 22nd Indian Brigade (Brigadier G. W. A. Painter) made the second brigade of the 9th Indian Division. In May the headquarters of III Indian Corps commanded by Lieut.-General Sir Lewis Heath was established at Kuala Lumpur, and III Corps took over the 9th and 11th Indian Divisions, the Penang Fortress and the Federated Malay States Volunteers.

About the same time Lieut.-General Percival[4] arrived to take over the Command as G.O.C. Malaya from Lieut.-General Bond.[5] He had been G.S.O.I. to General Sir William Dobbie, G.O.C., Malaya in 1936–7 and was commanding the 44th (Home Counties) Division when he was sent out to the Far East.

The decision to base the defence of Malaya on land and air forces until such time as in the event of the United States entering the war the weak East Asian American Fleet could enjoy the advantage of the great naval base at Singapore involved India in a strategic policy in the forming of which India had had no say and over the execution of which India would have no control, in spite of the strain such a venture would throw upon material resources already strained almost unbearably. India had to find 19 infantry battalions for Malaya and Borneo by the time Japan entered the war. England found four, Scotland two, and Australia six. Later in the disastrous campaign nine more English battalions and six more Indian battalions were sacrificed.

[1] Colonel W. O. Lay, D.S.O.
[2] Major-General B. W. Key, C.B., D.S.O., M.C.
[3] Major-General D. M. Murray-Lyon, D.S.O., M.C. (7th Gurkha Rifles).
[4] Lieut.-General A. E. Percival, C.B., D.S.O., O.B.E., M.C.
[5] Lieut.-General Sir Lionel Bond, K.B.E., C.B.

In preparing forces for any theatre of operations overseas India was most heavily handicapped by lack of trained officers, equipment and vehicles, and not helped by H.M. Government's frustrating delays in sanctioning new measures of expansion. And when sanction was at last gained promises made by the authorities at home were not kept. Officers and technicians were as much needed as equipment, and although it was easy to understand the difficulty conditions at home created in the way of supplying the precious equipment it was not so easy to understand the scarcity of officers.

The diversion of forces to Iraq and Iran—that brigade whose diversion from Singapore to Basra in April 1941 played such a vital part in the Iraqi business will be remembered—had interfered with preparations for despatching the troops promised to Malaya.

It was not heartening for G.H.Q. Delhi to be told by the Secretary of State for India in October 1940 that the Prime Minister was complaining that India was being a burden instead of a help at the present time.[1] Nor was it heartening for G.H.Q. Delhi to feel that the efforts India was making to supply troops for Malaya as well as the Middle East were considered superfluous. It was an insult, the Prime Minister was telling the C.I.G.S. a few days later, to tether the Scots Greys and Household Cavalry to horses at the present time, but it was presumably no insult to the famous cavalry regiments of India.

With the impossibility of obtaining equipment the provision of ancillary units was retarded, and with the urgency of despatching troops to Malaya as well as to North Africa and the Middle East the brigades sent out were not ripe for sending. Every unit in the Indian Army was milked to supply officers, V.C.O.'s and N.C.O.'s for the new units being raised. The ranks even of the brigades that were sent out of India were full of recruits of not always so much as 12 months' training. Even the training they had received was for the open warfare they might expect in North Africa and the Middle East. Add to that handicap another imposed by the N.C.O.'s and V.C.O.'s in too many cases lacking experience because of the rapid promotion necessary to fill the gaps made by withdrawing the older hands. Add yet another handicap imposed by the milking of every battalion of its officers so that in some cases the commanding officer and a grizzled subadar-major would be the only representatives in a battalion of that magnificently trained Indian Army which showed its quality at Keren. The Red Eagles of the 4th Division had not been too ruthlessly plucked: the 5th Division's Ball of Fire had not lost too

[1] *The Second World War*, Winston S. Churchill, Vol. ii, p. 590.

much of its fuel. The 9th and 11th Indian Divisions were not only given the impossible task of defeating an enemy trained to the moment for the operation he had set himself to carry through and overwhelmingly better equipped with ample air and armour support; they were asked to perform that impossible task with inexperienced young officers, N.C.O.'s and other ranks after some months of inadequate training for jungle warfare during which for security reasons they had had to exist in the continuous gloom of rubber groves, which within the experience of the present writer is the most depressing form vegetation can assume. Indeed, it fostered a form of mental sickness both among the British and the Indian troops compelled to endure it, and this rubberitis, as it was called, aggravated by the enervating monotony of the equatorial heat predisposed the victims of it to a melancholic outlook.

It would be unfair to censure the commanders on the spot for what was an undoubted failure to train the men for jungle warfare as they should have been trained, as for instance in the island of Hainan and elsewhere the Japanese commanders were training their men specifically for the task in front of them for a few months hence. After August 1941 the troops in Malaya had to be kept busy building defences; money for civilian labour was refused to the Malaya Command. The departmentalism which at home the Prime Minister was for ever scarifying with his toothed phrases remained in spite of them powerfully inert. The aerodromes that the R.A.F. were constructing for those 336 first line aircraft promised by the end of 1941, not a single one of which materialised, were constructed to suit the needs of the air at whatever cost to the land forces which had to defend them. Their dispersion over the peninsula made a mess of strategy, and when within 24 hours the enemy's air force had successfully denied them to our Air Force the unfortunate Army was still called upon to deny them to the enemy for as long as it could, stuck to the neighbourhood of those literally blasted aerodromes like flies on flypaper.

And what an air force was mustered to meet the Japanese attack of 700 modern aircraft! 15 Hudson general reconnaissance, 17 Blenheim I bombers, 17 Blenheim IV bombers, 27 Wildebeeste torpedo-bombers, 43 Brewster Buffalo fighters, 10 Blenheim I night fighters, three Catalina flying-boats, four Swordfish, five Sharks, but no pterodactyls. 141 mostly obsolescent or obsolete planes and not one out of the additional 336 front line aircraft promised by the Chiefs of Staff in response to the request by the Commander-in-Chief Far East for 566. No reproach is implied for the failure of

the aircraft to reach Malaya. The demands of North Africa, the Middle East and Russia upon a hard pressed homeland were too great. Nevertheless, in piety to the dead and for justice to the survivors of that fearful campaign it is necessary to bring home to the world that their lives and their liberty were not lost by their own fault.

We must now examine in more detail the strategic disposition of the troops to meet the Japanese attack. Before General Percival left London he had discussed the advantage of anticipating an attempted Japanese landing upon the beaches of Singora and Patani by an advance as far as the Kra Isthmus in southern Siam, and when he arrived in Singapore he was instructed by the Commander-in-Chief Far East to prepare a detailed plan for the operation which was known as *Matador*. At the same time he was told that *Matador* must not be carried out without reference to London because it 'could only be put into effect if and when it became clear beyond all reasonable doubt that an enemy expedition was approaching the shores of Thailand' (Siam).[1]

> The military advantages of the occupation of South Thailand, or of part of it, were great. It would enable us to meet the enemy on the beaches instead of allowing him to land and establish himself unopposed, it would provide our Air Force with additional aerodromes and, by denying these aerodromes to the enemy, it would make it far more difficult for his air force to interfere with our sea communications in the Malacca Straits. It was a question, however, whether it was a sound operation with the meagre resources available. No troops could be spared for the operation other than the 11th Indian Division, strengthened by some administrative units. The proposal to occupy the narrow neck of the Kra Isthmus was rejected as being too ambitious and the discussions centred round the occupation and denial to the enemy of the Port of Singora and the aerodromes at Singora and Patani.

It is clear that Percival himself was not completely convinced about *Matador*, but it could not have presented itself to him at the time as the cloud-cuckoo-land operation which we with the wisdom of posteriority can perceive it to have been. We are under no illusions after the event what the Air Force in Malaya was in fact capable of doing against overwhelming force. We know that the spearhead of the Japanese attack was the Kiku or Chrysanthemum Division—the 18th Division recruited from the descendants of the warrior clans of the Kyusha and considered except for the Imperial Guards Division, which was to follow it, the finest in Nippon. That crack division of

[1] General Percival's Despatch of February 26th 1948. Par. 29.

the Japanese Army commanded by Lieut.-General Mutaguchi was to give us three and a half years of continuous anxiety before Slim trod its last faded petals into the mud of Burma.

General Percival like General Maltby in Hong Kong was dependent for his judgment about Japanese intentions and Japanese fighting efficiency on the Far East Combined Bureau, and that efficiency was always underestimated. Yet Lieut.-Colonel Ward, an expert about the Japanese Army who came to advise the military authorities in Malaya, was insistent that a Japanese battalion was in training, discipline and intrepid efficiency as good as a crack battalion of the unmilked Indian Army of 1939, and that meant as good as any battalion anywhere in the world. People shook their heads over what they considered the 'defeatism' of Ward's opinions, and his expert knowledge was not invited again.

It should be added here that Major-General Murray-Lyon and his junior commanders were strongly in favour of an aggressive forward policy because North Kedah was from a tactical point of view a most unsuitable terrain for defence and from a strategic point of view even worse, exposed as it was to an advance from Patani which might easily cut its only line of communication by road and rail at Sungei Patani or even further south by way of the Grik road at Kuala Kangsar. Look at the map.

Murray-Lyon's 11th Indian Division which was to carry out this operation was a brigade light. It consisted of Lay's 6th Indian Brigade, composed of the 2nd East Surrey Regt, the 1/8th Punjab Regt and the 2/16th Punjab Regt; and of Garrett's 15th Indian Brigade, comprising the 1st Leicestershire Regt, the 2nd Jat Regt and the 1/14th Punjab Regt.[1]

[1] The 1/8th was formerly the 89th Punjabis and claimed to have served in more theatres of the First World War than any battalion of the Armies of the British Empire. It began by landing on the Red Sea to destroy the Turkish fort of Turba. It went on to defend the Suez Canal and reached Gallipoli whence a month later it moved on to Loos. From Loos it was sent to Mesopotamia where Lance-Naik Shamad Kha was awarded the Victoria Cross. From Mesopotamia the battalion went to the North-West Frontier and the Mohmand Blockade, then back to Mesopotamia, and finally to Salonika. The following year it marched all over Georgia and as far as Baku. The 8th Punjab Regt was recruited from Punjabi Mussalmans, Sikhs and Gujars.

The 2/16th Punjab Regt was formerly the 31st Punjabis and was milked through the First World War to supply trained officers and men for other battalions of the 16th. Nevertheless it had three years in Mesopotamia.

In the 15th Indian Brigade, the 2nd Jat Regt was originally the 2nd Bn of the 10th Jat Infantry. In the First World War it was among the unlucky battalions taken prisoner at Kut.

The 1/14th Punjab Regt was formerly the 19th Punjabis. In the course of its

After due consideration it was decided that *Matador* would be put into effect if 'a favourable opportunity presented itself' between October and March. The operation would consist of an advance by road and rail to capture Singora and hold a defensive position north of Haadyai Junction; simultaneously an advance would be made from Kroh to a defensive position known as The Ledge, favourable to demolitions on the road to Patani about 40 miles into Siam. Finally it was laid down that a start of at least 24 hours was required before a Japanese landing was expected. That allowance of 24 hours was really too sanguine: even a minimum of 48 hours would have been sanguine enough. *Matador* became a tonic for rubberitis. Maps were printed. Money in Siamese currency was collected, and the inevitable pamphlets were composed for distribution to convince the Siamese that our adventure across their frontier was inspired by the purest altruism. This curious British belief in the power of such credentials when printed may be a relic of the bibliolatry which was so long rife in Great Britain.

Finally, and this was the most tonic part of *Matador* for rubberitis, about 30 officers with faked passports in civilian disguise were sent to reconnoitre Siam where they met many undisguised Japanese officers and left the Siamese authorities and Japanese officers in no doubt about British intentions.

Matador, however, might not be a feasible operation, and since the task of the 11th Indian Division was to defend the northern frontier, which included covering the aerodrome in Alor Star and others farther south in Kedah and Province Wellesley, a position had to be found somewhere north of Alor Star. This was finally chosen in front of the little village of Jitra, 18 miles south of the frontier where the branch road from Perlis runs into the main road. It was not an ideal defensive position; indeed it was not at all a good one, but it was the best available within the area, and much troop labour was expended on trying to improve it, labour always being interrupted by training for *Matador*. We shall return to Jitra later.

The advance to The Ledge was entrusted to what was called Krocol under the command of Lieut.-Colonel Moorhead, who was to have the 3/16th Punjab Regt of which he was C.O. and the 5/14th Punjab Regt[1] with a light battery of the F.M.S. Volunteers

service in the First World War it had a tough time fighting the Bolsheviks. General Heath was originally gazetted to the 19th Punjabis. Later he commanded the 1st Sikh Regt.

[1] The 3/16th Punjab Regt was in the 15th Brigade. This battalion was the old Allahabad Levy originally formed from men of low caste. Later it became the 33rd

and a company of sappers. Moorhead estimated that he could hold up an enemy force, however strong, indefinitely if he was given time to make the necessary demolitions in the road covered by the position. Remember the time factor.

In September 1941 the 28th Indian Infantry Brigade (Brigadier W. Carpendale, 1st Gurkha Rifles) reached Port Swettenham. It was sent to III Corps with the intention of putting it operationally with the 11th Division. It consisted of the 2/1st King George's Own Gurkha Rifles, the 2/2nd King Edward VII's Own Gurkha Rifles and the 2/9th Gurkha Rifles.[1]

In December came the 3rd Cavalry as reconnaissance regiment to III Corps. This was formed out of the old 5th and 8th Cavalry, and was one of the regiments chosen in 1933 for what was then the experiment of having all Indian commissioned officers who had passed through Sandhurst or Dehra Dun. The 3rd Cavalry had only recently been mechanised and lacking armoured vehicles was issued with trucks. Indeed, it has to be added that so incomplete was the regiment's training that drivers for some of the trucks had to be borrowed from the infantry.

It is now time to look at the defences on the east coast where

Punjabis. It suffered heavily at Loos where it fought with great gallantry, and from France it went on to East Africa where the battalion could muster hardly a hundred men after the battle of Nyango which broke the German resistance.

The 5/14th Punjab Regt was in the 'fortress' of Penang before it joined Krocol. It was once the 40th Pathans, the famous 'Forty Thieves.' Its first service out of India was in the Shamsa expedition in 1903. In 1915 it reached France from Hong Kong, lost half its effective strength at Ypres, and after Loos went to East Africa. Its latest effort had been in Abyssinia where the Sikh Company of the 5/14th went in 1935 to guard the British Legation during the war with Italy. It was the cool behaviour of this detachment that saved the lives of many in Addis Ababa when the town was mob-ridden after the flight of the Negus. At Attock above the Gorge through which the mighty Indus flows stands a great monolith carved into a rifle cartridge. This is the war memorial erected to the men of the 40th Pathans who died in 1914–18, and none more impressive or more appropriate exists within the knowledge of the present writer.

[1] The 2/1st Gurkha Rifles was a battalion which did famous service on the North-West Frontier for many years.

The 2/2nd Gurkha Rifles was first raised in 1886, and their most famous exploit was when with the Gordon Highlanders they stormed the Dargai Heights, while Piper Findlater V.C. shot through both legs blew them on with the *Cock o' the North*.

The most famous exploit of the 2/9th Gurkha Rifles had been when in the early dawn of February 23rd 1917, the battalion set out to cross the Shumran Bend of the flooded Tigris under heavy fire for the whole of four miles and when it landed driving the Turks out of a strongly entrenched position. That 2nd Bn was composed almost entirely of young Khas Gurkhas enlisted after the First World War started. It would add to its glory in Malaya.

many miles of beaches were all too convenient for landing operations. The State of Kelantan was an obvious target for the enemy with its operable aerodrome at Kota Bahru, its almost operable aerodrome at Gong Kedah some 30 miles down the coast, and a third at Machang on the Krai-Kota Bahru road under construction.

This critical area was entrusted to the 9th Brigade of the 9th Indian Division, and Brigadier Key was lent the 2nd Frontier Force Regt from the 22nd Brigade to reinforce his own three battalions. These consisted of the 2nd Baluch Regt, the 1st Frontier Force Rifles and the 3rd Dogra Regt with contingents of the Indian State Forces to act as defenders of the aerodromes—the Hyderabad State Infantry at Kota Bahru and the Mysore State Infantry at Gong Kedah and Machang.[1]

Nearly 200 miles farther down the east coast the R.A.F. had constructed an aerodrome at Kuantan which required defence by the Army. Here was the other brigade of the 9th Indian Division—Painter's 22nd Brigade (less one battalion) of the 5th Sikh Regt and 2nd Royal Garhwal Rifles.[2]

[1] The 2nd Baluch Regt was descended from the old 26th Bombay Infantry and became the 126th Baluchistan Infantry.

The 1st Frontier Force Rifles were the famous Cookies, 55th Coke's Rifles, the heroes of the Crag Piquet, three times lost and won, in the Ambeyla Campaign of 1863. It was here that Lieut. Pitcher won the V.C. and Lieut. Davidson fell with his men fighting to the last.

The 3rd Dogra Regt was not an ancient regiment, having been raised originally in 1900 as the 41st Dogra Infantry. It met the Bavarians at Festubert on October 31st 1914, and was thanked by General French for its gallantry at Neuve Chapelle. After 11 months in France it served with equal distinction in Mesopotamia where Lance-Naik Lala was awarded a V.C. The casualties of the 3rd Dogra Regt and 1st Dogra Regt (37th) were so heavy that the two battalions were temporarily amalgamated. We shall see presently how nobly the 3rd Dogra Regt lived up to past glory on the bloody beaches of Kota Bahru.

There was another Dogra battalion in Malaya—the 2nd formerly the 38th—which was in the Singapore Fortress Garrison.

The 2nd Frontier Force Regt was formerly the 52nd Sikhs (Frontier Force). In 1913 the battalion was in Somaliland. On April 17th Captain Vesey and 49 men were by request included in a small column sent to cover the retreat of the King's African Rifles. What exactly happened is not known, but it would seem that the column was compelled to form a square against hordes of the Mullah's savage warriors, and later the bodies of the 49 Sikhs were found lying in an unbroken line, the only side of the square which had not been pierced.

[2] The 5th Sikh Regt was formerly the Duke of Connaught's Own 47th Sikhs. They were mentioned in the House of Commons for their gallantry at Festubert.

The 2nd Royal Garhwal Rifles were raised in 1901 as the 49th and presently the 2/39th Garhwal Rifles. At Neuve Chapelle they and the 1/39th suffered such casualties that the two battalions were amalgamated as the Garhwal Rifles. On March 10th 1915 Rifleman Gobar Sing Negi was accorded a posthumous V.C.

The position at Kuantan made necessary by having to deny that aerodrome to the enemy was an extremely awkward one. The beaches were far too long to be held in strength and manoeuvre was handicapped by a slow ferry over the Kuantan River so that the battalion holding the beaches and the battalion trying to defend the river lines and the aerodrome were likely to find co-operation difficult.

A hundred miles farther still down the east coast were Mersing and Endau, two small ports of East Johore, about 20 miles apart. There was a large iron-ore mine in this area owned by the Japanese and the area was considered a most likely one for an enemy landing; there were good landing beaches and motor roads across to the west coast at Batu Pahat and down to Singapore only 90 miles away. Originally this area was to be defended by the 12th Indian Brigade, but when the 27th Australian Brigade joined the 22nd Australian Brigade the 8th Australian Division was given the responsibility for the defence of all Johore and Malacca.

There remains Borneo. The task of trying to defend the Kuching landing-ground in Sarawak and denying the Miri and Leria oil-fields and the Latong refinery to the enemy was entrusted to the 2/15th Punjab Regt[1] commanded by Lieut.-Colonel C. M. Lane.

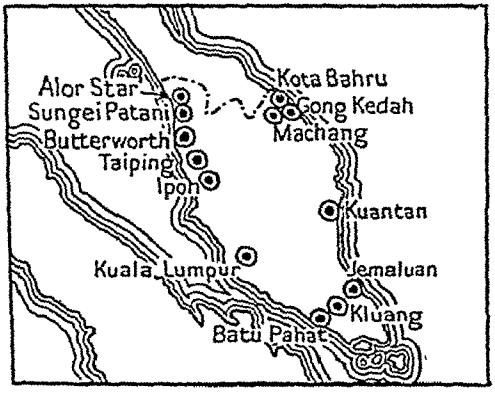
It can be said that the disposition of the troops available for the defence of Singapore against an invasion of Malaya was the best that could be made under the handicap imposed by the choice of sites for aerodromes and the failure to supply the quantity and quality of aircraft promised. When the crisis came there were three aerodromes complete or almost complete in the north-east and three in the north-west. There were three aerodromes in the west at Taiping, Ipoh and Kuala Lumpur and another most inaccessible

At Aubers Ridge the regiment again suffered grave losses. At Loos 17 Garhwalis cut off were taken prisoners—the only Garhwali prisoners taken prisoner in the First World War. In 1916 the 2nd Bn was distinguishing itself against the Turks, and in 1918 it reached Salonika just too late for the great attack which was stopped by the Bulgarian surrender.

For their outstanding services in the Great War the Garhwal Rifles were given the style of 'Royal' by the King-Emperor in 1921. The Garhwalis, a Rajput hill race in the Himalaya west of Nepal, have many characteristics in common with the Gurkhas, and the idea of forming a regiment of them had been the experience of their martial qualities in the ranks of Gurkha regiments.

[1] The former 26th Punjabis fought with distinction in Mesopotamia and was the advance guard of the long night march to Dujailah in 1916 before the last desperate effort to relieve the defenders of Kut. Later the battalion was allotted to Dunsterforce but did not reach Armenia and spent the rest of the First World War in North Persia in extremely difficult circumstances. Now it was committed to another solitary post in the Second World War.

one at Kuantan in the east. Finally there were three new aerodromes running across Johore in a line at Batu Pahat, Kluang and Jemaluan which would be an acute menace to Singapore in the hands of an enemy. These had to be defended by the Army with inadequate forces dispersed over a wide area in a country as favourable to the attacker as any in the world. In justice to Air Vice-Marshal Pulford's memory it must be pointed out that when he reached Malaya in May 1941 the sites for aerodromes had already been chosen and work upon them had begun. Moreover, to add to his difficulties, not only were the 141 aircraft of his command mostly obsolescent or obsolete, but many of them were temporarily unserviceable when the Japanese war started, owing to the great shortage



of spare parts. There were no reserve aircraft and no reserve pilots, and many of the pilots had arrived in Malaya from New Zealand with a minimum of flying training and no fighter training at all. The supply of trained pilots from Britain was meagre, and throughout the year 1941 the Air Force in Malaya was milked to find trained men for the Middle East. The Australian squadrons were similarly milked to find instructors for Australia.

Early in December it became clear that a Japanese attack on Malaya was imminent whatever the result of the Washington discussions and the position of the United States. The condensation trails of hostile aircraft wrote their warnings upon the air above aerodromes as far south as Ipoh where a piece of a Japanese camera was picked up. It was an omen of our Brewster Buffaloes' performance that not a single fighter succeeded in picking up one of these sinister intruders.

Chapter 19

December, 1941. Japanese convoys sighted—'Matador' cancelled—landing at Kota Bahru—airfields abandoned—loss of 'Repulse' and 'Prince of Wales'—adventures of 'Krocol.'

ON December 2nd the darkening of the international situation in the Far East was illuminated for a while by the arrival of H.M.S. *Prince of Wales* and H.M.S. *Repulse*. These two great ships had been sent by the Admiralty at the suggestion of the Prime Minister who hoped by this display of Britannia's naval might to persuade the Japanese to think twice before they ventured to defy it. It was a bold gesture by a bold man, and it expressed in a practical fashion Mr Churchill's own fervid belief already expressed in words that the prime defence of Singapore was the Fleet. The records of current opinion at the time do not reveal that anybody in Singapore felt uneasy about the future of these two great ships. Wise after the event we can recognise that the gesture was rash as well as bold, but when the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse* came powerfully to their berths upon that dank hot December day on the verge of the north-east monsoon the consequence of that gesture was still hanging in the stars.

On December 5th Far East Command was notified by the Chiefs of Staff that if Far East Command had information of a Japanese expedition approaching with the apparent intention of landing on the Kra Isthmus or of violating any other Siamese territory operation *Matador* might be put into effect immediately without reference to London.

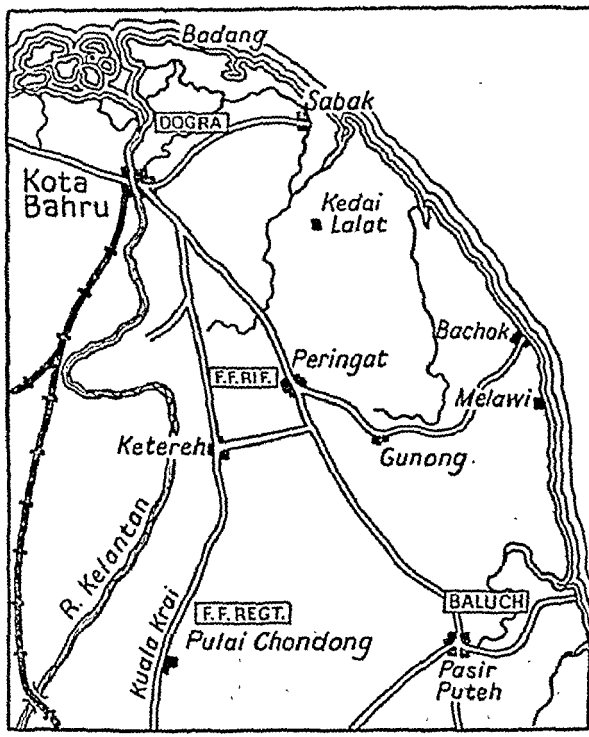
Next morning about 11.30 a.m. air reconnaissance watching the approaches to the Gulf of Siam reported having sighted Japanese warships and transports 156 miles south-east of Point Camo in southern Indo-China steaming west. This information, to which was added later information that there were two convoys and that their position was about 80 miles east-south-east of Pul Obi, reached General Percival at 3 p.m. in Kuala Lumpur where he was conferring with General Heath. At 3.15 p.m. he ordered Heath to assume the first degree of readiness and to instruct Murray-Lyon to be ready to move at short notice to carry out operation *Matador*. When Percival (by civil airline !) got back to his headquarters at Singapore

that evening at 6.30 p.m. he was informed that one convoy consisted of 22 10,000-ton ships, five cruisers, and seven destroyers, and the other of 21 ships escorted by two cruisers and ten destroyers. At the same time he was informed that Brooke-Popham, estimating that these convoys had probably turned north-west in order to demonstrate against and bring pressure to bear on Siam, had decided not to order operation *Matador* yet. Meanwhile, two Hudson had been despatched at 4 p.m. to shadow the convoys until they were relieved by a Catalina flying-boat which was to shadow them through the night. In the event the Catalina failed to make contact owing to bad weather conditions, and a second Catalina sent out early on the morning of December 7th to search for a possible concentration in the Koh Kong area believed by G.H.Q. to afford a likely anchorage did not return. This flying-boat, it transpired later, was shot down by the Japanese. Further Hudson reconnaissance that morning was fruitless owing to the weather, but at 5.30 p.m. Hudsons sighted a transport and cruiser steaming toward Singora, when the cruiser opened fire on the aircraft. Just before 7 p.m. in very bad visibility four Japanese vessels, perhaps destroyers, were sighted off Singora steaming south.

At G.H.Q. it was estimated that if an enemy convoy was bound for Singora it would reach there about midnight of December 7th and that the landing troops of the 11th Division could not arrive before 2 a.m. of December 8th. Percival informed Brooke-Popham that in the circumstances he considered *Matador* an unsound operation. Later that night at 10.30 p.m. at a conference at which Air Chief Marshal Brooke-Popham and Admiral Sir Tom Phillips (just back from Manila) were both present it was decided not to order *Matador* that night. This decision was communicated to General Heath at 11.20 p.m. with instructions to be ready to put *Matador* into effect at dawn on December 8th if ordered to do so. Why that conference should have contemplated the possibility of putting *Matador* into effect at dawn of December 8th after the sensible decision to call it off on the night of December 7th is beyond the wildest guess. The result of such illogical mental fumbling was that the unfortunate troops of the 11th Division were still kept on their toes all that night in order to be off at half an hour's notice. At 8.20 a.m. on December 8th G.H.Q. Far East reported that *Matador* had been approved by the Chiefs of Staff if the Japanese attacked Kota Bahru, which by now they had done in full force, but ordered Percival not to act. The Chiefs of Staff had already authorised G.H.Q. Far East on December 5th to act without reference to them,

and it is difficult to understand why London was brought into it at all at this desperate last moment. The uncomfortable suspicion persists that London and G.H.Q. Far East were each aiming at an affiliation order against the other and trying to toss the baby backwards and forwards across thousands of miles.

Meanwhile, G.H.Q. Malaya Command was being rung up by Corps H.Q. and again rung up and yet again to ask if *Matador* was or



was not to be put in operation. Corps could only reply to Division that *Matador* had not been cancelled but that Division must remain at the ready to start off within half an hour.

General Percival had now fully realised that it was too late to put *Matador* into operation, but operation *Matador* was not cancelled until 1 p.m. on that disastrous December 8th, when the order was given for the 11th Division to man the Jitra position. General Percival in his Despatch says he attended a Straits Settlements

Legislative Council at 10 a.m. and that about 11 a.m., sanction to enter Siam having been obtained from the C.-in-C., Far East, 'orders were issued to the Commander III Indian Corps to occupy the defensive positions on both the Singora and Kroh-Patani roads, and to send a mobile covering force across the frontier towards Singora.' Yet Corps did not receive the order to cancel *Matador* for another two hours. The effect of this delay on the troops remains to be told.

It is now clear that *Matador* was never a sound operation, and therefore no tears need be shed over the failure to put it into effect. What must be deplored was that display of caution by G.H.Q. Far East in cancelling the operation, a caution that even the Foreign Office might have considered excessive.

While Murray-Lyon was waiting for the starter's pistol in the north-west, up at Kelantan in the north-east the enemy had started hours ago. To save himself from reading a detailed description of the way Brigadier Key had disposed his forces to watch for landings over about 30 miles of sandy beaches and hold a vulnerable country inland, the reader is asked to study the map. Besides its own infantry the 8th Brigade with the 2nd Frontier Force Regt from the 22nd Brigade had the 21st Mountain Battery Indian Artillery, the 73rd Field Battery of the 5th Field Regt R.A. at Pulai Chongdong, the 19th Field Company of Bengal Sappers and Miners and ancillary units. The 3rd Dogra Regt and 2nd Baluch Regt had a couple of 18-pounder guns apiece manned by men of the battalions.

It will be noticed that Key kept his troops on the right bank of the Kelantan River, relying on patrols for the farther bank. Where the Kelantan flows into the sea the land on either side is veined with streams and dense with nipah palms which have no bald trunks but branch directly from the moist ground in which they flourish. Behind the miles of sandy beaches south are sparse groves of coco-nut palms about a hundred yards deep, but behind them are a network of streams and thickets of nipah while all down the coast the beaches are separated from one another by small creeks. The mangroves which infest the westerly coast of Malaya and the east coast farther south are not much in evidence in this north-east corner; but the beaches are continually separated by streams at the mouths of which are numerous fishing villages, the inhabitants of which for political reasons could not be turned out. The sand of the beaches is cut into a miniature cliff by the north-east monsoon blowing across the South China Sea.

These beaches were wired and mined and had a line of fortified pillboxes about 1,000 yards apart, each held by one N.C.O. and six

men. Behind this line there were reserve points similarily spaced, but even more lightly manned.

Just before midnight on December 7th the Beach Defence troops of the 3rd Dogra Regt on Badang and Sabak beaches reported ships anchoring off the coast, the wind having dropped to a damnable calm and allowing the enemy assault barges to put out for the beaches. The first shot in the Malayan Campaign was fired by the Dogras' 18-pounder on Badang. The enemy landing craft were met with a heavy fire and several were sunk by the shore defences, but these disciplined troops of the Chrysanthemum Division never wavered and despite the casualties the assault barges kept on into the Kuala Pa Anat Creek between Badang and Sabak while the guns of the enemy ships shelled the shore defences. By 12.25 a.m. Japanese troops were ashore and by 1 a.m. they had captured the nearest Dogra pillboxes, but only after every Dogra that manned them had been killed. They fought as the 41st Dogra Infantry fought at Festubert and Neuve Chapelle, and to-day Dharmsala and the fair valley of Kangra are the poorer.

Reconnaissance at dawn had reported no Japanese ships to the south, and the 1st Frontier Force Rifles (Coke's) who had been behind the 2nd Baluch Regt were fetched up to Badang for counter-attacks. The 2nd Frontier Force Regt commanded by Lieut.-Colonel Cumming[1] was brought forward from Chongdong to man the airfield, and two companies were at once asked to counter-attack the Japanese who had obtained a foothold on the beaches. A Company under Captain Medeppa recaptured Pillbox 13, but Captain Medeppa himself was killed in this gallant action. C Company led by Subadar Mohammed Ali made a fierce counter-attack along the Sabak beaches and drove the enemy back into the sea. The Dogra beach defences gave strong support to these two counter-attacks, but presently Colonel Preston of the 3rd Dogra Regt was wounded and Colonel Cumming was ordered to take command of the beach defences at Sabak. Accounts of how much our Air Force managed to damage the enemy at all are confusing. However, certainly one transport was set on fire, though this was claimed by the Dogra 18-pounders[2] and by the mountain battery. Aircraft returning to the aerodromes in Kedah to refuel were attacked by Japanese bombers and fighters and were grievously reduced. The aerodromes at Alor Star, Sungei Patani, Butterworth (on the mainland opposite

[1] Brigadier A. E. Cumming, V.C., O.B.E., M.C.

[2] These were saluting guns which Murray-Lyon had requisitioned as infantry weapons.

Penang), Kota Bahru, Gong Kedah and Machang were all attacked during that rain-drenched December 8th with deadly effect, and the myth of Japanese incompetency in the air preached by British and American intelligence was exploded by the Nippon pilots. To finish the melancholy tale, by 4.30 p.m. the R.A.F. station commander at Kota Bahru aerodrome asked permission from A.O.C. Far East to evacuate it. The serviceable aircraft left were flown away and the ground staff sent by road to the railhead at Kuala Krai. The anti-aircraft detachment of the Hong Kong and Singapore Regt of Artillery behaved with valour throughout and were worthy companions-in-arms of their fellows in Hong Kong on that day.

By 7 p.m. more Japanese ships were off the Sabak beach and in spite of dauntless resistance enemy troops were penetrating through the defence posts all over the Kota Bahru area. Key decided to shorten his line and ordered a withdrawal to a line running from Kota Bahru to Kedai Lalat. The night was black; rain was falling in sheets; the country was marshy and leech-infested in a labyrinth of streams. Communications were almost impossible to maintain and in the circumstances it is astonishing that so few detachments were lost.

Cumming commanded the withdrawal from the Sabak beach and lost many men by drowning before he took up a new position immediately east of Kota Bahru, where he remained throughout December 9th until a Dogra officer told him that the left flank of the new line had been withdrawn to Chongdong and that the Japanese were pouring through the gap. The signal to Cumming to fall back had not reached him.

By now Cumming had lost his own battalion and had with him some men of the 3rd Dogra Regt whom he started to lead back in a desperate effort to reach Chongdong nearly 20 miles south of where he was. As his force approached a sizeable village called Kubang Kriang large parties of Japanese were seen hurrying through the palms to occupy it. Cumming sent two Bren carriers to intercept them; these were blown up in the village. Three times the Dogras attacked the village, but at last not 50 of them were left and these withdrew to a flooded river carrying as many of the wounded as they could. They found two sampans in which under heavy fire from the enemy they managed to cross.

On reaching the other side Chinese villagers told the survivors that every cross-road, bridge and ford between them and Chongdong was in Japanese hands. However, they struggled on, still carrying their wounded, through jungle and across flooded paddy-fields until

they reached a small Chinese village whence it was impossible to move unobserved. Cumming told his Dogras to disguise themselves as Malays and Chinese and try to slip through to the brigade at Chongdong. The Dogras did not like the notion of abandoning Cumming and the wounded; Cumming insisted. An hour later Jemadar Khushi Ram arrived disguised in a sarong to say that the men had got through and that he had come back to help those left behind. Two Chinese women came along with bowls of rice and fish and refreshed by this the party decided to make a last effort. The most severely wounded were put in a Chinese hut to be tended by kindly villagers. Then the others set off with Jemadar Khushi Ram. Presently they were seen, had to take cover in flooded paddy from the enemy's fire, and finally crawled back to the friendly village. This time a Chinese guide led the party out from the rear of the village by a jungle path running south. Suddenly the sound of a Bren gun carrier was heard coming along the track. In it were Captain Pomeroy,[1] an American officer in Cumming's own battalion, and one of the Dogras who had returned to look for the little party of wounded men. They had charged right through the Japanese position and now with the party aboard the carrier they charged back through the Japanese line while it was firing on the positions of the 8th Brigade.

That Key was able to withdraw his brigade through the dark drenching night and man a new line by dawn is a tribute to his own skill and the fine discipline of the battalions he commanded. On the morning of December 8th the 4th Hyderabad Regt was moved to Kelantan by rail from command reserve and placed under the orders of III Indian Corps. On the same day the 28th Indian Brigade was moved up to the area of the Alor Star aerodrome and placed under the commander of the 11th Indian Division.

Later that morning of the 9th, after confused fighting at close quarters, the troops fell back to Peringat where they were joined by two companies of the 2nd Baluch Regt who had been withdrawn from the beaches south. The 4th Hyderabad Regt was ordered to move up from Kuala Krai to a good position at Ketereh rather more than half-way between Kota Bahru and Chongdong. This allowed

[1] Captain Eugene Cowles Pomeroy of Hopetown, New Jersey, was an American journalist in Shanghai who was accepted as an officer in the Indian Army before the United States was belligerent and posted to the 2nd Frontier Force Regt. He performed many gallant deeds in the course of the Malayan Campaign and finally became a prisoner of war. Sent to work on the Railway of Death he escaped, but was taken by Siamese police on the frontier of Burma and handed over to the Japanese who executed this intrepid and selfless American gentleman.

mighty British ships and landward to the labyrinth of streams fringed by nipah palms with pious thoughts of those devoted Indian soldiers who died for their military honour and, forgetting for a moment the barbarities which have stained their name, even with pious thoughts of the Japanese soldiers' valour and discipline, accepts the dedication of those quiet stones to all the fallen by those shores and beneath those waters of the pale aquamarine China Sea, friend or foe.

H.M.S. *Prince of Wales* and H.M.S. *Repulse* in the hope of bringing aid to the hard-pressed troops by sinking the Japanese transports off Singora, Patani and Kota Bahru sailed at dusk on December 8th from Singapore escorted by H.M. destroyers *Electra, Empress, Vampire* and *Tenedos*. Admiral Sir Tom Phillips was notified by Air Vice-Marshal Pulford that fighter protection would not be available. Late the following afternoon the British Fleet was sighted by a Japanese submarine. That night the enemy's 22nd Air Flotilla attempted a torpedo attack, but the bad weather made operations impossible and the flotilla returned to its airfields by Saigon. Admiral Phillips, realising that his movements were known to the enemy, decided to return to his base.

Unfortunately later on during that night Naval H.Q. in Singapore reported an enemy landing at Kuantan, which if it was not a panic hallucination of the shore defences may have been a deliberate feint by the enemy to lure the Fleet to its doom. The Admiral who was sharply conscious of what had been seeming the desertion of the Eastern Naval Base by the Fleet for which it had been constructed gave the order to close the shore and discover what the situation was. A heavy sky made an attack from the air seem improbable. Fate willed otherwise. The sky cleared above the great ships, and they were observed by enemy reconnaissance planes at about 10.15 a.m. An hour later they were attacked by 88 bombers and torpedo planes of the Genzan, Mihoro and Kanoya Groups. *Repulse* sank at 12.33 p.m. on December 10th. By 1.10 p.m. *Prince of Wales* was listing steeply to port and settling rapidly. At 1.20 p.m. she heeled over sharply and sank by the stern. Captain Tennant,[1] who with General Alexander had been the last to leave the Dunkirk beaches, went down with his ship, but was rescued by a destroyer.

A British prisoner-of-war told a Japanese reporter later:

> Admiral Phillips stood on the bridge of the ship from the beginning to the end. A destroyer drew near just before his ship sank and signalled 'Come aboard.' But he answered 'No, thank

[1] Vice-Admiral Sir William Tennant, K.C.B., C.B.E., M.V.O.

you'. Raising his arm in salute from the bridge he went down with the ship. His Flag Captain stood with the Admiral at salute, and they disappeared into the sea, as if swallowed by it.

A Japanese account says:

> Two days later a part of the —— Unit again flew over the scene of the terrific battle, but there were only blue waves glistening below, as though nothing had ever taken place there before. Upon these waves the members of the crew threw a large floral wreath.
>
> To the souls of the departed heroes of the British Navy who fought to the last, Sleep in Peace. This was the tender sentiment of the Wild Eagles who were strong in battle. Our losses were three planes crashed in self-destruction, one forced landing (crew safe) and one 'wounded.'

Those who criticise the judgment which led Admiral Phillips to take the risks he did should remember that the American Pacific Fleet had been eliminated from the naval scene, that the American air force in the Philippines had been as successfully annihilated as our own in Malaya, that the Admiral's only alternative to immediate action was to fill his bunkers with oil and depart for the west or remain at the base in Singapore as a target for the Japanese air force. If *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* could have struck a mortal blow at the Japanese navy and the Japanese transports the situation in Malaya might still have been saved and the High Command at home might have had time to send those vital air reinforcements, those 336 aircraft which had been promised by the end of the year, *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* were not lost by a rash admiral; they were lost by one democracy which like the fabled ostrich believed that safety first meant seeing nothing, by another democracy which believed that it meant a fortified line, and by a third which believed that isolation was the same as insulation.

This ultimate cause of all the disasters which overtook the democracies as each in turn became involved in the Second World War must continuously be emphasised because that ultimate cause is too often obscured by blaming the men on the spot for a failure to perform the impossible. Nowhere more than in the Malayan Campaign was responsibility for disaster quite so successfully shifted in public opinion to the shoulders of the men on the spot, who either dead or prisoners of an inflexible enemy could not defend themselves.

While Key's 8th Indian Brigade in the north-east corner of Malaya was desperately engaged with the landing forces of the

Chrysanthemum Division the 6th and 15th Brigades of the 11th Indian Division were standing by in the first position of readiness for operation *Matador*.

We have found it difficult to discover a good reason for leaving the unfortunate 11th Division standing by in the heavy rain all that night to carry out an operation of which there was by now not a likelihood: we have found it even more difficult to discover a good reason for keeping it still standing by until 1 p.m. next day before Heath was allowed to order Murray-Lyon to man the Jitra position; we find it impossible to discover a good reason for waiting until that afternoon before Percival was allowed by Brooke-Popham to allow Heath to give orders for the column under Lieut.-Colonel Moorhead to move forward along the Kroh-Patani road to seize The Ledge.

General Percival says:[1]

> There is no doubt that this change from an anticipated offensive to a defensive had a great psychological effect on the troops. Although the chances of being able to put MATADOR into operation had never, up to the last moment, really been very great, yet it is a fact that the offensive is always more attractive than the defensive and, when there is a possibility of both, people tend to concentrate on the former rather than on the latter. Perhaps we at Headquarters, who were in a position to appreciate the political factors more clearly, did not communicate our views sufficiently to the forward troops, or perhaps they did *not* percolate through Corps Headquarters, or perhaps the degree of secrecy which it was necessary to preserve in this matter had its effect. I cannot say for certain who, if anybody, was at fault, but the fact remains that the 11th Indian Division was much more confident of being able to operate MATADOR than were commanders farther back. So much so that on the seventh, Murray-Lyon, the divisional commander, had as a precautionary measure moved two of the battalions of his 15th Infantry Brigade a distance of some miles to Anak Bukit station to entrain.

Surely this implied criticism of Murray-Lyon is hardly justifiable. The first degree of readiness placed the troops for *Matador* at half an hour's notice and more from ten starting points. It was well known at Malaya Command that the starting point of two battalions was Anak Bukit and that their transport was the train.

If Murray-Lyon had failed to move those two battalions to Anak Bukit on December 7th after the news of the Japanese troopships he might well have been blamed for disobeying orders.

[1] *The War in Malaya*, pp. 114–115.

Early on that disastrous Monday, December 8th, news reached divisional H.Q. at Sungei Patani that the Japanese were landing at Singora and Patani. To urgent enquiries from Division Corps could only reply that it must still stand by for *Matador*.

At 7.15 a.m. the Sungei Patani aerodrome was raided. The petrol tanks were fired and three aircraft on the ground were knocked out. Two hours later in a second raid the station wireless and operations rooms were hit and four more aircraft knocked out. The Alor Star aerodrome was raided at the same time just as ten aircraft returning from Kota Bahru were landing, four of which were destroyed. The petrol was fired. The operations room was hit. Three wives of R.A.F. officers came out of the Rest House beside the aerodrome, one of them with a baby in her arms. No slit trenches had been dug. An officer of the Bawahalpur Infantry who were guarding the aerodrome pulled down the frightened mother and shielded her with his body.

This kind of thing was able to happen in Malaya because Singapore had been continuously preoccupied with London's order that nothing must be done to provoke Japan into entering the war.

Impatience with what seems the hesitancy of G.H.Q. Far East, must be tempered by remembering the nervousness of London about any action that could be construed by American opinion as brutal British imperialism. Pearl Harbour relieved us of any necessity to risk an offence against the neutrality of Siam. By then the Siamese aerodromes had been prepared for immediate operation by the Japanese. The delay in deciding about *Matador* had grave consequences. The unsatisfactory position at Jitra had been neglected since November 29th when the 11th Division had been placed in the second degree of readiness, which meant that it was under six hours' notice to operate *Matador*. Now the troops were suddenly called back to man the defences. The Leicesters and the 1/14th Punjab Regt had spent that morning getting in and out of the train waiting to take them to Haadyai as enemy aircraft came over. On their way back to Jitra they had to pass the Alor Star aerodrome, the sight of which did not conduce to raise the morale of troops who were already tired, and the unexpected substitution of defence for attack, of retreat for advance, was lowering. Any chance that Lieut.-Colonel Moorhead had of seizing The Ledge was spoilt by the delay in ordering Krocol to advance. Moreover, he had only his own 3/16th Punjab Regt. The 5/14th Punjab Regt had not reached him from Penang, and the battery of the Federated Malay States Volunteers was not ready. The adventures of Krocol will be told presently.

A column under Major Andrews, consisting of two companies and the carriers of the 1/8th Punjab Regt with a section of the 273rd Anti-tank Battery and two sections of sappers and miners, was ordered to cross the frontier and advance along the Singora road to harass and delay the enemy. At the same time on December 8th an armoured train at Padang Besar manned by a platoon of the 2/16th Punjab Regt and a detachment of sappers and miners steamed up the railway on demolition bent.

Andrews' little force reached Sadao nine miles over the frontier at dusk, and the troops were disposed for the night in a semicircle round the village. At 9 p.m. the distant headlights of a Japanese mechanised column were seen through the dark drench of rain. Lieut. May in command of the anti-tank section held his fire till the leading tank was within a hundred yards. Then he gave the order to fire. It was a good shot. The tank was stopped, and the carriers opening fire with their anti-tank rifles knocked out two more. The leading Japanese lorries following close behind halted, a good mark for the carriers' light automatics. However, the invaders had been trained for this kind of surprise. Within a couple of minutes they had their mortars out and were in action with them. One of our carriers was hit and by the light of the blaze the Japanese soldiers could be seen working round the east flank of our position. A sapper reported to Major Andrews that three bridges were ready for blowing, and he gave the order for the two companies to get into the lorries waiting for them south of the village. The anti-tank guns and the carriers carried on the action till 11 p.m. when the guns pulled out covered by the carriers. The three small bridges were successfully demolished and the whole detachment came back with hardly any casualties. The enemy did not follow up, and the frontier now being held by two companies of the 1/14th Punjab Regt was recrossed at 1.30 p.m. A chance to ambush the Saeki Unit had been missed with a grim result presently. The armoured-train party destroyed a 200-feet girder bridge and withdrew to Padang Besar. That burst bridge upset Japanese transport for three months.

The sodden defences of Jitra, on which tired, soaked, dispirited troops were working knee deep in mud, and the 2nd Jat Regt, the battalion which had the worst position to hold, harder than any, were not ready by December 10th. Brigadier Garrett was told that he must stop the enemy north of Asun until dawn of the 12th. He was given the 2/1st Gurkha Rifles from Carpendale's 28th Brigade which had been moved up to come under Murray-Lyon's orders.

From the small hours to dusk of December 10th Major Anderson's

two companies of the 1/14th Punjab Regt were fighting a withdrawal through six miles of dense rainswept country to Changlun where they were joined by the rest of the battalion, leaving the 2/1st Gurkha Rifles at Asun. The Gurkhas had been working on the Jitra position all day. At 7.30 p.m. they were taken in trucks to Asun where two hours later they were working again on a position quite unprepared. On their way they passed the blazing hangars and petrol tanks of Alor Star. It had been evacuated by the R.A.F. that morning without a word of their intention to H.Q. of the 11th Indian Division which had been set to hold that wretched Jitra position to protect this aerodrome. A few ineffective holes had been blown in the runway. At other aerodromes the ground staff were in such a hurry to quit that not even this poor contribution was made to help the Army's task of denying them to the enemy. Whatever the behaviour of the ground staffs the pilots did not flinch. They fought the Japanese Zeros with their prehistoric planes while one of them was left. The lives of those young men were sacrificed to a dishonoured promissory note.

To conclude that cheerless December day the news of the sinking of the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* reached the division that evening.

When dawn broke on December 11th the 1/14th Punjab Regt had spent four nights almost without sleep in rain-drenched clothes. The two forward companies were astride the road. The bridge over the Loko had not yet been blown. Two platoons of a reserve company were sent forward to locate the enemy's main troops. This patrol failed to return.

By 8 a.m. the Japanese were attacking the Changlun position, and there was heavy fighting all through the morning. Garrett who was at battalion headquarters when it was under a mortar bombardment was wounded in the neck, but after retiring to Tanjong Pau to have his wound dressed he insisted on returning into the thick of the battle. Lieut.-Colonel Fitzpatrick took advantage of a lull to get his Punjabis back and break contact with the enemy, and at 3 p.m. Murray-Lyon arrived to discuss the situation with Garrett and Fitzpatrick. Garrett had wanted to withdraw the 1/14th behind the anti-tank obstacle at Asun; Murray-Lyon ordered the covering force not to withdraw so far until it was compelled, and a temporary position was chosen for the night about two miles in front of Asun. This was a mistake due to Murray-Lyon's anxiety to give more time for work on the Jitra defences. The withdrawal was in process of being made when the blitz happened.

In the words of Lieut. Greer, one of those who survived it:

It was raining. Well, as you'll remember, it hadn't stopped for days. Then suddenly there was the devil's own deluge. I had never been in such a storm. You couldn't see more than twenty yards.

I was with my carriers in a hide near the 19th milestone. One of my Sections was forward. It was about quarter to five. Suddenly I saw some of our trucks and a carrier screaming down the flooded road, and heard the hell of a battle a short way to the north. It sounded as though guns and machine-guns had got right into our position. The din was terrific.

It is believed that an infantry attack from the east, supported by mortars, coincided with the tank blitz which now occurred. This and the subsequent sniping of the Jitra position about an hour later indicates that the Changlun position had been outflanked in some strength.

I wasn't given any time to wonder about this because almost immediately a medium tank roared past me. I dived for cover. I reckon that within the next two minutes a dozen medium tanks and a couple of dozen one-man tanks passed me. Brigadier Garrett estimated the enemy at about sixteen medium tanks with smaller A.F.V.'s similar to Bren carriers and some motorised infantry—in all a total of about forty-five vehicles. They had crashed right through our forward Companies, but most of these must have been on the move. As far as I know none of the Company Commanders were forward, and a good few of the V.C.O.'s were back too, reconnoitring a position for the night. In the middle of the tanks I saw one of my carriers; its tail was on fire and the No. 2 was facing back firing his L.M.G. at a tank twenty yards behind him.

The next item in this ghastly procession was fourteen lorries crowded with Japs, I saw one of our blokes just across the road firing single shots at them with an L.M.G. I remember wondering why the hell he was only firing single shots. A lorry screeched to a halt quite near me and the passengers leapt out and lined the road blazing away as hard as they could. I had a quick 'dekko' and saw two Japs changing a wheel. In a matter of a couple of minutes that lorry was off again with its passengers aboard.

Then about twenty cars buzzed past and that ended it.

I recovered my breath and looked around. My carrier crews had vamoosed; I can't say that I blame them. I'd been feeling that way myself but had decided that I was safer under cover. I went north for a bit to look for the Battalion—not a sign of it! So I returned to my carriers to find McCarthy there.

We decided to make for home but it was dark now and black as pitch, and we gave it up after I'd dam near drowned myself in a marsh. We lay up all that night in a hut and set off at first light

next day moving wide, east of the road. We picked up quite a mixed bag on the way—about thirty of our chaps, fifty Gurkhas and half a dozen Mountain Gunners. We fetched up in Hislop's Company area near Bukit Penia at half past one in the afternoon. It was a bloody awful trek.

The enemy tanks after overrunning the 1/14th Punjab Regt approached the bridge in front of the Asun outpost position in the sodden twilight. The sapper V.C.O. in charge of the demolition was hit. Major Bate commanding the 23rd Field Company ran forward to push down the plunger. The rain had rendered it useless. The demolition had failed. Major Bate fell riddled with bullets. Then Havildar Manbahadur of the 2/1st Gurkha Rifles aligned his anti-tank rifle, fired, and knocked out the first tank. The second tried to work its way round, but Havildar Manbahadur knocked that one into the ditch. Two more tanks came on, and the havildar fired again. One of them turned round and retired; the other hit the leading tank and remained still. Havildar Manbahadur took advantage of the brief immobilisation he had caused to dash forward and rescue Major Bate, but he died in the havildar's arms as he was being carried back.

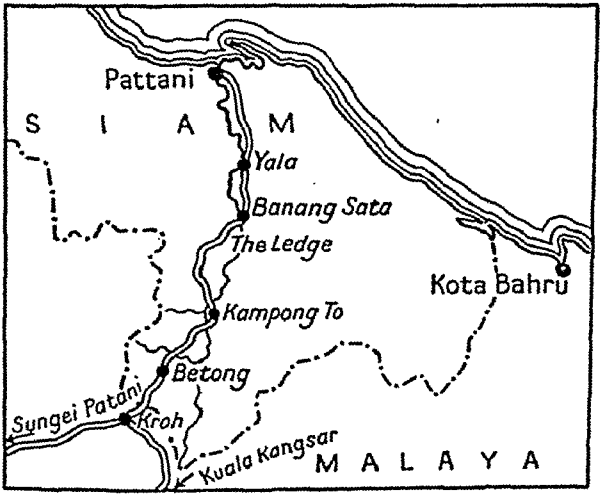
Alas, that gallant immobilisation was all too brief. The tanks came on over the bridge. The three companies of the Gurkhas were overwhelmed by Japanese infantry, communications having been broken and the orders to withdraw never reaching them.

Few of the 2/1st Gurkha Rifles managed to rejoin the 11th Division, and only about half of the 1/14th Punjab Regt. Lieut.-Colonel Fitzpatrick and Captain Mohan Singh were captured by the Japanese at Kuala Nerang, and it was there that Major Fujiwara, a remarkably persuasive Japanese officer, first mentioned to Captain Mohan Singh the idea of joining an Indian National Army of which for a while Captain Mohan Singh was the commander.

That mechanised unit commanded by Major Saeki, a late instructor in the Cavalry School, was bold and resolute and so it was also lucky.

It is now time to see what happened to Krocol 12 hours after the Japanese had landed at Patani when Lieut.-Colonel Moorhead received his belated orders at 1 p.m. on December 8th to move across the frontier and seize the defensive position on the Patani road known as The Ledge, the object being to safeguard the line of communications of the 11th Division from an enemy attempt to cut them at Sungei Patani or Kuala Kangsar. He was without the 5/14th Punjab Regt still in Penang and without his guns, for the

10th Mountain Battery which was to take the place of the F.M.S.V. battery had not joined him. Therefore Krocol when it started was really Moorhead and his 3/16th Punjab Regt, a battalion in the words of the divisional historian, 'so well trained, full of guts and permeated with esprit de corps that it compared favourably with its 'unmilked' self of pre-war days.' The transport was supplied by the 2/3rd Australian Reserve M.T. Company whose drivers, veterans all of the First World War, rendered magnificent service to the two Indian Divisions throughout the Malayan Campaign and were much loved by the troops whom they never failed.



By 2 p.m. scouts had reached the padlocked frontier gate. They smashed it with axes, but as soon as the leading scout went through he was shot dead by a Siamese fusillade. This Siamese behaviour was a shock. However, the carrier platoon went ahead as an advanced guard and the column proceeded. At every bend in a winding road blocks had to be cleared. These were all under heavy rifle and automatic fire until the two flanking companies had cut their way through the thick jungle on either side of the road to drive off the defenders who on two occasions charged the invaders with fixed bayonets. Could these have been the gentle Siamese of Sir Josiah Crosby's optimistic despatches? Were they not in fact Japanese soldiers disguised as Siamese policemen?

So slow was the progress of the battalion against this tough

resistance that by dusk only three miles of the road to The Ledge had been covered. Sniping continued all night.

At 4 a.m. next morning the 5/14th Punjab Regt reached Kroh, but were held there by Moorhead who thought that the country allowed scope for a single battalion only and the 3/16th Punjab Regt again advanced. They found themselves opposed by about 350 'Siamese policemen' who fought as toughly as yesterday until the early afternoon when abruptly all opposition ceased. Betong, hung with white flags, was reached by 3 p.m. and here a minor official apologized for the 'mistake' the police had made.

At 6 a.m. on December 10th the 3/16th Punjab Regt in the Australian lorries moved off and at 1.30 p.m. alighted six miles south of The Ledge, this being the farthest turning place for lorries north of Kroh. Two Japanese aeroplanes dropped bombs without doing any damage. The Punjabis continued on foot for another two and a half miles when they met strong opposition still three and a half miles from The Ledge, no longer from Siamese policemen but troops of the Japanese 5th Division who had covered the 78 miles from Patani over quagmire roads and one single ferry with astonishing speed.

Three companies of the 3/16th Punjab Regt went forward through the dense jungle in an attempt to outflank the enemy, and by 5 p.m. all touch with them had been lost. Lieut. Charlton the adjutant was sent forward to find A Company. He found two sections of it soon after crossing the wooden bridge over the Kampong To stream and was hearing that the rest of the company had gone forward when he saw two Japanese tanks coming round a bend 400 yards ahead. He sprinted back to battalion H.Q. at the bridge which the sappers were strengthening for the carriers to cross it. A moment later they were pulling it to pieces to stop the tanks from crossing it. However, under the fire of the anti-tank rifles they turned back, and the bridge was made impassable.

Soon after darkness fell B Company came back. They had been held up by dense and precipitous country west of the road, but had suffered no casualties.

Moorhead disposed his two remaining companies south of the To stream, B Company on the right, C Company on the left. He had ordered the 5/14th Punjab Regt and the 10th Mountain Battery to take up a position nine miles north of Betong.

Eight men under an N.C.O. of A Company now rejoined the battalion to tell a tale of heroism. Subadar Sher Khan commanding A Company had advanced 700 yards beyond the bridge when his vanguard met tanks. Subadar Sher Khan at once deployed his

company in the jungle east of the road. The enemy came on in three parties of two tanks and a company of infantry each with intervals of a few hundred yards between them. Subadar Sher Khan let the two leading tanks pass through and then ordered his men to charge the infantry. He was at once severely wounded, but kneeling beside the road urged his men on. They wrought such havoc among the Japanese infantry that the survivors fled squealing into the jungle. And then the two tanks of the second party arrived, the first of them running over Subadar Sher Khan and killing him. The Punjabis caught thus in the road were shot to pieces. Havildar Bahadur Khan who commanded a Bren gun section had only Sepoy Muzaffer Khan left. Although himself suffering from several wounds Havildar Bahadur Khan continued to fire his gun for several minutes and inflict many casualties on the enemy before he died. Then Sepoy Muzaffer Khan took the gun and kept it in action until he too was killed.

A Company fought on for half an hour against overwhelming odds until almost every man was killed or wounded. The section of eight men and an N.C.O., the only survivors of A Company, continued as a section right through the Malayan Campaign, never failing in their soldierly duty until the end at Singapore.

Throughout that night the two companies of the 3/16th Punjab Regt were patrolling and the sappers under continuous sniping made the To stream impassable for infantry. Dawn of December 11th brought a bombardment by mortars, but it did slight damage. At 10 a.m. 2nd Lieut. Mohammed Zarif Khan brought D Company safely back. They had found a feature called Jungle Hill occupied by the enemy and had turned him off it at the bayonet's point. Then they had held the hill until their communications with the battalion were cut by the Japanese who encircled it from the west. 2nd Lieut. Zarif Khan hung on until dark when he led his company out by a long detour through the jungle with the loss of 15 men.

During that afternoon Moorhead's gallant Punjabis were thrice attacked, the last attack just before dusk being at battalion strength against the whole line. The enemy's infantry guns (a deadly and serviceable weapon which we lacked) blew to pieces many of the Punjabi carriers; but they were silenced at last by 3-inch mortars. It was a day of very hard fighting from which the 3/16th Punjab Regt emerged undaunted. The Indian stretcher-bearers of the 36th Field Ambulance and the drivers of the 2/3rd Australian Motor Ambulance Convoy did noble work in evacuating the wounded. Nevertheless, Moorhead was anxious about the future. His men had

now been in action for four days and without sleep for four nights. Casualties were mounting. He decided that he must withdraw and join up with the 5/14th Punjab Regt before his own 3/16th were too exhausted to fight on. He had no secraphone and at 8 p.m. telephoned to divisional headquarters in riddles.

'Things are not so good . . . you remember what Francis I said of the Battle of Pavia? That will give you the picture.'

'Never heard of the bloke,' replied Colonel Harrison, the G.S.O.I.

Moorhead had to be more explicit.

'We shall have to join Stokes (the C.O. of the 5/14th). There are too many slit eyes round here.'

He was told to hang on till an officer from D.H.Q. arrived, and Murray-Lyon sent a written order to Moorhead, giving him discretion to withdraw but telling him that the Kroh position must be the limit and that there he would have to hold on to the last man and the last round.

This order was sent by the G.S.O. III (Intelligence) who had to ride 113 miles through the drenching darkness on a motor-bicycle to deliver it. He was back at D.H.Q. by 5 a.m. on the 12th to report that Moorhead was in great heart but estimated the enemy as a full regiment of three battalions with tanks.

Moorhead had decided to wait for dawn of that desperate December 12th when the disastrous battle of Jitra was fought and the Japanese landed in the Philippines. At 4 a.m. the enemy attacked strongly, but in hand to hand fighting the Punjabis made the Japanese look inferior soldiers. Dawn revealed that the enemy was outflanking the position on the east, moving southward along the banks of the deep and wide Sungei Patani.

At 7 a.m. the strongest attack yet made was launched, supported by those outflanking troops with light-automatic fire from the tree tops. The fighting continued fiercely for two hours. The enemy got into C Company's area; D Company led by Zarif Khan put them out again with the bayonet. By 9 a.m. only four of the carriers remained. Moorhead ordered the derelicts to be jacked on to the road as obstacles and himself superintended the operation under heavy fire. By now the enemy had outflanked the west of the position; Moorhead ordered D Company to fall back a mile to hold a position while B and C Companies withdrew. B Company withdrew with 30 casualties, but C Company was completely surrounded and had to fight its way out. When the survivors reached D Company's position Lieut. Casson and his second-in-command 2nd Lieut. Skyrnes had both been killed in hand to hand fighting.

The last to leave was Moorhead himself with the rearguard of the four carriers. He was armed with a rifle and fighting with his wonderful men till the forward companies withdrew. The carriers were now under shell fire, one was silenced by a direct hit, another was knocked out sideways. Moorhead hung on until the companies were clear. Then he gave the order for the two carriers left to retire and jumped aboard the rearmost as it started. No sooner was he aboard than he saw a wounded lance-naik lying 50 yards back. He halted the carrier and ran back along the road swept by bullets and blasted by shell fire to hoist the lance-naik on to his shoulder and bring him back to the carrier.

The enemy did not follow up the withdrawal. The Australian lorries with their veteran drivers were waiting for the battalion at the suspension bridge eight miles north of Betong. Some of those drivers must have thought of the days when they held the Turk at Anzac. The bridge was blown. The lorries went back. At 3 p.m. 350 men, all that was left of the 3/16th Punjab Regt passed through the 5/14th Punjab Regt to occupy the left sector of the Kroh position, where they were joined by 100 first reinforcements. At midnight Krocol passed from Major-General Murray-Lyon's command to III Indian Corps.

He had pressed for this before hostilities began; if *Matador* had been put into operation the command of Krocol would have been even more difficult. The delay in giving Moorhead his orders to seize The Ledge was even less excusable than the delay in notifying Major-General Murray-Lyon that *Matador* had been abandoned. In the circumstances all that could be done was done. The fight of the 3/16th Punjab Regt on the Patani Road added another glorious page to the annals of the old Indian Army.

Whatever regiment in Pakistan is now the heir of the 3/16th Punjab Regt, the old Allahabad Levy of long ago, let it remember always with reverence the battle of the Patani Road.

Chapter 20

December, 1941. Withdrawal from Jitra position—ordeal of 11th Indian Division—gallantry at the Grik road—reluctance to deploy Australians—underestimate of Japanese ability.

THE Jitra position was just north of the little town of the same name and lay astride the trunk road into Siam and the junction with it of the road to Perlis. It was to be held by two brigades forward. On the right the 15th Brigade consisted of the 1st Leicesters and the 2nd Jat Regt. The latter had a particularly vulnerable position because its right flank was in jungle and rubber through which ran many paths giving the enemy a covered approach. Lay's 6th Brigade on the left was responsible for a 10 miles front of paddy and swamp, stretching across the railway to the sea. The 2/16th Punjab Regt had to watch this part of the line. Forward was the 2nd East Surrey Regt on the left of the Leicesters. The 1/8th Punjab Regt held an outpost position at Kampong Imam on the Perlis road from which it would fall back into brigade reserve. Unfortunately the premature demolition of a bridge at Manggoe on the evening of the 11th cut off two forward companies of the 2/16th Punjab Regt with their trucks, the 1/8th Punjab Regt outpost detachment with its trucks and carriers, the guns of the 7th Mountain Battery and seven anti-tank guns. That blunder followed upon the overrunning o the 1/14th Punjab Regt and 2/1st Gurkha Rifles on the Singora roa

Brigadier Garrett was wounded and missing. So Brigadi Carpendale took over the 15th Brigade together with the o battalion left of his own 28th Brigade—the 2/2nd Gurkha Rifles. This was moved forward as 15th Brigade reserve. The 2/9th Gurkha Rifles was south of Alor Star as aerodrome reserve.

The front of the 2nd Jat Regt was 2,800 yards wide and 1,000 yards deep. Paddy knee-deep in mud with the rice already well-grown filled the area between the rubber and jungle on its right to the Bata stream. Another stream, the Palong, flowed through the paddy, north and south. Both were in flood and unfordable. Moreover, they were fringed with trees for a depth of 50 yards. The Palong thus cut across the field of fire and afforded a covered approach to the enemy. The two forward companies were separated by 1,300 yards of paddy.

The Leicesters' position was much easier to defend than that of the Jats. It included both the roads. There was a good field of fire over the paddy and the Kamunting stream flowing east and west was a useful obstacle. The bridge over it on the road had been prepared for demolition. There was one danger spot in this area in the event of withdrawal: the Bata stream, 30 feet wide, in the rear could be crossed only by the Iron Bridge on the trunk road and one of those shaky bamboo bridges in single file.

The position was chosen under the belief that the Japanese would arrive during the north-east monsoon and communications, particularly in the Jats' area, were in December a nightmare. The reader is reminded that all those troops had not had a proper night's rest for nearly a week, that for three and half days they had been digging and cutting and trying to get sodden defences into good order, that all the labour they had spent on Jitra since August had interfered with their training and vice versa, that parsimony had denied to the Army the necessary money to employ civil labour, that the equipment and arms with which they would have to fight had come in very slowly, and finally that the milking of infantry battalions and field companies of sappers and miners to provide trained officers, N.C.O.'s and men for the new battalions and field companies being raised in India, had continued right up to the end of November. Add to this the disappointment caused by turning back instead of going on, the absence of friendly aircraft from the skies, the abandonment of the blasted aerodromes, which the troops supposed they were in this god-forsaken mosquito-thick drenched corner of the peninsula to defend, and the effect of the blitz on the Singora road, and the mood in which the doomed 11th Indian Division met the 5th Japanese Division trained to the moment for the task set them at Jitra may be appreciated.

Soon after dark on December 11th one of the Jat companies was engaged with Japanese snipers who had by-passed the 1/14th Punjab Regt during the Changlun battle in the morning, but the first severe attack fell on the Leicesters. At 7.45 p.m. Japanese tanks were reported past Asun, and Lieut. Clarricoats with two men was sent forward to warn a forward patrol. He was instructed to fire a succession of green Verey lights if he sighted the tanks before he reached the patrol. Only half a mile forward he met the tanks and fired his lights. This gallant young officer was last seen in hand to hand encounter with three Japanese soldiers who had jumped out of the leading tank. Half an hour later the tanks had reached the causeway demolition just north of the Leicesters' position. The

One might suppose from such brave words that the men at home in charge of our position in the Far East had been worthy of their great trust and taken adequate measures to secure that position.

A counter-attack by the 1/8th Punjab Regt to restore the situation when the enemy had penetrated between the Leicesters and the Jats started badly with a heavy fusillade from the Jats to whose aid they were coming. When the time arrived for Lieut.-Colonel Bates to go forward again he found that half his exhausted troops had fallen back. He then addressed the men left and nobly they responded. Bates himself with Lieut. Alabaster the adjutant and Captain Jennings led the charge. Few of them reached the Copse they were trying to capture. All three officers were killed and 28 Punjabis with them. Some of the unwounded survivors of the charge tried to secure their colonel's body; they too were all killed.

At noon a Japanese battalion attacked D Company of the 2nd Jat Regt; it was held by the guns of the Lanarkshire Yeomanry, that splendid 155th Field Regt which did yeoman's service indeed throughout the Malayan Campaign. The Japanese still came on whenever the bombardment ceased for a moment. An hour and a half later Lieut.-Colonel Murdoch reported that he was very short of ammunition. For some time Captain Holden of D Company had been compelled to reduce the expenditure of the 2-inch mortars. By now many of the rifles and L.M.G.'s were red hot: others were clogged with mud. Holden telephoned to his Colonel that the enemy was massing in the anti-tank ditch right in front of D Company. Colonel Tester said he could not give him permission to withdraw.

'O.K., sir,' Holden replied, 'We'll fight it out with grenades and the bayonet. The men are splendid. I reckon we've got about five minutes left.'

Tester wished his company commander good luck. D Company with bayonets fixed faced the Japanese battalion. Whistles shrilled. The enemy charged. Very few of the Jats survived that charge, and when last seen Captain Holden was hurling grenades at the surging yellow swarm.

The 2nd Jat Regt has been called unsteady at Jitra. Let the stand of D Company be remembered and let their heroic captain write their epitaph. 'The men are splendid.'

The overwhelming of D Company meant that the right flank of the Leicesters was now completely exposed.

All that day exhausted and shattered survivors of the Asun blitz were coming in, and the sight of these did not raise the morale of the troops at Jitra. Yet there were bright incidents. A party of the 2/1st

Gurkha Rifles during their escape found two Japanese tanks unguarded and set them ablaze with Molotov cocktails. Seven of the crews came hurrying back and were captured. The Japanese dreading their military and civil future begged their captors to shoot them; these were certainly formidable adversaries.

For the rest of the day the situation deteriorated everywhere; when Murray-Lyon and his G.S.O.I. got back to D.H.Q. as darkness was falling the situation reports and messages did not console them for what they had been hearing and seeing for themselves. B Company of the 2nd Jat Regt at Bukit Penia had been overrun.[1] There had been strong infiltration in Tanjong Pau camp and 15th Brigade H.Q. was moving to Milestone 10. Another Jat company had been ambushed. The 2/16th Punjab Regt's detachment at Kelubi had been attacked and one platoon was missing. A heavy Japanese attack had been launched against the Leicesters as the battalion was readjusting its positions according to orders. The enemy was in force opposite the 2/2nd Gurkha Rifles on the Bata. The 3/16th Punjab Regt was back at Kroh with their strength reduced to 350. And most unkindest cut of all, a request came from the R.A.F. for the destruction of the runways and salvage of a vast amount of valuable stores, arms, equipment and machinery at Alor Star which their own ground staff had left behind.

Murray-Lyon telephoned to Corps for permission to withdraw. Percival and Heath were still in conference at Singapore; Heath once again urged that Murray-Lyon should be given discretion. At 8.30 p.m. Brigadier Fawcett, the B.G.S. of III Indian Corps telephoned that Lieut.-General Percival gave Major-General Murray-Lyon discretion to withdraw, but stressed the fact that the security of North Kedah was still his primary object.

It was a tragedy that Murray-Lyon's request in the morning had not been granted. The withdrawal by night for tired troops with broken communications was a most difficult operation. The Leicesters were in a particularly nasty position because the Iron Bridge over the Bata was now held by the enemy. An attempt was made to find sampans. One was discovered after a long search but by 5 a.m. only 43 of the Leicesters were across. Lieut.-Colonel Morrison, who had reached Jitra on December 11th to take over the command of the battalion and already proved himself a dauntless and extremely competent C.O. in the course of the fighting, decided to make for the town of Alor Star across country, six miles south of the aerodrome for which the 11th Indian Division had been

[1] This report proved later to be completely incorrect.

sacrificed, to find the town already in Japanese hands. When the battle of Jitra began the Leicesters had 23 officers and 625 men. When dusk fell on December 13th they mustered seven officers and 150 men.

The details[1] of that withdrawal from Jitra cannot be related in these pages which have to be starved as ruthlessly of tales of devotion, courage and misfortune as Malaya, Burma and Hong Kong were starved of the means to defend themselves during those disgraceful years when Britannia was fox-trotting with her covetous enemies.

By the time the withdrawal from Jitra was finished the 11th Indian Division was a shadow of itself. The 15th Brigade could hardly muster 600 men. We have recorded the state of the Leicesters. The 2nd Jat Regt mustered four officers and 187 men. The 1/14th Punjab Regt had only one officer and two weak companies, all survivors of the Asun blitz. The 6th Indian Brigade had lost more in the withdrawal than in the fighting. The 1/8th Punjab Regt was the only battalion seriously engaged. It was reduced to three companies, one of which consisted of the survivors of those two companies that made the counter-attack. The 2/16th Punjab Regt had only one rifle company, but it was the only battalion in the brigade with a carrier platoon and even that was a section short. The 2nd East Surrey Regt had lost two platoons.

Without sleep for a week, without food from the morning of December 12th until they reached Gurun on December 14th and perhaps not a chapatti apiece then, muddied by swamps, soaked by streams, the 11th Indian Division needed rest as few troops have needed rest. There were no troops available to relieve it, and so it was called on to continue fighting and withdrawing for another lethal month.

The loss of sea power and the lack of air power made the conquest of Malaya by the Japanese inevitable in a matter of weeks. No general, alive or dead, could have hoped to postpone it by more than a month, and it is hard to believe that any senior officer in Malaya supposed otherwise. Therefore it might have been better to relieve the 11th Division by sending Lieut.-General Gordon Bennett and his two Australian Brigades north from Johore and replacing them there by the 11th Indian Division. To be sure that would have been to gamble over a Japanese attack on the island by sea with a landing at Mersing, but by now the naval base was almost as much

[1] It is to be hoped that the Divisional History of the 11th Indian Division by Colonel A. M. L. Harrison, the G.S.O.I. will be published. In the poignant annals of military endurance few soldiers have suffered as much as that ill-starred division.

of a liability as the aerodromes and too much was being sacrificed to an imaginary preservation of face.

All that Percival could possibly do was to put the Command reserve, the 12th Indian Brigade less the 4th Hyderabad Regt which was being withdrawn from Kelantan, at the disposal of III Corps.

The Gurun position extended from the Kedah Peak, a jungle-clad isolated mountain rising sheer from the plain to 4,000 feet, across the railway and main trunk road to rubber estates on the east, all with minor roads familiar to the enemy. A main road from Yen on the coast to Kampong Kambar ran laterally across the front of the division crossing the trunk road at Guan Chempadek. The 28th Brigade was on the right. The 6th Brigade on the left covered the road and railway. What remained of the 15th Brigade was in reserve.

The exhausted troops had scarcely three hours to occupy this new position. By 3 p.m. on December 14th the enemy attacked down the trunk road with tanks followed by lorried infantry and supported from the air. The cross-roads were lost, but recaptured in a counter-attack led by Brigadier Lay himself, orders being given to reoccupy them in strength after dark. However, the Japanese gave these orders no chance of being carried out. During the night they penetrated deep into the positions of the 6th Brigade, overrunning the 1/8th Punjab Regt and the 2nd East Surrey Regt, and at 7 a.m. they obliterated brigade H.Q. killing every officer and man, Lay himself escaping death only because at the time he was at 28th Brigade H.Q. in consultation with Carpendale. To cut a melancholy story short, Murray-Lyon decided to withdraw the division behind the Muda River. The withdrawal was covered by the 28th Brigade, in the course of which Lieut.-Colonel Selby's 2/9th Gurkha Rifles and two companies of the East Surreys in the rearguard held the enemy back long enough to save the rest of the division.

By the morning of December 16th the 11th Indian Division had had a night's sleep in Province Wellesley, having lost heavily in men, arms, equipment, ammunition, supplies and transport after 10 sleepless nights and hungry days. That they were able to go on fighting for over another month without relief was a miracle.

We must now turn back to Krocol which on December 14th was absorbed into Paris's 12th Indian Brigade. After the 3/16th Punjab Regt passed through the 5/14th Punjab Regt the latter withdrew from its position north of Betong on the morning of December 13th directly to the Kroh position. Moorhead whose orders were to hold Kroh to the last man and the last round did not want to tire out the 5/14th with delaying action.

At dusk next day Brigadier Paris reached Krocol H.Q. to tell Lieut.-Colonel Moorhead that he was now under his command and order him to withdraw through the Argylls in position seven miles behind him at Baling and remain at Tawar in reserve. At midnight Krocol withdrew to Kupang. The 5/2nd Punjab Regt reached Merbau Pulas (14 miles east of Sungei Patani) at 7 p.m. of December 15th and was ordered to occupy at once a position covering the approaches across the Muda because the Kroh road must be protected against a Japanese threat from the west as a result of the Gurun mess. A single company of the Argylls had been sent to block the Grik road which ran 93 miles from Kroh to Lawin on the trunk road. The road north of Grik, considered impassable for trucks except in dry weather, was nevertheless a menace after what the Japanese had accomplished in the way of transport along the road from Patani. With the Highlanders were some armoured cars of the Federated Malay States Volunteers.

On this day the aerodrome at Butterworth was abandoned by the R.A.F., the ground staff performing the operation at top speed.

The Krai position which was occupied by the 11th Division on December 17th stretched 30 miles from Mahang to the coast. It was too long a frontage for the depleted division, and the thickly wooded banks of the river afforded the enemy too much cover. Moreover, the strong pressure of the Japanese along the Grik road, where Major Kennard's company of Argylls was re-enacting the thin red line of the old 93rd, might in the end prove too strong and that would mean the division's being cut off. Heath decided that another jump back would have to be made to the line of the Perak River as a preliminary to occupying a stronger position farther north about Kampar. He had just reached this decision when news came that Kennard's company after another hard day's fighting had been pushed back nine miles to Sumpitan. Heath had to take the 12th Brigade away from Murray-Lyon, and send the 5/2nd Punjab Regt to Kuala Kangsar to give help to the hard-pressed Argylls on the Grik road. He notified Percival of the enemy's attempt to get behind the 11th Division and suggested that 'at least one fresh Australian Brigade' should be sent to Ipoh at once. Percival replied that they did not want to dissipate their forces in Johore and Singapore and that Heath was to aim at getting behind the Perak. Meanwhile, on December 19th the fortress of Penang had been evacuated after a savage bombardment of Georgetown by the Japanese air force in which the Chinese centre of the town was destroyed and all municipal public services ceased to function. Unfortunately when the enemy

entered Penang he found 24 self-propelled craft, several dozen junks and many barges which after being deserted by their crews were not destroyed in the hurried evacuation which had to be ordered.

Next day the 6th and 15th Indian Brigades left the 28th Brigade on the Krian and at Ipoh they were reformed as the 6/15th Indian Brigade consisting of the British Battalion (1st Leicestershire and 2nd East Surrey Regt), the Punjab/Jat Battalion (1/8th Punjab Regt and 2nd Jat Regt), the 1/14th Punjab Regt and the 5/14th Punjab Regt.

There were other changes in command about now. All the brigadiers were casualties. So the 6/15th Brigade was given to Lieut.-Colonel Moorhead, the 28th Brigade to Lieut.-Colonel Selby of the 2/9th Gurkha Rifles, and the 12th Brigade to Lieut.-Colonel Stewart of the Argylls. Brigadier Paris replaced Major-General Murray-Lyon in command of the 11th Indian Division. Murray-Lyon was a victim to the failure of Great Britain to shoulder the responsibilities of Empire: he was unlucky, but at least he escaped death or long imprisonment by a barbarous foe like so many thousands of other victims.

The defence of the Grik road by the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders supported later by the 5/2nd Punjab Regt was at once a brilliant and a brave feat which cost the enemy heavy casualties, but here as elsewhere the limit of endurance for troops was reached.

On December 23rd a staff officer was commenting:

> It can't go on like this. The troops are absolutely dead-beat. The only rest they're getting is that of an uneasy coma as they squat in crowded lorries which jerk their way through the night. When they arrive they tumble out and have to get straight down to work. I've seen them. They're just stupid with sleep, and have to be smacked before they can 'connect' with the simplest order. Then they move like automatons, or cower down as a Jap aeroplane flies 200 feet above them. They're bound to crack soon.

In this condition a keen response to Lieut.-General Percival's 'Tour Notes' which were circulated two days after he visited Lieut.-General Heath's headquarters at Ipoh was hardly to be expected.

'We must play the enemy at his own game,' he wrote, 'and attack on every possible occasion.'

It seems worth while to quote from a Japanese account of that disastrous first fortnight of the Malayan Campaign.[1]

[1] *Japanese Land Operations* (from Japanese sources December 3 1941–June 8 1942). Compiled on 'information drawn entirely from Japanese sources.' Published by the Military Intelligence Services, War Department, Washington.

The first landings at Singora and Patani were carried out by the 5th Division under Major-General Matsui. The Guards Division (Major-General Nishimura) landed at Singora on December 13th, and one regiment of this division was in action by December 21st.

On arrival at the Perak River the Japanese strength amounted to 'five Divisions,' but 'the actual fighting was done by small units at the head of the column because of the narrow road and lack of manoeuvre space; the British as well could use only small bodies of troops. But by the clever use of demolitions, road blocks, and small rearguard detachments . . . they were able to slow up the Japanese advance in the early stages and to inflict heavy losses in both men and material.'

When the 11th Indian Division was 'along the Krian river . . . where the highway and railway bridges had been destroyed' the Japanese column which 'had been marching at widely extended intervals' had the head of its main body at Prai . . . while the remaining divisions were strung out along the road to the north, the last one being in bivouac at Singora . . . The fact that General Yamashita allowed his command to become so strung out that it would require several days to assemble for battle showed that he had little fear of any offensive action on the part of the British.'

No, indeed, for the nearest fresh troops, the 8th Australian Division was 286 miles to the south, and Yamashita, for all his divisions were strung out, was always able to put in fresh small units at the head of the columns.

Yet even now there was still a disposition in Singapore to cling to that depreciation of Japanese military skill which was responsible for so much deplorable rhetoric over the radio. Consider what those gangsters, as Lieut.-General Percival called them, had accomplished by December 23rd. They had forced the 11th Division back 160 miles from the Siamese frontier to the Perak River. They had occupied the State of Kelantan. They had swept the R.A.F. out of the sky and the Royal Navy from the sea. They had paralysed the United States Fleet in Pearl Harbour and obliterated the United States Air Force in the Philippines. They were now driving the U.S. forces back along the Bataan Peninsula. Hong Kong was on the verge of falling and Wake Island had just been occupied, and on this December 23rd they were invading Sarawak where in all British North Borneo the 2/15th Punjab Regt was the sole garrison.

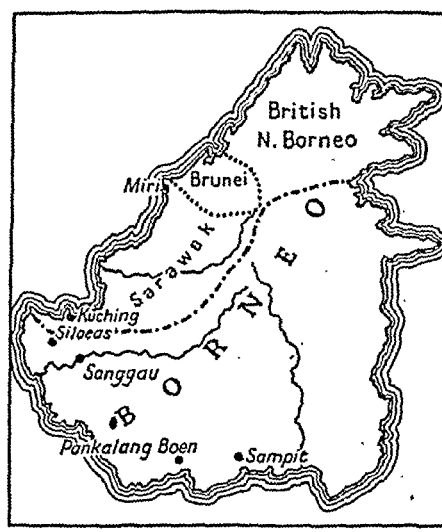
Chapter 21

December, 1941–April, 1942. The battle for Borneo—Japanese land at Kuching—a magnificent rearguard—800 miles through the jungle—survivors captured.

LET us follow for a brief while the fortunes of that expendible battalion, the 2/15th Punjab Regt, commanded by Lieut.-Colonel C. M. Lane. Lane's orders had been to deny the Kuching landing-ground to the enemy and if attacked in overwhelming force to withdraw by bush-track into Dutch West Borneo. At Miri 400 miles east through roadless jungle was one company of the 2/15th Punjab Regt under Major Slatter whose task it was to make a mess of the oil-fields and demolish the refinery at Lutong. This was accomplished by December 13th when H.M.S. *Lipis*, a small coastal steamer, arrived at Miri to embark the troops from Kuching. Next day H.M.S. *Lipis* was attacked by a Japanese aircraft and among those killed was Major Slatter who was engaging the aircraft from the bridge with a light automatic. The steamer reached Kuching and the battalion was complete again. On the morning of December 23rd reconnaissance aircraft from Singapore sighted nine enemy warships and transports steering for Sarawak. Through a breakdown in communications Lane was not informed of this till 8.30 p.m. and 10 minutes later he was ordered to demolish the landing-ground. Next morning the Japanese transports were anchored in Santubong Bay and landing craft were penetrating inland up the Santubong River as far as Kuching. Lane was unaware of what was happening, the cable between him and his forward posts having been cut during the air bombardment of Kuching on December 19th. By 4 p.m. the enemy had occupied the town and after dark Lane withdrew his forward detachments to the landing-ground. His communications with Singapore were cut when the civil W/T station was seized by the enemy.

By dusk the enemy had reached the perimeter defences of the landing-ground and deployed his advanced troops round three sides of it, and was ranging on the position with heavy mortar, machine-gun, and shell fire. As darkness fell patrols began to probe the battalion's defences, and the bombardment continued for most of the night. Lane was still without a reply from Singapore about the

future of the landing-ground, and on Christmas morning he decided to withdraw 80 miles through the jungle into Dutch West Borneo. The European women and children with the sick and some officials carrying the State records were sent on first and crossed the ferry in safety. Then there was trouble because the ferrymen deserted and left their craft on the wrong side of the swirling Sarawak River. However, this difficulty was overcome, and Lane gave orders for the battalion to withdraw company by company. The Sikh company which had been heavily engaged the previous day with the enemy's landing forces was the first to disengage and went on to hold the



ferry. The Jat company was the next. All vehicles, petrol and stores were destroyed before it left, and the last thing it denied to the enemy was a case of champagne with which Christmas was to have been celebrated. The bottles were smashed by light automatic fire. Battalion H.Q. with two platoons of the Punjabi Mussalman company followed the Jats. The rearguard was the Pathan company with a platoon of P.M.'s; before they could get clear the Japanese launched fierce assaults from two directions. The Pathans fought with superb devotion until they were overwhelmed by numbers to gain time for the rest of the battalion to reach the ferry. Those who were not killed where they stood and could get away carried with them the rifles and ammunition belts of the fallen all the way to Sanggau, which was reached on December 29th, when the 2/15th

Punjab Regt came under the orders of the local Dutch commander. The total casualties of the battalion in the Sarawak fighting had been four British officers and 229 Indian other ranks, all four of the British officers and many of the sepoys being killed.

The battalion after re-forming and up to a point being re-equipped undertook local defence in the Siloeas-Sanggau area. It was reported that the Japanese troops landed at Kuching numbered 3,000–4,000. By January 7th they had reached the frontier between Sarawak and Dutch West Borneo and for nearly a fortnight there was savage jungle fighting between there and Sanggau. The Punjabis put up a great defence of the Sanggau (Singkawang II) aerodrome and with a loss of another 150 men succeed in holding off the Japanese long enough for the demolitions to be accomplished.

By now the enemy had landed another force on the west coast of Borneo, cutting off the battalion's retreat in that direction; it then struck south-east as a preliminary to attempting a formidable march of over 400 miles to the south coast.

Heavy rearguard actions were fought, the Sikh company distinguishing itself on January 27th by a counter-attack on an entrenched Japanese battalion which drove through three lines of trenches and held them until the enemy powerfully reinforced himself.

At 6 a.m. on January 28th a hundred men of the Punjabi Mussalman company commanded by Subadar Faramurz Khan with 12 machine-guns were holding the banks of the Sambas River in order to give time for the main body to disengage from the enemy.

This position was to be held until an hour after midday. The Japanese using very heavy mortar-fire gradually silenced the machine-guns in their pits, and having crossed the river on both flanks attacked furiously time after time. There was no longer an question of withdrawal: the only question now was death c surrender. The enemy bade them cease firing and become h brothers. He would treat them as noble warriors like himself. T Punjabis chose death. By 5 p.m. after 11 hours' fighting half of that rearguard was dead and all the rest were wounded. The enemy's bombardment was suddenly redoubled in intensity. A hush fell before the final Japanese assault.

Then the Japanese swarmed into the position and within a few minutes only 30 wounded and dying were left of Subadar Faramurz Khan's faithful and valorous hundred. The foe gathered these together and tied them to the trees, denying them even water. Then they wired these wounded prisoners one to another through the

Achilles tendon, poured petrol over them and set them alight. Dyaks afterwards told the story.

The battalion whose successful disengagement owed so much to that devoted hundred lost contact with the enemy at Ngabaung. It was now operating independently of the Dutch, and it was decided to make for the south coast in two columns, one heading for Sampit, the other for Pankalang Boen, 120 miles to the west.

One column started on February 3rd, the other on February 5th and after arduous days of marching through the equatorial jungle they reached their respective destinations at the same time. The Sampit column found the enemy there before it, and after a skirmish it set off westward to join the other column at Pankalang Boen. Marching on a compass bearing for six days through virgin jungle it was successful in uniting the battalion again. By the end of March officers and men were utterly exhausted. Since leaving Kuching they had marched over 800 miles through country as difficult as any in the world, and marched moreover for most of the time on half-rations, carrying their light automatics and rifles, their ammunition and equipment.

On April 3rd the men of the 2/15th Punjab Regt, still an example of soldierly order but baffled by the surrender of the Dutch East Indies of their hope of finding transport to Java, became prisoners of war. Sikhs, Jats, Punjabi Mussalmans and Pathans shared with the British officers who led them in a feat of physical endurance and moral strength not often paragoned in the chronicles of human valour.

The 2/15th Punjab Regt came to Malaya with the 6th Brigade of the 11th Indian Division. When it was sent to Sarawak its place was taken by the 2nd East Surrey Regt. It was an honour even for the old Glasgow Greys, 70th of the Line, to take the place of such a battalion.

Chapter 22

December, 1941–January, 1942. Promise of reinforcements for Malaya —fight for Kuantan airfield—the stand at Kampar Hill—withdrawal to the Slim River.

IT was on Christmas Eve that Major-General Murray-Lyon received orders to report at once to corps headquarters and hand over to Brigadier Paris temporary command of the 11th Indian Division. Colonel Harrison, the G.S.O.I. of the division writes:

> We all knew what that meant. The General was being relieved of his command. No doubt this was inevitable. In the face of constant disaster troops are bound to lose confidence in their Commander, and the one vital thing was to restore that confidence. Perhaps a new broom would help.
>
> Major-General Murray-Lyon knew what it meant too, but he took that knock like the man he is. He bade cheerful good-bye to his Commanders and Staff at D.H.Q., thanked them for what they had done, and left us.
>
> All who knew him well were sad to see him go. He had never spared himself during his year in command of the 11th Indian Division in Malaya before the outbreak of hostilities: he had met and overcome many difficulties and some obstruction: he knew his officers and he knew his men, and they knew him and trusted him implicitly. The 'Divisional sign' was a wheel with eleven spokes. It was intended to symbolise the wheels of the 11th Division revolving towards Singora, but those wheels never advanced. That sudden change of orders on the 8th December stopped them, and then the dam' things started going backwards.
>
> In those first two weeks of disaster, Major-General Murray-Lyon did all that a Commander could do to restore broken confidence and to inspire his Division. He showed himself calm and unruffled throughout. He invariably went forward into the thick of it when affairs took a bad turn. He was a gallant leader.

On the same day Lieut.-General Sir Henry Pownall[1] arrived in Malaya; a fortnight later he became Chief of Staff to General Sir Archibald Wavell as Supreme Commander of Allied South-West Pacific Command.

[1] Lieut.-General Sir Henry Pownall, K.C.B., K.B.E., D.S.O, M.C.

In the middle of December Whitehall captivated by tales of the Scorched Earth Policy in Russia ordered unrestricted Scorched Earth for Malaya. It might be rash to claim a record for the ultimate depth of official stupidity, but such an order for a country like Malaya inhabited by people of other races to whom we had guaranteed our protection by treaties would be a powerful competitor. In the end after representing the state of affairs to London the Far East War Council extracted permission to leave the civil population with the food already distributed and not to destroy the water supplies or power plants.

News reached General Percival of reinforcements on the way. The 45th Brigade of the 17th Indian Division diverted from Iraq would arrive in the first half of January. So too would the 53rd Brigade of the 18th East Anglian Division diverted first from North Africa to Burma and then diverted again to Singapore. The 53rd Brigade would be followed by the 44th Indian Brigade and the rest of the 18th Division. 50 Hurricanes were also being sent by the same convoy of American liners as the 53rd Brigade. It was stressed that these liners had only been obtained by special permission of the American authorities, and that everything must be done to protect this valuable convoy against air attack. 52 Hudsons were also promised: 15 of them reached Singapore. It is difficult to understand why the dangerous despatch of these aircraft was possible at the beginning of January and the safe despatch of them a month earlier impossible. The deeper the chronicler shall delve into the history of the Malayan Campaign the heavier he shall find the weight of responsibility on those at home for its disastrous outcome.

Percival was naturally anxious to leave nothing undone that could be done to ensure the safe arrival of those reinforcements, and therefore he insisted on the paramount importance of denying the aerodromes at Kuala Lumpur and Kuantan to the enemy. It will be convenient at this stage to tell the story of Kuantan before we leave Malaya for a while and return to events in North Africa.

Kuantan is a small seaport on the east coast of Pahang separated from the railway at Jerantut in Central Malaya by a road running for a hundred miles through desolate jungle. Here nine miles from Kuantan itself the R.A.F. had recently completed a large and well equipped aerodrome to the defence of which the 22nd Indian Brigade had been committed.

The 2nd Frontier Force Regt had been detached from Painter's 22nd Brigade when hostilities began in order to reinforce Key's 8th Brigade in Kelantan. So the 5th Sikh Regt and the 2nd Royal

Garhwal Rifles were entrusted with the defence of this remote area. The latter was responsible for 11 miles of coast from the north of the River Kuantan to the River Balok. The Sikhs were west and south of the Kuantan River with the aerodrome in their zone. The vital ferry which was the only means of communication between troops operating on either side of the Kuantan was a slow and clumsy affair worked by Tamil coolies and unpleasantly vulnerable to hostile aircraft.

Early on the morning of December 9th the eight Blenheims were flown to Singapore: the Hudsons remained. Later that morning Japanese planes raided the aerodrome.

Japanese aircraft were over the brigade's area three or four times a day from December 9th until they left it at the beginning of January; but apart from the aerodrome and grounded planes destroyed in the first raid the damage they did was of no account. They could not even hit the large tanks of the Asiatic Petroleum Company, and in the end the Royal Bombay Sappers and Miners had to drain the aviation spirit off into the River Belat and there set it alight. Except for three Dutch bombers being chased by two Japanese fighters the only friendly planes the troops saw until they reached Singapore on February 1st were a couple of Wildebeestes sent to salvage some of the 20 torpedoes left on the Kuantan aerodrome.

During the night of December 9/10th the Garhwali pillboxes on the beaches and the guns on the east side of the river blazed away at what was believed to be an attempted landing by the enemy. It is quite probable that a few Japanese Light Motor Craft tried to probe the Kuantan coast defences, but it is by no means certain that the whole business was not a delusion. Anyway, it was the report of a landing at Kuantan which reached Admiral Phillips from Singapore and led him to close the shore with *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* and thus next morning encounter the Japanese planes.

By December 20th a Japanese coastal column moving southward from Kelantan had reached Kuala Trengganu. A Garhwali patrol came into contact with the enemy near Chukai three or four days later, and reported that he was using about 100 trucks and lorries in his advance. On the morning of December 27th five Japanese lorries approaching Kampong Balok came under fire from the guns of the 5th Field Regt. Two were knocked out and the others withdrew. Presently the Garhwali riflemen with whom was one company of the 2nd Frontier Force Regt were heavily involved. On the morning of December 30th the enemy had reached the Jabor Valley Rubber

Estate. The pillboxes near Balok were under heavy machine-gun fire and Japanese aircraft were dive-bombing and machine-gunning along the length of the coast defences. That afternoon they attacked the ferry and succeeded in cutting one of the two cables. The sappers managed to repair this after dark and during that night the guns and vehicles were got over to the west bank.

By dawn next day the Japanese were on the east bank of the Kuantan River in some strength, but Jemadar Ajit Singh of the 5th Sikh Regt who commanded the platoon post on the far bank held on to the bridgehead and saved a disaster. Fighting for the ferry lasted all day, and at 6 p.m. the Garhwalis crossed the river covered by a heavy artillery barrage. Two of their companies and the 2nd F.F. Regt company were missing.

One Garhwali company in Jabor had been out of communication for some time, and Captain Ishar Singh commanding A Company of the 2nd F.F. Regt which was the Garhwalis' battalion reserve was sent to clear up the situation. He found that the Garhwali company had been destroyed and fell back to Kuantan before the Japanese advancing in strength. When he reached the river he found that the rest of the Garhwalis had all crossed, and that Kuantan town was in enemy hands. The company was forced back into a corner by the mouth of the river, and here Captain Ishar Singh was joined by a platoon of Garhwalis under a young British officer. Ishar Singh ordered the platoon to cross by the boom over the mouth of the Kuantan while his company gave covering fire. The Garhwalis started, but except for the young officer and four men who jumped into the sea and swam across all the Garhwalis were killed by machine-gun fire. On the far side the young British officer was able to see Captain Ishar Singh and his gallant company completely overwhelmed by strong Japanese forces.

By New Year's morning all our troops left were across and the ferry was destroyed. Unfortunately the river was fordable in its upper reaches and the 22nd Brigade was still in danger of encirclement. Nevertheless, it was believed essential that the brigade should hang on as everywhere else in Malaya to that now blasted aerodrome and on January 1st an order was sent round to all units that it was to be denied to the enemy for five days so that Japanese fighters could not use it to escort their bombers against the convoys approaching Singapore with reinforcements.

However, the situation in the west did not allow Heath to take the risk of losing the 22nd Indian Brigade, and on January 3rd Major-General Barstow, commanding the 9th Indian Division, gave

the order to withdraw to Jerantut. The 2nd Royal Garhwal Rifles broke contact with the enemy first, and it was followed by the 5th Sikh Regt. The 2nd Frontier Force Regt less two companies, one of which was that of Captain Ishar Singh, was left to hold the edge of the aerodrome until 9 p.m. D Company was at Pekam at the mouth of the Pahang. Battalion headquarters was established in a small trench line with a redoubt at one end and a grass hut behind it. B Company was on the edge of the airfield, C Company in the rear of battalion headquarters. The ground was rubber plantation which had been thinned out.

At 7 p.m. the perimeter was tightened and strong piquets were mounted. At 8 p.m., by which time the moon had risen one of the rear piquets opened fire. Lieut.-Colonel Arthur Cumming and the adjutant, Captain Ian Grimwood, crept forward with drawn pistols to investigate this firing. Suddenly the piquet opened rapid fire, and then there was silence. It had been overrun by a swarm of Japanese who now rushed forward against the two officers. Both of them brought down several of the enemy, and when Cumming was twice bayoneted Grimwood drew the enemy's attack which enabled his commanding officer fighting with an empty pistol to back gradually until he reached the redoubt where the battalion havildar-major gripped him under the armpits and pulled him over the wall of the redoubt into the trench. Captain Grimwood could not reach battalion headquarters, but fought his way to the headquarters of D Company from where he directed the withdrawal of the two leading companies and battalion headquarters.

The Japanese now attacked battalion headquarters which consisted of about 40 men—runners, signallers and intelligence staff with the havildar-major and Subadar-Major Rai Singh, the Intelligence V.C.O. There seemed abundant ammunition and when the enemy attacked in three waves he crossed the trench-front and suffered heavily. Then ammunition began to run short. Between the trench line and the grass hut was Cumming's Bren-gun carrier in which there were five boxes of ammunition. The carrier backed up to the trench line and Cumming managed to throw them down. As he was getting out of the carrier his driver Sepoy Albel Chani handed him a tommy-gun, a weapon he had never previously used. However, he turned it on a swarm of Japanese and got back into the trench. The yellow swarm started another attack, this time from the rear, but stopped at the grass hut. Then some climbed on the roof, some went inside, and some crawled under the raised floor. Cumming told the subadar-major to open rapid fire on the hut, climbed

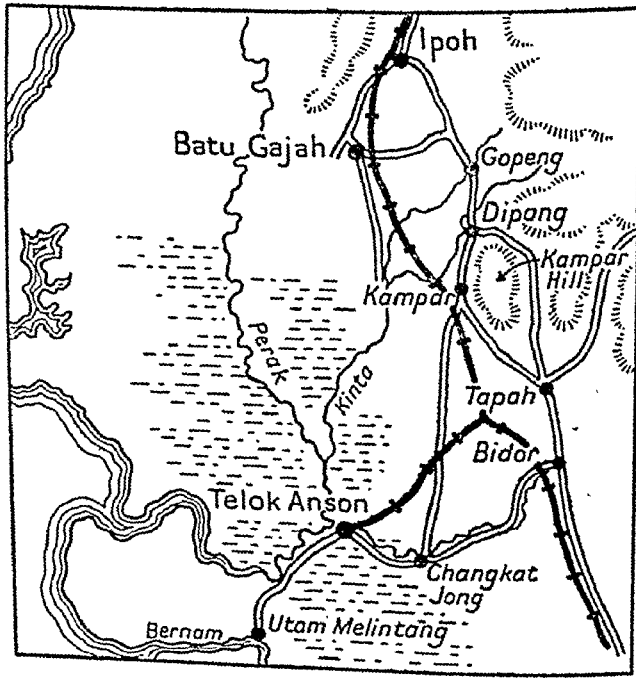
into his carrier, and ordered Sepoy Albel Chani to drive him round to the back of the hut. Between Cumming's tommy-gun and the rapid fire from the trench all the Japanese in the hut were slaughtered.

It was now 9 p.m. Cumming ordered the subadar-major to begin the withdrawal while he went forward to C Company to order its withdrawal. While on his way he was three times wounded and fainted. When he regained consciousness his driver told him that the enemy had established a road block in the cutting along the line of withdrawal. There were now several wounded men in the back of the carrier. The banks of the cutting were maggoty with Japanese who had put a tree across the road. Cumming told Albel Chani to charge the cutting because the tree was held up by the bank and there was enough room for the carrier to pass under it. A mine exploded under the carrier and blew it into the air, but it came down with tracks undamaged and went on. A shower of grenades was thrown from the bank, but these bounced off the rabbit-wire which covered the top of the carrier and burst harmlessly in the road. Machine-gun fire was opened in front, and several bullets passed through the carrier. Cumming was leaning against his driver and was but slightly injured by the splinters. Rifle-fire was opened on the carrier from the banks of the cutting. Some of the wounded men were wounded afresh; Cumming's right arm was shattered. Finally an armour-piercing bullet pierced the carrier to hit Albel Chani in both thighs. Nevertheless, he drove on through the road block and the carrier reached brigade headquarters where he and his commanding officer collapsed and were evacuated to a base hospital in Singapore. Lieut.-Colonel A. E. Cumming was the first British officer in the Army of India to be awarded the Victoria Cross in the Second World War. As these words are being written the battalions descended from the Punjab Frontier Force—the Piffers—are celebrating their centenary in Abbottabad. No battalion has a finer record of service than the old 52nd Sikhs (Frontier Force), the Hill Corps, until 1903 when the Punjab Frontier Force was dissolved. In Kelantan and Kuantan the 2nd Frontier Force Regt added yet something to a great tradition of valour, discipline and duty.

To return now to the western area of operations. On December 24th the 12th Brigade was disposed in depth about Chemor with the 5/2nd Punjab Regt holding the outpost positions. The 6/15th Brigade after their brief rest at Ipoh to be re-equipped as far as possible were now wiring and digging a position about Kampar with the 2/2nd

Gurkha Rifles. The other two battalions of the 28th Brigade were in the pontoon bridge area near Blanja. The Japanese were crossing the Perak River.

By December 26th the enemy was in contact with Stewart's 12th Brigade and the 5/2nd Punjab Regt repelled an attack. By next day pressure against the 12th and Selby's 28th Brigade was increasing. At dawn a powerful attack was launched against the 5/2nd Punjab



Regt and in the course of severe hand to hand fighting the right flank of the battalion was enveloped. Lieut. Chadda led the reserve company in a gallant counter-attack; it failed, and its leader was killed.

There were now indications of a wide turning movement by the enemy, and the 12th Brigade with orders not to become too seriously involved with the enemy withdrew. The 4th Hyderabad Regt attacked in flank inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy who gave the impression of being tired. However, he was soon reinforced

with fresh troops; thoughout the Malaya campaign the Japanese made a rule of using fresh troops every 36 hours.

Ipoh was abandoned on the night of December 27th. On December 28th the 11th Division was in position at Kampar, the 12th Brigade in a forward outpost position in depth between Gopeng and Dipang where by the afternoon it was again in contact with the enemy. It had been hoped that the armoured cars would be able to fight a successful delaying action; they were fretted and stencilled by the armour-piercing bullets issued to every Japanese rifleman.

The fighting at Gopeng was sharp on December 28th and 29th; the enemy's air force was even more than usually aggressive. The Argylls and the Hyderabads were holding the forward positions, and the 5/2nd Punjab Regt was in reserve. The 28th Brigade was looking after the defence of the Dipang bridge to protect the rear of the 12th Brigade; Moorhead's 6/15th Brigade had a patrol on the railway at Halim Nawer to protect the left flank. Toward dusk of December 28th the enemy began his infiltrating tactics, and after dark the Hyderabads except for one company holding the road forward of the Argylls were withdrawn. At dawn on December 29th this company fell back after patrol fights at close quarters.

Pressure developed on both flanks of the forward position, and for the first time the brigade was shelled somewhat heavily. Our own artillery support had to be given south of the Dipang bridge which was a dangerous bottleneck and the whole of the 12th Brigade except the Argylls was withdrawn south of it.

That afternoon eight Japanese tanks with lorried infantry advanced straight down the road. A mistaken order had led to the withdrawal of the 2nd Anti-tank Battery earlier. When this was discovered one troop was ordered forward to the Argylls, but it did not get back in time and came into action in the 5/2nd Punjab Regt's sector, and the Argylls were driven off to either side in some confusion. Two armoured cars of the Argylls did gallant work in covering the withdrawal which might have turned into another Asun as the two forward companies of the 5/2nd Punjab Regt were carried back by the retreating Argylls. However, Lieut.-Colonel Deakin took command of the situation, and by 5 p.m. he had established a firm check position with his own battalion and some of the Argylls. Brigade H.Q. was under fire from the tanks, but Sergeant Anderson with his troop of the 2nd Anti-tank Battery stood firm, and knocked out the leading tank, thus blocking the road. Stewart ordered his brigade through the Dipang bridgehead established by the 28th Brigade.

When Stewart's brigade was over the bridge he met Selby.

'I've come to hand over the business to you,' he said. 'It's a running concern.'

With this crack he went on with the 12th Brigade to Bidor, where it hoped to rest for a while in brigade reserve.

In 14 days of almost incessant fighting and withdrawal the 12th Indian Brigade lost 550 men and almost all its armoured cars and carriers.

The Kampar position, except for one fatal weakness of which more presently, was the strongest yet. It occupied a semicircle with a frontage of four miles; to the west and north-west was the open level country of tin-mining which gave a field of fire up to 1,200 yards—a welcome change from the enclosed country in which the 11th Division had had to fight until now. South-west was a big rubber-plantation known as the Cicely Estate. The position straddled the trunk road which ran close under the western slopes of a steep massif 4,000 feet high, nine miles long and six miles deep. The Gunong Buying Malaka, which will be called Kampar Hill for brevity, was covered with jungle and encircled by a road which forked from the trunk road just south of Dipang and running through Sahum joined it again at Tapah, a few miles north of Bidor. The railway ran parallel with the trunk road. Just north of Kampar village a road ran south-west to Changkat Jong, where it joined a road from Bidor and thence due west to Telok Anson where it turned south to Utan Melintang.

The latter is on the River Bernam: the former on the River Perak about 10 miles from its mouth.

A fresh division would have found the Kampar position very strong indeed: for what amounted now to a tired and depleted brigade it was less reassuring. The enemy might advance by the Sahum road round Kampar Hill and make the position untenable, or he might land seaborne troops at the mouths of the Perak and Bernam rivers and cut the line of communications at Bidor, or he might advance up the Changkat Jong road.

These various threats compelled Paris to disperse his force and use his reserve, the 12th Brigade, to watch Telok Anson besides detaching part of the 28th Brigade to guard the Sahum by-pass. There was no corps reserve.

The preparation of this position by the 6/15th Brigade and the 15th Field Company of Madras Sappers and Miners had been regarded as a kind of rest. Coolies had been impressed to help in the work. The Japanese dropped one or two bombs in the area on

Christmas Eve. Half of the coolies had vanished on Christmas Day, and the rest of them 24 hours later.

The 6/15th Brigade had a week of foul weather in which to dig gun pits, put up wire, and clear fields of fire in the jungle. For the first time since the battle of Jitra the higher civil authorities made a half-hearted attempt to clear the local population from the area.

The north face of the perimeter was held by the British Battalion under Lieut.-Colonel Morrison. The west was held by the 1/14th Punjab Regt, the 3/16th Punjab Regt now commanded by Lieut.-Colonel Robinson, and the 2/16th Punjab Regt which covered the junction of the Cicely Estate and Changkat Jong roads. The southern face was held by the Jat/Punjabi Battalion.

The 28th Brigade was entrusted with the task of stopping any attempt by the enemy to advance along the Sahum by-pass to cut the communications of the 11th Division; it was hoped that an opportunity might occur of an attack on the enemy's communications when he was engaged with his main attack.

Heath when choosing the Kampar position had always feared an attempt by the enemy to outflank it by sending troops on rafts down to Telok Anson; on December 24th he was warned by the Royal Navy that 24 motor-craft had been left in Penang undamaged and this made an outflanking move down the coast with landings at various points a certainty unless the Royal Navy and the R.A.F. could intervene successfully. Neither was in a position to do anything and troops of Mutaguchi's Chrysanthemum Division practised in this kind of operation were able to move down the coast without interference. The only Imperial troops immediately available to deal with this threat as best as they could were the Independent Company, the 5/14th Punjab Regt and the 7th Mountain Battery. Presently the last two units were ordered to Temoh as divisional reserve and Brigadier Stewart was given command of operations on this part of the front. He was also ordered to construct a delaying position covering Bidor and to reconnoitre the area north of Trolak on the trunk road 20 miles south. The 12th Indian Brigade could not be allowed the rest it so much needed.

At dawn on December 30th Lieut. McKenzie, the Forward Observation Officer of the Lanarkshire Yeomanry, observed four Japanese staff cars approach the demolished bridge at Dipang and telephoned his battery commander to stand by for a salvo.

The occupants alighted from the four cars and strutted about in the approved Japanese way. The F.O.O. ordered 'eight rounds

gunfire' and that was the end of the four cars and their occupants. During that day and the next the Gurkhas of the 28th Brigade had the measure of the Japanese on the east flank of the position, but there were indications that the enemy intended to launch a strong attack along the Sahum by-pass and Brigadier Selby was not too happy at being left with only the 2/9th Gurkha Regt and a single battery of the Lanarkshire Yeomanry to hold it up. However, the fighting of the 28th Brigade and the shooting of the Scottish gunners seemed to have discouraged the enemy from their project of advancing round Kampar Hill, or it may have been a feint intended to draw off Paris's reserves while the main attack went on in the front wing of Moorhead's 6/15th Brigade.

On New Year's Day 1942 the weight of that attack fell upon the British Battalion, and nobly did the 1st Leicesters and the 2nd East Surreys respond. The old 17th Foot are Royal Leicesters now, and if only for that two days' fight at Kampar the honour would have been earned. Number 8 Platoon on Green Ridge under 2nd Lieut. Newland was bombed from the air, shelled, mortared and machine-gunned for 36 hours. Several times the platoon was surrounded within the range of grenades, but it held. Young Newland under heavy fire continually visited not only his own hard-pressed posts but also those of Number 7 Platoon in his rear, whose commander had been killed; equally gallant was his platoon sergeant, Sergeant Macdonald. All day the enemy tried to overwhelm the three platoons of A Company; when dusk fell he had not succeeded, although he used for the first time troops of Nishimura's Imperial Guards Division.

At dawn of January 2nd the furious attack was resumed; by 7 a.m. that morning Number 9 Platoon had been forced to abandon its area; Number 7 and Number 8 Platoons were isolated.

By 11 a.m. Number 10 Platoon on Green Ridge was in danger of being overwhelmed and unless reinforced the right flank of the British Battalion must give way. Lieut.-Colonel Morrison ordered A Company of the Jat/Punjabi Battalion to move up, but the enemy's fire halted the advance, and only one platoon led by Company Havildar-Major Rampat pressed on across the hillside until so few men were left that it could advance no farther.

Brigadier Moorhead, who was present, ordered Lieut.-Colonel Tester to call up another company. C Company consisting of two platoons of Sikhs and one platoon of Gujars, all of them 1/8th Punjab Regt, under 2nd Lieut. Lamb arrived, accompanied by Captain Graham, the battalion's second-in-command. Reinforce-

ments must reach Green Ridge and the Japanese must be driven from their positions on the upper slopes of Thompson's Ridge.

Graham addressed C Company. The British Battalion was in danger. The crest of the hill must be taken. The honour of the regiment depended on its being able to reinforce the British Battalion.

Then he ordered every man to be served with two drams of rum, and the attack went on. Graham and Lamb led their men into a storm of fire. Young Lamb and many of the sepoys were killed almost at once, but the attack went on. Graham was in front; the company did not falter. The first Japanese line was carried at the bayonet's point and the company paused under mortar and small-arms fire, having suffered very severe casualties. Captain Graham heedless of himself visited each platoon to order the attack on the enemy's second line. Afterwards his sepoy runner said: 'The Sahib seemed to be everywhere at once.'

The second line was charged; the second line was taken from the Imperial Guard by the Sikhs and Gujars, but the company was much smaller now. Only 30 men were able to follow Graham in the last charge. Then as he reached the enemy's trench a mortar bomb blew off both his legs below the knee.

Mortally wounded, Graham Sahib shouted encouragement to his few Sikhs and Gujars, kneeling upon his shattered stumps and hurling grenades at the remnants of the Imperial Guards as they fled toward the jungle.

The third line was held when Graham collapsed and was carried back. When his bearers were passing the headquarters of the British Battalion whose flank he with his Sikhs and Gujars had saved he recovered consciousness. 'Was the attack successful?' he asked, and on this question he died.

The reader, awed by such self-sacrifice, may wonder why a posthumous Victoria Cross was not awarded to Captain Graham of the 1/8th Punjab Regt. One may hope that the sombre explanation is not that gallantry is recognised less generously in defeat than in victory. The conscience of those in high places responsible for disasters like Malaya is apt to salve itself with reflections on the failures of the men who had to fight not on their triumphs.

After Graham's attack Moorhead reported that the Kampar position could not be held indefinitely. He had no battalion with which to relieve the British Battalion, which was much depleted not only by the heavy fighting but also by malaria. The gunners of the 88th Field Regt had been in continuous action for three days and

nights and had fired off all their dumped ammunition. On the other hand, the Japanese were using fresh troops.

The news from Stewart's 12th Brigade was not more reassuring. On January 1st with the 137th Field Regt it was at Bidor. West of it in the Telok Anson area was part of the Independent Company, a kind of commando formed from volunteers of the various Indian and British battalions, and with them was a squadron of the 3rd Cavalry which at last had been equipped with armoured cars. The Telok Anson area was flat and swampy, netted with streams and creeks some of which were navigable far inland and difficult to watch on account of the mangroves and the jungle through which they wound. The absence of air support deprived the men on the ground of information, and the activity of the Japanese aircraft in shooting up cars and runners on the road made communication difficult.

On the afternoon of January 1st enemy landing-craft appeared in the Bernam River, and that night landings were effected at Uta Melintang and about the mouth of the Perak River. The first attempt to land were thwarted by the Independent Company, but before dawn landings in strength had been made. That afternoon the Argylls moved to Changkat Jong followed during the night by the 5/2nd Punjab Regt and the 4th Hyderabad Regt. Next morning the Argylls were in action and with the 5/2nd Punjab Regt were successful in holding the enemy. Enemy air activity was continuous and intense. On the afternoon of January 3rd the 5/2nd Punjab Regt, the Argylls and the Gunners made a mess of a Japanese attack along the whole front. However, reports were now coming of landings farther south, and as it was obvious that neither the Royal Navy nor the R.A.F. was able to do anything about this threat to the communications of the 11th Division it was withrawn that evening from the Kampar position.

Stewart received orders that the 12th Brigade would break contact with the enemy, and withdraw in motor transport to Trolak.

The withdrawal of the 6/15th Brigade was a ticklish business, and the British Battalion had some anxious moments. Brigadier Moorhead by his gallant example endeared himself as much to his brigade as he had to his own 3/16th Punjab Regt whose amalgamation with the 2/16th Punjab Regt he had successfully resisted. Lieut.-Colonel Morrison's leadership of the British Battalion was outstanding. Indeed, the battle of Kampar was throughout a tribute to the endurance and valour of the 11th Indian Division after its heartbreaking experience in North Malaya.

By January 4th the 28th Brigade was on the line of the Slim River; the 12th Brigade held the jungle north of Trolak; the 6/15th Brigade was round Bidor. Early that afternoon Moorhead's brigade was in light contact with the enemy at Sungkai and was withdrawn to the area of divisional headquarters about Tanjong Malim.

During the uneasy pause before the curtain rises on the tragedy of the Slim River we shall return to North Africa.

Chapter 23

November, 1941–January, 1942. The Western Desert—capture of Jalo Oasis—attempt to cut Rommel's line of retreat—enemy withdrawal to Agheila position.

THE reader is reminded that many pages back Briggs' 7th Brigade of the 4th Indian Division which had been garrisoning the Siwa and Jarabub oases since August 1941 was relieved by the 29th Brigade of the 5th Indian Division. The Jalo Oasis about 200 miles west of Jarabub was still in Italian hands. When the operation *Crusader* was being planned Brigadier Denys Reid was ordered to protect certain airfields which were to be pushed forward westwards to provide fighter cover for the land forces in their advance along the coast, to capture Jalo and from there to harass the enemy as opportunity offered, and to continue deceptive measures with the object of persuading the enemy that a large force was being concentrated in the south and thus induce him to divert part of his armour to meet such a threat.

Reid was not allowed to reconnoitre towards Jalo until the very end of October, and even then he was forbidden to go himself. Therefore he sent Lieut.-Colonel Jenkins,[1] commanding the 3/2nd Punjab Regt, with instructions to reconnoitre as far as Bu Etla, about 18 miles north of Jalo, Reid's intention being to attack Jalo from the north or west which would cut the enemy's line of retreat.

Eighth Army was a long time about giving the commander of the 29th Indian Brigade any definite orders; but on November 16th they arrived, possibly under the influence of Jupiter Ammon at Siwa, in oracular form.

To quote Reid's own words:

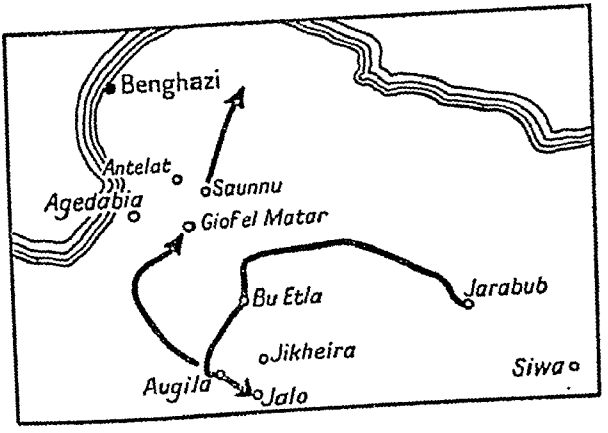
> Major Bill Towsey, West Yorkshire Regt, flew down to Jarabub as Liaison Officer from Eighth Army. I asked him what my actual task was going to be, and he said, 'Oh, they all reckon you are going for Jalo?' So for Jalo we went.

Denys Reid, in language the Duke of Wellington might not have accepted for one of his despatches, was a tough guy or to make a

[1] Major-General F. A. M. B. Jenkins, D.S.O., O.B.E., M.C.

distinction without much difference the son of an Inverness-shire manse. It was he who led his 3rd Mahrattas up the Pinnacle in front of Fort Dologorodoc. E Force as the Jalo Expeditionary Force was called was composed of the 3/2nd Punjab Regt, the 6th South African Armoured Regt, and the 7th South African Recce Bn, a battery of the 2nd South African Field Regt, a battery of the 73rd Anti-tank Regt, the 5th Light Anti-aircraft Battery R.A., a section of the 21st Field Company of the Indian Sappers and Miners, the 31st Indian Field Ambulance, and headquarters of the 29th Indian Brigade.

Transport was a major problem because neither Eighth Army nor Desert Air Force could provide any. However, the other two bat-



talions of the brigade, the 1st Worcestershire Regt and the 6th Frontier Force Rifles, left behind with the flies and dates in Siwa and Jarabub had to lend theirs; 1216 Company of the Indian Pioneer Corps, and other units were called upon to be equally generous.

The turn round for transport from Jarabub to Jalo and back was calculated at eight days. Ten days' supply of water and petrol was carried, the latter in 40-gallon drums to avoid the wastage of those 4-gallon light tins which were inflicted on the forces in North Africa by short-sighted duffers at home as a major contribution to the difficulty of desert operations.

At 8.15 a.m. on November 18th the 3/2nd Punjab Regt moved out of Jarabub at the head of E Force. Forty-nine miles were covered the first day, and by the night of the 20th/21st the column was due north of Jalo. Operation orders were then issued for its capture.

The first objective was to be Augila, an oasis seven miles west-north-west of Jalo, to block the line of escape. This task was entrusted to Colonel Short of the 6th S.A. Armoured Car Regt with a squadron of his own battalion and a company of the 3/2nd Punjab Regt. Lieut.-Colonel Grobelaar with a squadron of his 7th S.A. Recce Bn and another Punjabi company was to move round by Jikheira to Gur Ed Dib and demonstrate against the northerly and north-easterly approaches to Jalo. The main body was to advance by Augila to a position west of Jalo, preparatory to the assault.

Short's column was to lead the march on November 21st. It was not to halt at Bu Etla with the rest of the force but to proceed another 15 miles south and harbour for the night of November 21/22nd and next day move on Augila and capture it by 11 a.m. During the march of the main column on November 21st two wadis 100 yards wide and some 80 feet deep with sheer banks in most places had to be crossed. These had never been crossed by vehicles and there was only a zigzag camel track.

Reid wrote later:

> It is still a source of astonishment to me how the vehicles ever got up those sheer sides, and I would again like to record my admiration of the decision and courage of Lt.-Col. Jenkins after his first reconnaissance in considering that those wadis would actually be possible and passable.

While the centre of the main body was crossing the second of these wadis the column was dive-bombed at noon by three Messerschmitts. The anti-aircraft guns came into action and diverted the worst of the attack from the many vehicles immobilised by the sand, but the maintenance column suffered casualties. At 2 p.m. seven Italian aircraft dropped a number of bombs without serious damage. The column reached Bu Etla at 3.30 p.m. where it harboured for the night in a dry, scrubby, hillocky area with good cover. That evening of November 21st the German radio announced that a large armoured force moving towards Agedabia had been attacked by the Luftwaffe and the Regia Aeronautica and that about a hundred British tanks had been destroyed. Reid moved early on November 22nd in order to be clear of Bu Etla before the enemy's reconnaissance planes appeared, but he left the maintenance column with a squadron of armoured cars and a troop of anti-aircraft artillery at Bu Etla in the hope of making the enemy think that the progress of the armoured force had been held up by the damage his air force had inflicted on it. The ruse was successful. The main body and Short's

column were not discovered till dark, and the maintenance column had the honourable pleasure of being attacked all day from the air.

Short's column owing to very bad going had to circle Augila and come in from the south. The enemy held his fire until the armoured cars were 300 yards from the fort when he opened up with 47 mm. and 20 mm. Bredas and knocked out one armoured car. Honour being satisfied, the garrison of 49 Italians surrendered.

The main body moved too far to the west and got into trouble with soft sand, particularly the gunners, and by nightfall the column was still dispersed. Grobelaar's column had a bad time with the going, being bombed from the air in addition, and it was 3.30 p.m. before it reached Jikheira, having left many vehicles stuck in the sand. A troop of armoured cars sent forward to reconnoitre an Italian post at the southern edge of the oasis was engaged by Breda and light automatic fire. After two cars had been knocked out C Company of the 3/2nd Punjab Regt was moved to the eastern edge of the oasis, and a patrol was sent through the scrub to locate the enemy position. This patrol got to within 100 yards of the enemy when it was spotted and checked by the Breda and light automatic fire. It was withdrawn after dark without loss, having established the enemy's position.

Next morning C Company went in to the attack, and after it had been checked by the enemy's fire the light anti-aircraft guns were rushed up on a ridge and fired over open sights. Then the Punjabis charged with the bayonet; two officers and 47 Italian other ranks were captured.

The main body had had to wait at Augila until noon on November 23rd before the essential vehicles and most of the guns were in, and that afternoon Reid with his unit and company commanders made a reconnaissance of the Jalo Oasis, which is about four miles from north to south and five miles from east to west. Northward the ground was covered with small mounds, the remains of old date-palms; these provided an obstacle to motor vehicles. East and west of the fort the land was sandy and undulating without much cover. Southward the sand was very heavy with thin groves of date-palms, and a peculiar feature was a number of large mounds covered with evergreen bushes which served as natural emplacements for machine-gun and Breda posts.

Reid declares that the reconnaissance was done under cover and that the fort only came into view in the late evening light. The 3/2nd Punjab Regt War Diary says that the reconnaissance was carried out in full view of the fort from country without vegetation or cover. The present chronicler abstains from a casting vote. The

main point is that the reconnaissance was the prelude to a neatly executed action.

Force E less one squadron of the 7th S.A. Recce Bn and one company of the 3/2nd Punjab Regt was to do a night march in motor transport from Augila to reach a position six miles south-west of Jalo just before dawn. The 3/2nd Punjab Regt, less two companies, was to attack the fort from the south-west.

The 6th S.A. Armoured Car Regt with A Company of the 3/2nd was to move round to the southern landing-ground and capture any aircraft on the ground, after which the South Africans were to demonstrate east and north pretending to be tanks, and the Punjabis were to fight their way westward and rejoin the battalion. The 2nd South African Field Regt's battery was to go into action on the high ground west of Jalo and to fire by observation.

By 7 a.m. of November 24th light automatic and mortar fire could be heard from the landing-ground, and one Italian aircraft was seen in flight; this was the only one that got away. About the same time the attack on the fort started. The two companies of the 3/2nd Punjab Regt found that lack of cover and heavy going looked like making it a more difficult operation than had been anticipated. A Company after accomplishing its task at the landing-ground joined the other two companies; progress was slow in the face of the enemy's Bredas, well sited on those mounds mentioned above. On the west flank the 7th S.A. Recce Bn was in contact with the enemy, but it too was held up like the Punjabis. At 1 p.m. Reid had a look at the situation and decided that a night attack was the solution. The armoured cars were no help because of the soft sand, and four of them had been knocked out in the course of the morning's fighting. At 7.30 p.m. the attack went in. D Company of the Punjabis captured the three mounds, and A Company from the west took the fort.

Next day the oasis was cleared after a short resistance by one party of Italians at El Lebba just east of the fort where the position had to be stormed by men of the 6th S.A. Armoured Car Regt fighting on foot. In all 21 officers, 650 other ranks, and a large number of Bredas and heavy machine-guns were captured.

The problem now was petrol, only enough being left for local running and protection. This complicated the food situation because the maintenance column could not return to Jarabub, and the whole of E Force had to be put on half-rations.

On November 27th Eighth Army signalled:

Well done. Press on to Agedabia.

It was out of the question for Reid to take his force as far as that without more petrol, and he decided to devote his activity to light reconnaissance patrols until fuel was available for an advance.

The course of events in Cyrenaica has already been recorded. On December 13th Ritchie had decided to send Bencol consisting of the 22nd Guards Brigade to cut across the desert and upset the enemy's retreat from the Gazala line. Simultaneously Reid was to link up with Bencol in the Antelat-Agedabia area and help in this operation. Unfortunately the shortage of supply vehicles made it impossible for Bencol to start until December 20th, and December 22nd was fixed as the day for E Force to link up with it.

Reid decided to make Giof el Matar his base for operations. German patrols were found to be active in the area south and west of Agedabia. They had been sighted round Gasr es Sahabi on December 17th, and this might mean that German troops had reinforced the Italian garrison at Giof el Matar. Agedabia itself was strongly held by infantry and tanks, and there were anything up to 50 aircraft on the aerodrome there, a dangerous threat to operations by E Force against Giof el Matar. Long Range Desert Group with Special Air Service Troops raided this aerodrome on the night of December 21/22nd and destroyed 37 enemy aircraft on the ground. This dashing success cleared the prospect for E Force.

Shortcol which included a company of the 3/2nd Punjab Regt under Lieut.-Colonel Short of the South African Armoured Car Regt was sent on a day ahead of the main body on December 19th with orders to secure Saunnu by the evening of December 21st. Another column and Lieut.-Colonel Grobelaar was to make contact with Bencol east of Saunnu. Without giving details of some skilful and complicated desert moves it is enough to say that Shortcol, having captured Giof el Matar with 14 Italian prisoners, was sent forward to establish contact with Bencol in the Antelat area. It was in position near the Antelat-Agedabia track by 2 p.m. on December 22nd, but reported to the main body which had by now taken up defensive positions in and around Giof el Matar that it had not gained touch with Bencol.

What had happened was that the Guards Brigade on reaching Antelat on December 22nd had found an enemy force with 30 tanks lying round Beda Fomm to cover the main retreat of the Germans and Italians along the coastal road. One battalion was driven out of Antelat next day. General Gott diverted 7 Special Group to the help of the Guards, and the enemy withdrew to Agedabia. The pursuit of the enemy by XIII Corps was thwarted by difficulties of

supply and, when the time came to attack Agedabia only the 22nd Armoured Brigade could be put in with the Guards Brigade and the Special Group. The 22nd Armoured Brigade was to carry out a flanking movement to the south: the Guards were to attack frontally. Neither operation was successful. The 22nd Armoured Brigade had lost 60 out of its 130 tanks from mechanical breakdowns in the move across the desert from Gazala; when it engaged the remnants of the enemy's armoured divisions eight of the 14 tanks it lost were lost for the same reason. Nevertheless, although the 22nd Armoured Brigade failed to get behind the enemy and was compelled to retire to El Haseiat it destroyed 20 of the enemy's tanks. Another action was fought on December 30th and more tanks were lost.

On December 25th Reid had gone to Saunnu to get in touch with Bencol. Here he had found the 22nd Armoured Brigade on the point of moving south-west. Finally he had made contact with Bencol nine miles south of Antelat. During the next days E Force sent out columns to give what help they could in the operations; finally on December 29th E Force was placed under command of the 22nd Armoured Brigade and given the task of protecting its left flank. For the next few days the work of its small columns went on, but on January 7th it was learnt that the enemy had withdrawn under cover of a heavy sandstorm to the Agheila-Marada line, and E Force continued its patrolling activities. By January 20th on the eve of Rommel's come-back E Force had only the 3/2nd Punjab Regt and the 7th South African Recce Bn left with one battery of the 2nd South African Field Regt.

The operations of E Force deserve attention not only for the consistent skill with which they were carried out but because if the necessary supplies, equipment and armour could have been forthcoming it is clear that Rommel's forces would never have lived to fight another day. However, in the end what was lost by British unreadiness was compensated for by German stupidity. It was impossible to reinforce Auchinleck; at that date and for some months to come the German High Command could easily have reinforced Rommel. Had they done so the British forces in North Africa must have been overwhelmed as completely as the British naval, military and air forces were to be overwhelmed by the Japanese in Malaya.

Chapter 24

January, 1942. Priorities between Middle East and Singapore—Rommel forestalls attack by 4th Indian Division—conflicting appreciations of enemy intentions—the Benghazi trap.

BY December 18th two brigades of the newly raised 17th Indian Division, trained, so far as they were trained, for operations in the Middle East, had been diverted to Malaya. These were the 44th and the 45th Indian Brigades, of whose unhappy fate we shall all too soon be hearing. The Middle East Defence Committee was pointing out to the Chiefs of Staff that only three of a minimum of seven divisions considered necessary for Persia and Iraq would be available in the spring of 1942. Wise after the event we may be inclined to suppose that Middle East Command was unduly concerned about its Northern Front, but at the time it seemed absolutely certain that the Germans would strike at our vital oil and as the tide of Japanese success flowed strongly that India would be simultaneously attacked from the North-West and the North-East. The Committee estimated that the diversion of the 18th East Anglian Division to Malaya could be offset by the recall of the 50th Northumbrian Division, but it was seriously concerned about the proposed diversion of air reinforcements not merely to the Far East but to Russia and Turkey.

Now that the situation in Malaya on that New Year's Day has been examined it may perplex the reader to recall that on that date the Chiefs of Staff informed the Commanders-in-Chief in the Mediterranean that the security of Singapore and of sea-communications in the Indian Ocean were second only to the security of the United Kingdom and the sea-communications thereto.[1] When he recalls those 336 first-line aircraft promised by the end of 1941 not one of which had arrived, he may wonder why in 1940 the security of Singapore was regarded with such complacency that the despatch of two brigades to the jungles by the Indian Government seemed an almost criminal evasion of its responsibilities to the campaign in the Middle East. It is arguable that the policy of improvisation dictated by the neglect of our Imperial responsibilities during the previous decade made the task of those responsible for the conduct of the war an almost impossible one. What the ultimate judgment of history

[1] p. 178.

may consider gravely reprehensible is the encouragement given to the R.A.F. to construct aerodromes for aircraft that there was presumably no likelihood of being able to provide unless the security of Singapore was in very fact regarded as second only to the security of the United Kingdom; if it was so regarded no excuse can be found for those who imperilled that security by accepting the minimum demanded for it and their subsequent failure to honour the promissory note for even that minimum. It is kinder to believe that the security of Singapore was not regarded as second only to the security of the United Kingdom and to read this telegram by the Chiefs of Staff to the Commanders-in-Chief of Middle East as sugar for the disagreeable pill the latter had to swallow.

The second paragraph insisted that the defeat of Germany must remain our primary object and that we should not divert more of our forces than were necessary to hold the Japanese. If the Chiefs of Staff really believed there was any likelihood of being suspected of planning an invasion of Japan at this moment, Whitehall was Wonderland.

The third paragraph laid down that *Crusader* should be exploited to the greatest possible extent subject to the condition that it must not prevent the despatch of essential reinforcements to the Far East. Who in Middle East Command was not anxious to exploit *Crusader*? A hint of exasperation is apparent in the reply of the Middle East Defence Committee on January 4th. They pointed out that *Crusader* was not yet completed, and that if Cyrenaica was to be secured they must move forward at least to the area Agheila-Marada, the alternative to which would be withdrawal to the frontier area.

> Your cable cancelling offer of 5 Ind. Div. to India had crossed G.H.Q. India's cable accepting the offer. 5 Ind. Div. less 29 Bde is in Cyprus. Personnel only could be moved to Egypt, and even then only by imposing unwelcome additional strain on Navy, who are fully occupied at present. Part of 29 Bde Gp is operating in Cyrenaica. Whole Div. would have to be completely re-equipped in Egypt and would not be ready to move before 1st March. Moreover 5 Ind. Div. would have to be relieved in Cyprus by 70 Div. whose artillery is operating Cyrenaica. It is therefore clear that move of 5 Ind. Div at present would affect completion of *Crusader*.

Beyond anxiety in Cairo about the effect on *Crusader* of the diversion of troops and aircraft to the Far East there was a devouring anxiety about the true Middle East. In this same telegram the Chiefs of Staff were asked to bear in mind for the urgency of early

replacements that the lukewarm attitude of Turkey was likely to become chilly when she heard of these diversions of forces, that with the threat to the Burma and Netherlands East Indies oilfields the importance of the Persian and Iraqi oilfields was greater than ever, and finally that the Persian supply-route to Russia must at all costs be kept open.

A fortnight later on January 18th 1942 Auchinleck was sending to the commander of the Ninth and Tenth Armies an admirably well reasoned instruction for the defence of Persia, Iraq and Syria and for the conduct of possible operations in Turkey, and it is difficult to avoid the impression that the work this entailed upon his staff may have tended to obscure perfect clarity of vision about the immediate future in Cyrenaica.

On January 19th Auchinleck was notifying Ritchie that he intended to prosecute the offensive and that Tripoli remained his objective, but in the next paragraph he was admitting the fluidity of the general strategic situation and the possibility of having to pass to the defensive on the Western Front[1] in which case it was his intention to stand on the line Agheila-Marada, with the proviso that in the event of being unable to secure and hold this line a withdrawal would be made north-east and east to the line Sollum-Jarabub where the enemy would be stopped. After more detailed instructions about the form the withdrawal was to take this pregnant paragraph appears: 'It is not my intention to try to hold permanently Tobruk or any other locality west of the frontier.'

During January that early offensive, of which Auchinleck still cherished hopes in spite of the drain on his resources caused by the critical situation in the Far East, was being planned. Briggs' 7th Indian Brigade was to attack Mersa Brega, 25 miles east of El Agheila, what time Messervy would launch the 1st Armoured Division against Maaten Giofer, 20 miles to the south. Then, Rommel's right flank having been duly disturbed, the armour was to move west and meet another brigade of Red Eagles landed from the sea in his rear, and that was to be the end of Rommel. In spite of the leading part for which it was cast in the offensive the 4th Indian Division was still dispersed on various duties, much to the indignation of its new commander, Major-General Tuker. He had been Director of Military Training in India previously and the prospect in Western Cyrenaica did not appeal to him as an exponent of modern warfare.

[1] It may be well to remind the reader that the Western Front means the Western Front in North Africa and the Northern Front the whole of the true Middle East.

Divisional headquarters moved to Benghazi on January 4th. Anderson's 11th Brigade except for the 1st Rajputana Rifles was in Tobruk. The latter was now directly under the command of XIII Corps in the Antelat district. Russell's 5th Indian Brigade was policing the Derna area. What was left of the Buffs had been replaced by the 1st Welch Regt and the 3/1st Punjab Regt had been relieved by the 1/1st Punjab Regt.[1] Briggs' 7th Brigade was in Benghazi with the Central India Horse, the 25th Field Regt, the remaining battery of the 31st Field Regt, and the 65th Anti-tank Regt under command. On January 11th divisional headquarters moved back to Barce. It was hoped that by the beginning of February the port of Benghazi would be working again and enable the British supply services to support the offensive to put Rommel back into Tripolitania.

And then on January 21st Rommel started what Eighth Army believed was a reconnaissance in force but was in fact something much more ambitious. That evening columns of tanks and guns with some 3,000 attendant vehicles were in the Saunnu-Antelat area where a company of Wellesley's under Captain Mahbaksh Singh did not get its transport from XIII Corps headquarters now withdrawn to Msus until too late. The riflemen cut off from the north-east tried to escape by making a detour, but the lorries stuck in the sand and were overrun by panzers. Few escaped.

Auchinleck had been in Haifa when Rommel started what Eighth Army continued to insist had been a reconnaissance in force that had gone right and was being skilfully exploited. Be that as it may have been. He returned to Cairo on January 23rd and two days later flew to Ritchie's headquarters in Tmimi where he remained during the next few critical days.

Immediately after Rommel's advance Ritchie instructed Tuker to control the coastal corridor between the escarpment and the sea in order to protect Benghazi. Tuker at once sent to Lieut.-Colonel Goulder (Goldforce) the remaining battery of the 31st Field Regt, the Central India Horse, and some anti-aircraft and anti-tank guns to secure the vital passes through the escarpment at Sceledeima and Si Brahim. At the same time he asked for the battalions of the 11th Indian Brigade in Tobruk to be sent forward at once. Eighth Army placed under his command the 1st and 144th Field Regts, the 4th South African Field Regt, the 149th Anti-tank Regt and 32

[1] By having succeeded to the position of the 2nd Madras Infantry in 1903 as the 62nd Punjabis the 1/1st Punjab Regt held the precedence in infantry units of the Indian Army and inherited a wealth of military exploits from the middle of the 18th century. It was Field-Marshal Auchinleck's old regiment.

Valentines of the 8th Royal Tank Regt. The last were given to the 7th Indian Brigade which took up defensive positions along the Nauuaghia minefield 14 miles south of Benghazi. When the 1st Welch Regt arrived from Barce two companies were despatched to hold the passes secured by Goldforce, and the rest of the battalion remained in garrison at Benghazi to the outskirts of which Tuker moved his headquarters. The Red Eagles were beginning to recover from their moult and assume once more the appearance of a complete division. Nevertheless, Tuker did not like the look of things, and he at once advised all the local commanders in Benghazi to prepare schemes for evacuation and demolition. Then on January 23rd he suggested to Godwin-Austen, the corps commander, that his division should attack the enemy's rear in the Agedabia area with the idea of helping the 1st Armoured Division in its struggle with the panzers. However, the battle between Messervy's 1st Armoured Division and the 21st Panzer Division went badly, and the 2nd Armoured Brigade was much knocked about. Therefore XIII Corps decided that until the probable development of the armour battle was clearer the 4th Indian Division should not be committed to the struggle. Moreover, Godwin-Austen warned Tuker that the evacuation of Benghazi might become necessary if the enemy pushed on past Msus to the east of the Sceledeima Pass. In that event the 1st Armoured Division would retire across the desert to Mechili; the 4th Indian Division would fall back through the Djebel Akhdar to stand on the line Derna-Martuba-Carmusa.

On January 24th the enemy halted, having been pestered all day by as impudent a piece of gallantry as a romancer might dream of. Lance-Daffadar Attar Singh of the Central India Horse with two trucks had set out from Goldforce to find out what the enemy was doing round Antelat. He found a large concentration of Germans where the escarpment flows down to lose itself in the desert and at once despatched one of his trucks to take the news. With the other he proceeded to shadow the German force as it moved north. Two armoured cars were sent to deal with him, but Lance-Daffadar Attar Singh kept on dodging. He intercepted several British lorries and directed them along the road to safety with messages to Goulder's headquarters about the enemy's moves. His truck was holed by bullets when from time to time he came within the range of small arms fire, but entirely alone Lance-Daffadar Attar Singh dogged the Germans till darkness fell when he rejoined Goulder's column. A pity that Rudyard Kipling did not live to tell the tale of Lance-Daffadar Attar Singh as only he could have told it.

On the morning of January 25th Godwin-Austen adjudged the situation to be stable enough to form a defensive line east and west through Beda Fomm and instructed the divisional commander accordingly. Tuker set out to reconnoitre suitable defensive positions and almost immediately the code word *Mercury* was flashed. *Mercury* meant that Msus could not be held and that a general withdrawal should be set in motion at once. Orders were given for base and administrative details in Benghazi to leave; artillery and tank units on their way to reinforce the 7th Motor Brigade were halted at key positions in the Djebel. That evening XIII Corps notified Tuker that the 1st Armoured Division had disengaged from the enemy and was rallying at Charruba, some 40 miles north of Msus. The question now was whether Messervy's armour could prevent the panzers from entering the Djebel. There was anxiety about the fate of the rest of the 1st Rajputana Rifles, one company of which had been overrun at Antelat.

A patrol of the Central India Horse from the Sceledeima Pass reported that the desert east was teeming with hostile columns, and it was feared that Wellesley's without troop-carrying transport was lost. However, Lieut. Mehbab Singh, the battalion transport officer, stripped the few battalion vehicles to their springs and floorboards, packed the riflemen into them somehow, drew petrol from one end of a dump while the enemy was following up at the other, and got Wellesley's away to Charruba, covered by a squadron of the 12th Lancers which had stayed behind to help them.

Meanwhile, Auchinleck had reached Ritchie's headquarters and there talking over the situation they decided that 'Rommel had almost certainly intended in the first place to make only a limited advance and was now skilfully exploiting an entirely unexpected success.'[1] Auchinleck and Ritchie, who had pulled the Eighth Army out of a mess in November 1941 by pressing a counter-attack when Rommel's foray to the frontier was being disagreeably successful, decided that counter-attack was again the policy. At 9.20 p.m. Ritchie was in communication with Tuker over the telephone to discuss the course of action. Tuker was a good deal less optimistic than the G.O.C. and the Army Commander. In that drily gentle voice of his capable of maddening anybody at the other end of the line who disagreed with him he told the sanguine Ritchie that the chance of effective offensive action in the coastal corridor had passed and that the only sound course was to withdraw to the Derna-Martuba line as ordered by Godwin-Austen. Ritchie could not agree.

[1] Despatch of General Sir Claude Auchinleck, p. 69.

In spite of the fact that the 22nd Guards Brigade had reported the presence of the 90th German Light Division at Agedabia some days previously and that all the prisoners taken so far by the mobile columns were German, Ritchie relying on his Intelligence insisted that there were only Italians on the front of the 4th Indian Division.

In the early hours of January 26th the Army Commander informed Godwin-Austen that *Mercury* was cancelled and that the 4th Indian Division would pass from XIII Corps under the direct command of Eighth Army.

At 9.15 a.m. a staff officer reached Tuker's headquarters to tell him that the 7th Indian Brigade from the west and the 1st Armoured Division with the 11th Indian Brigade from the north should converge on Msus. As the 2nd Armoured Brigade would be in no condition to undertake this operation for three days the 7th Brigade was to delay the enemy meanwhile with mobile columns. Tuker did not like it. He considered that the Intelligence of Eighth Army was wrong in its estimate of Rommel's strength. He did not believe that the 1st Armoured Division in its present state was capable of holding the panzers. His own divisional Intelligence had intercepted two of Messervy's messages that morning. From the first it had transpired that the 2nd Armoured Brigade had only 33 runners. From the second he had learnt that Messervy had informed the corps commander that it was impossible for his division to protect the flank of the 4th Indian Division on a front of 35 miles. All he could guarantee was to block the nearest tracks into the Djebel. Tuker grew warm. If these intercepted signals represented the situation then the 4th Indian Division would be committed to an attack 90 miles in the enemy's rear without hope of armoured support. What was the matter with the original plan of XIII Corps which provided for a counter-attack from a defensible position? However, if a withdrawal as far as the Derna-Martuba line seemed to give up too much ground to the enemy, why should the 4th Indian Division not concentrate about 90 miles east-north-east of Benghazi and 30 miles north of the 1st Armoured Division at Charruba?

Tuker's argument did not convince Ritchie and Auchinleck when the Eighth Army staff officer returned with it. The reply from Army headquarters was an order to proceed with offensive operations based on Benghazi.

Tuker now suggested that the 11th Indian Brigade should move south from Maraua and support the 2nd Armoured Brigade in a direct attack on the advancing enemy while at the same time the 7th Indian Brigade would move quickly through the Sceledeima

Pass to attack the enemy's left flank and drive him from Msus. Ritchie came to Benghazi on the morning of January 27th and the attack was finally fixed for the morning of January 30th, the earliest day by which the 1st Armoured Division could be ready.

At dusk a report came in that the Msus-Sceledeima track was alive with enemy transport moving west. Briggs was ordered to reinforce the escarpment passes and hold them at all costs. Hearing presently that there were signs of the enemy within six miles of Sceledeima, Tuker signalled to Ritchie personally a suggestion that the 1st Armoured Division should immediately strike at the rear of the forces moving on Sceledeima. This signal crossed what proved to be a mistaken appreciation of the situation from Eighth Army. The enemy's forces had been divided. One half was moving north-east toward Mechili, the other west toward Benghazi, the bulk of the panzers being with the eastward bound group. So Tuker's plan was ruled out in favour of attacking the rear of the Mechili force with Messervy's armour and leaving Tuker and the 4th Indian Division to tackle what was unfortunately believed to be a feint at Benghazi without armour in support and with an undefended flank. At midnight, however, Eighth Army signalled that Tuker's suggestion had been approved, and that the 1st Armoured Division would act in concert with the 7th Indian Brigade in a hammer and anvil operation.

Heavy rain had held up the crossing of the Sceledeima Pass by Briggs' stalwarts on the previous evening, but early on the morning of January 28th two mobile columns of the 7th Indian Brigade moved off toward the pass with the intention of engaging the enemy's forces east of it. The first of these known as Gold Group was commanded by Lieut.-Colonel Goulder and consisted of the 4th Sikh Regt, the 31st Field Regt, anti-aircraft and anti-tank guns and a squadron of the Central India Horse. The second known as Silver Group was commanded by Lieut.-Colonel G. C. Evans[1] and consisted of the 1st Royal Sussex Regt, a battery of the 25th Field Regt, anti-aircraft and anti-tank guns, and another squadron of the Central India Horse. Brigade Headquarters Group consisted of a company of the 4/16th Punjab Regt, a third squadron of the C.I.H., two troops of the 57th Light A.A. Regt, and the 12th Field Company Queen Victoria's Own Madras Sappers and Miners.

When Gold and Silver Groups were on their way to Sceledeima they met patrols of the Central India Horse who reported that two enemy columns, one following the line of the escarpment, the other

[1] Major-General G. C. Evans, C.B., C.B.E., D.S.O.

the main coastal road, and each with 40 tanks, many guns and attendant vehicles were moving up the corridor only a few miles behind them. If these columns were not stopped they would be in Benghazi in a few hours. Already the dawn patrol from Benina airfield had reported strong enemy columns as far north as El Abiar moving west on Benghazi. This had seemed like a plump quarry for the 7th Brigade which might expect to take them in the flank and rear. That dream faded with the news brought in by the patrols. Silver Group had reached Sceledeima at dawn and a battery of field guns was at once sent to reinforce the garrison, which consisted of a company of the 1st Welch Regt, a company of the 4/16th Punjab Regt, and an anti-tank platoon. However, while the gunners were looking for positions the enemy was seen approaching from the east and along the top of the escarpment; presently scouts reported that he was approaching along the base of the escarpment from the south. Silver Group could do nothing but withdraw, the retirement being covered by the battery sent into the pass as reinforcement and the guns being got out only just in time.

Throughout that morning Silver Group fell back towards Benghazi unable to disengage from the enemy but holding him off as it made its way to the rallying line of the Nauuaghia minefields. Gold Group which had harboured at Magrun the previous night was pressed back all that morning, heavily attacked by Stukas and predatory panzers, and by noon had reached the defensive belt 13 miles south of Benghazi.

All that morning the garrison of Sceledeima under the command of Lieut.-Colonel Napier and consisting of battalion headquarters and one company of the 1st Welch Regt, a company of the 4/16th Punjab Regt, and one anti-tank platoon put up a stern fight against the forces assailing them on three sides. The casualties of the gallant defenders were already heavy. When at 2 p.m. orders came to withdraw to Benghazi, six officers and about 150 men of the garrison made the desperate attempt and succeeded in escaping on foot through the enemy north of the pass, finding cover in the scrubby ridges by day and drawing near to Benghazi by night. By January 30th the remains of the garrison now no more than 70 strong, without water and the scantiest amount of food to sustain their difficult march, reached an area south of the Benghazi railway where they were surrounded by enemy forces and compelled to surrender.

As soon as Briggs had reported what was happening in the corridor Tuker telephoned Ritchie to know the whereabouts and movements of the 1st Armoured Division. Eighth Army had swallowed Rommel's

bait and the 1st Armoured Division was moving eastward behind the enemy feint at Mechili. In other words the original appreciation of Eighth Army, which Tuker had supposed his appreciation had quashed, had won. Tuker was shocked; that dry gentle voice became drier but less gentle. There was no chance of reinforcements from Barce reaching Benghazi before the enemy, and his immediate problem was to save the forward elements of his division from being destroyed. He demanded the instant evacuation of Benghazi. Ritchie still argued that he had chiefly Italian forces to deal with. Tuker insisted that both the 21st Panzer Division and the 90th German Light Division had been identified in the corridor. At last Ritchie gave way and consented that Benghazi should be given up.

The columns of the 7th Indian Brigade were ordered to withdraw behind the Nauuaghia minefields. The 5th Indian Brigade was despatched to hold the Tocra Pass on the coastal road over 40 miles north of Benghazi. P Force under Lieut.-Colonel Peake which included the carrier squadron of the Central India Horse was given the task of covering the main road through Benghazi and the by-pass round it along which the columns of the 7th Brigade must withdraw to safety. Demolitions were started, which included blowing up 6,000 tons of captured enemy ammunition.

At 3.30 p.m. divisional headquarters left for Barce: it was a close call. It had only just started when one of the armoured cars with P Force reported being fired on by Mark III panzers in the pass at Regima. Peake sent a company of the Welch Regt to cover the Benghazi by-pass and authorised the last fighter squadron left on the Benina airfield to leave. By 5.30 p.m. the covering company reported enemy scouts on the outskirts of Benghazi, and was ordered to keep the by-pass open at any cost.

As darkness fell the enemy came on while B Echelon vehicles of the 7th Brigade began to move out along the by-pass. Panzers and armoured cars had moved north along the rim of the escarpment and as Stukas shot up the transport the fighting vehicles roared down on to the Benina airfield. Here they split, half of them making straight for Benghazi, the rest sweeping across country toward the coastal road. The covering company of the Welch Regt with the 171st Light Anti-aircraft in support waited for the panzers' charge. The gunners opened with their Bofors at point blank range and destroyed four tanks and an ammunition wagon. The rest of the panzers retreated into the darkness of that wet and windy night, and the by-pass was still open for the B Echelon transport to go through.

Soon after 7 p.m. as the transport reached Coefia eight miles

north of Benghazi red and green tracers spurted across the road that was raised here above the foreshore with ditches on either side. The transport tried to turn; in a minute or two confusion was absolute. The enemy had chosen the perfect site for a road block. The road out for the 7th Indian Brigade was cut.

Lieut.-Colonel Lavender of the 4/16th Punjab Regt with one company of his battalion was on the road behind. He at once pushed forward through the congestion to find that enemy armoured cars were sweeping the road ahead which was also under fierce machine-gun fire from a building overlooking it, and as the Punjabis reached the head of the transport column the first of the enemy's lorried infantry arrived. The Punjabis charged, but were stopped by a stream of small arms fire.

Meanwhile, Peake had sent word to Briggs that P Force was no longer able to guarantee the 7th Brigade a way out of Benghazi either through the town or along the by-pass. Briggs replied that he would have a shot to break out from the south. Peake then went along to Coefia with his two companies of the Welch Regt and the four carriers of the Central India Horse. After great difficulty he managed to get his troops past the jammed transport, and handed them over to Lavender. Efforts were made by the Welch and the C.I.H. carriers to open the road block, but by now the enemy had brought up 75-mm. guns, and the sound of panzers could be heard in the darkness beyond. Enemy troops were arriving all the time. The position was hopeless: at dawn it would be a massacre.

Half an hour before dawn Lavender ordered the transport to be destroyed and the men to get away as best they could. One party of a hundred Welshmen and Indians with Lavender struck out eastward. On February 5th after marching for 125 miles this party met Peake and another party who had escaped similarly when the road block on the Benina road was no longer tenable.

Both parties took different roads again and, after an astonishing series of hairbreadth escapes through the enemy's lines and leaguers, Lavender's party on the night of February 10th reached the trip wires guarding the minefields behind which the Free French were lying south of Tmimi. Peake's party reached the British lines seven days later. There were many other escapes by smaller parties and many individual odysseys, but they must give way to the most remarkable escape of the whole war—the break out from Benghazi of Briggs' 7th Indian Brigade less that company of the old Bo Peeps which escaped with their battalion commander out of the death-trap at Coefia.

Chapter 25

January–February, 1942. The break-out from Benghazi—a hazardous passage through enemy leaguers—a brilliant feat of arms brings a brigade to safety.

BRIGADIER H. R. BRIGGS was commanding the 2nd Baluch Regt when he was given the 7th Indian Brigade. His old battalion had fought splendidly in Key's 8th Indian Brigade at Kelantan and while their former commanding officer was wondering how he was going to extricate his brigade from Benghazi on this January night, away in Malaya his Baluchis had only 17 days of freedom left to them before they were the victims of a situation from which no brigadier could have extricated them.

The situation of Briggs on that night of January 28th 1942 has been admirably described:[1]

> Night had closed over a wild scene in Benghazi. Heavy clouds scurried across the sky and a shrill blustery gale whipped in from the sea. Winter rain fell in torrents. Along the black streets transport raced furiously. Thunderous blasts shook the town as the demolition engineers worked on. From the north-east came a crackle of gunfire, as Colonel Lavender with his Welch and Punjabis valiantly strove to break out. To the east along the escarpment, the leaguer flares of the Germans rose constantly as more men and guns closed round the doomed port. Only to the south the darkness was unbroken. Here at the airfield beside the Agedabia road Brigadier Briggs sat in his staff car in the beating rain, and pieced together the situation.

The news of the road block on the Coefia road had reached Briggs at El Guarscia, nine miles south of Benghazi. The time was just after 7 p.m. Divisional headquarters was now at Barce some 60 miles away, and wireless communication was disconnected. The last situation report Tuker had received had given enemy forces at Benina, 17 miles east of Benghazi. At 9.15 p.m. Tuker got into telephonic communication with Ritchie who tried to calm him down by repeating Eighth Army's belief that there were only Italian troops near Benghazi. It would seem that even so late as this Rommel's apparent thrust for Mechili was dancing like a will-o'-the-wisp

[1] *The Tiger Kills*, p. 83.

round Eighth Army Intelligence. In order to soothe Tuker still more the Army Commander suggested that Briggs' brigade should stay put in Benghazi, and at the very least leave a battalion there to hold it against the Italians.

All through that night divisional headquarters waited for news of the 7th Brigade. At 5 a.m. a message came through on a 4/16th Punjab Regt set that Lavender's force was in action at the Coefia road block and that Briggs' arrival in Barce might be delayed. The same message reported the enemy to be German. Tuker instructed Russell to send strong fighting patrols from his 5th Brigade along the main road and the fair-weather track in an endeavour to get into contact with the 7th Brigade, and then made an appeal to Messervy to move on Benghazi. The reply was that the 1st Armoured Division could at most send out contact patrols because the total strength in runners of the division now was less than a regiment's. It may be regretted that Briggs sitting in his staff car could not hear that telephone conversation between Tuker and Ritchie. He was a man with a keen sense of humour and an agreeable wit, and the picture of his brigade staying put in Benghazi to say 'boo!' to Italian troops until the Eighth Army's counter-offensive was launched would have made him smile, even if the prospect was a prisoners-of-war camp and the end of the war for him.

To quote again:[1]

> The boom of guns at Coefia, the soaring flames along the line of the escarpment, told the 7th Brigade commander all that he needed to know. He was cut off, surrounded and in the gravest peril. As he studied his map, the desert called in no uncertain voice. It was the only way out. If the enemy could be dodged in the coastal corridor his brigade might escape.
>
> This night of storm was made for adventure. The pelting rain drove the enemy into close leaguer and blurred the sentries' eyes. The darkness was a dense curtain, although later there would be a moon. If dawn broke with the columns beyond the Agedabia-Antelat trails, the danger would be over. That meant 75 miles across rough country. Could it be done?

One advantage the brigade did enjoy. It was already organised in three mobile columns, which gave each of them a better chance and enabled them to set out as soon as the signal was given. Messages were sent to Lavender and Peake telling them to make plans to break out at their own discretion. A last attempt was made to get into communication with divisional headquarters without success.

[1] *ibid.*, pp. 83–84.

Soon after 8 p.m. the following signal was sent to Gold and Silver Groups:

> Road cut. Groups must make their own way over desert. Carry only personnel and weapons. Conserve petrol by destroying surplus vehicles. Good luck everyone.

To quote once again:[1]

> In the darkness and rain the word passed from vehicle to vehicle. The distance to safety was three hundred miles. A check-up showed that there was not enough petrol for all vehicles. Private kit and all stores, except food, water, fuel and ammunition, were ruthlessly jettisoned. All documents, codes, files and maps were destroyed. Most of the Bren carriers, because of their high petrol consumption, were drained of oil, and their engines raced until they seized. Fire or explosive could not be used, so pickaxes and bayonets were plied on radiators and tyres. A signaller in a letter recounts his sadness when obliged to use a hammer on his wireless transmitter-receiver. By 11 p.m. all was in readiness. The columns of Headquarters Group formed up and wheeled about on the airfield. As an omen of good fortune, the moon elected to show for a moment through the clouds. The breakout was under way.

he had not, and the column passed safely through in single file, changing to desert formation as it made southward about half-way between the escarpment and the sea. At 2.30 a.m. the column halted for the first of many check-ups and many lame vehicles were destroyed. At 4 a.m. numerous leaguer flares on the right front revealed a large enemy encampment at Solluch, 30 miles south of the departure point. This meant that the dangerous area round Antelat and Saunnu would have to be crossed in daylight.

Beyond Solluch the area between the escarpment and the sea steadily grew wider until there was as much as 25 miles in which to manoeuvre and the columns were able to keep completely clear of the coastal road. The moon came out of the clouds and lightened the task of the navigators by helping them to avoid Arab encampments in a fertile strip made by a continuous top-dressing of soil washed down through the Sceledeima Pass.

About 7 a.m. on January 29th the Beda Fomm-Antelat track was crossed, and Headquarters Group, though travelling in easy country, was exposed to the risk of being detected by any one of the enemy's supply columns moving north-east along the tracks between Agedabia and Antelat. It would have been all right if the group could have made a wide detour round this area, but the stock of petrol available did not allow this. They had already traversed 65 miles; the next 15 miles would be decisive. Orders were given for the vehicles to spread out in order to give the impression of casual groups of transport.

The Central India Horse Newsletter gave a vivid picture of the daylight hazards:

> Vehicles appeared on the crest of the rise over which we had to pass. Coming down the slope they turned along the track to Agedabia. A small convoy also was seen coming in the opposite direction towards Antelat. Three Axis aircraft flew very low over the valley just ahead. After watching the enemy lorries for a few minutes, the Brigade Commander went back to his car and said: 'Cross the road.'
>
> We set off on what all regarded as the critical phase of our journey. Nearing the trail we could see four tanks, about 800 yards away, with men working on them. A motor-cyclist passed along the track 200 yards ahead of our leading truck. A staff car coming from the opposite direction halted for a few minutes beside the tanks and then went on. Just as we crossed the road, two big lorries which had been moving towards us apparently became suspicious, and also halted near the tanks. A big gun on tow, a straggler from one of the enemy convoys, was only fifty

yards away from us. Its driver was quite oblivious of us, and he pulled up to allow one of our three-tonners to pass in front.

In one of our vehicles were five German prisoners. The sowars stood over them, with the butts of their rifles held ready to bash their heads in if they attempted to give the alarm. One prisoner started to pull himself to his feet, but was quickly hauled down by his comrades.

While Headquarters Group was negotiating this tricky situation three of the light anti-tank guns escorted by a platoon of the 4/16th Punjab Regt stuck and their predicament was not observed in the concentrated effort of the rest of the vehicles to reach dead ground beyond the ridge. Enemy tanks came along to help supposed comrades in distress and the unfortunate stragglers were all captured when their identity was realised.

The other columns of Headquarters Group went on eastward and then north-eastward across hard sand into the desert.

The Central India Horse Newsletter carries on the tale:

> Driving all day in a shallow depression of the desert, with a rim of high ground extending many miles round the horizon, we might have expected to be observed from many of the numerous, but distant, viewpoints. But neither on this day nor the next did we see any further sign of enemy movement, either on the ground or in the air. Halts were few and short, but at dusk we had a longer break when we got into night formation. The remaining petrol reserves were then issued, to give all vehicles an equal share. On this second of our sleepless nights between which was sandwiched a long day's driving, fatigue began to produce hallucinations. In the slanting rays of a low moon, the play of shadows on a mass of vehicles moving over the flat, horizonless desert produced visions of mosques and houses, palm trees, pools of water, and even leafy English lanes down which one appeared to be wandering. Keeping awake called for a strong mental effort. Many did not succeed, but no serious accident occurred.

By dawn of January 30th Headquarters Group in 30 hours of continuous movement except for short periodic check-ups had covered 250 miles and was now in a featureless waste remote from any kind of traffic, about 80 miles south-west of Mechili. The brigadier decided to call a long halt and give his men time for a hot breakfast. He now had to make up his mind whether to risk the chance of the enemy's being in Mechili or of running out of fuel in an effort to make the extra 100 miles eastward to reach El Adem.

Finally Briggs took a chance with the radio and asked in clear if there were friends in Mechili. The message was picked up by XIII Corps and 4th Indian Division Headquarters and the answer came back: 'Many friends.' Corps then asked Headquarters Group where it was. Briggs did not think it would be prudent to give this in clear, but a cypher was ingeniously improvised. With him were several New Zealand signallers who had been with XIII Corps when every operator had had his own number, of which Corps had kept a list. So to give the four figures of the map reference they signalled the name of four New Zealand operators, and the operators with Corps at once understood.

Headquarters Group now headed for Mechili; about 9 a.m., when all seemed well, armoured cars were sighted on the horizon which dogged their tracks all the morning, drawing ever a little closer. However, when at last they closed they proved to be armoured car patrols of the Royal Dragoons, and they in turn were relieved to find this formation crossing the desert was not another of Rommel's thrusts.

By 3 p.m. Headquarters Group of the 7th Indian Brigade was in touch with the Free French and Polish outposts at Mechili.

We must now follow the fortunes of Gold Group commanded by Lieut.-Colonel C. Goulder, D.S.O.

This consisted of:

31st Field Regt
4th Sikh Regt
A squadron of the Central India Horse
One troop 169th L.A.A. Battery
One troop 171st L.A.A. Battery
258th Anti-tank Battery.

Gold Group had reached the Nauuaghia minefield early on the afternoon of January 28th, waiting to withdraw north from Benghazi to D'Annunzio according to orders. At 7.30 p.m. it began to move slowly northward along the main road choked with transport until it reached the El Guarscia airfield where Goulder heard that the northerly road had been cut and received orders from Briggs to break out southward through the desert.

While Gold Group was turning at the airfield it was joined by various units from Benghazi including among others a detachment of the 12th Field Company Madras Sappers and Miners, a platoon of the 4/16th Punjab Regt and the B Echelon transport of the 25th and 31st Field Regts which had escaped the Coefia road block. By

good fortune these vehicles were carrying a certain amount of spare petrol. When Gold Group set out at 11 p.m. the number of vehicles all told was about 300.

Like Headquarters Group Gold Group had no difficulty in getting through the minefield, and it then followed the Agedabia road for 10 miles before adopting desert formation and passing between Ghemimes and Solluch, both of which were in German hands.

In the first grey of dawn the columns were 20 miles short of the Antelat Gap, and just before daybreak a straggler from Headquarters Group was picked up when Goulder was informed that it was about two hours ahead of him. Goulder thought it would be too great a hazard for both groups to tackle the Antelat track by daylight and decided to accept what he considered the slighter hazard of lying up till dusk in a dispersal area east of Beda Fomm.

It was an anxious time, with hostile aircraft frequently over them, and about noon enemy forces were reported to be approaching the hide-out from the north-west. However, luck was with Gold Group, for the menacing column changed course and, passing within a mile of Goulder's men, failed to detect Gold Group.

At 3.30 p.m. a dust storm blew up under cover of which Gold Group moved off, crossed the Beda Fomm-Antelat track at twilight without incident and turned south-east to get through the gap between Antelat and Saunnu. In the middle of this most dangerous part of the adventure 19 troop-carrying lorries in the rear of the column ran into soft sand and were stuck. By a piece of luck a lance-corporal of the R.A.S.C. who was driving the only 4-drive vehicle in the group, noticed that the lorries were in trouble, and with coolness, skill and determination pulled them out one after another, thus saving some 300 men from the hands of the enemy—a splendid feat.

The Antelat-Saunnu Gap provided a good deal of excitement that night. There was a hostile camp on either side of Gold Group and enemy transport moving up through it. However, after a tense hour Gold Group was clear and able to speed up on the hard sand, reaching an unfrequented area some 30 miles south-east of Antelat by 8 a.m. of January 30th. Here the signallers picked up the signal from Headquarters Group and it was known that so far all was well with it. Goulder had no New Zealanders with him and feeling unsure of what the situation was at Mechili decided to make for Tengeder, some 40 miles due south of it on the Trigh el Abd, which was known to be free of the enemy.

Gold Group was just preparing to proceed again after the halt when armoured cars of the Central India Horse reported a group of vehicles approaching from the north-east. In a few minutes this was discovered to be a column of enemy transport escorted by four panzers. The men climbed hurriedly into their lorries while the 25-pounders of the 31st Field Regt and the troops of anti-aircraft and anti-tank guns deployed to cover the retirement of the lorries and deal with the panzers. In the excitement the anti-tank guns opened fire at extreme range before the 25-pounders could get on to their targets with the result that the hostile column turned and made off into the north-west. It was soon evident that the whereabouts of Gold Group had been reported to the enemy because aircraft kept coming over in low flights to look at the columns. Strict orders had been given not to fire at the planes and when one of them fired a machine-gun burst without response the perplexed scouts flew away. It may be observed in passing that it seems strange that neither in the British, German, nor Italian armies had any method of recognition signals been devised for an occasion like this. A week earlier Reid and his merry men in E Force, whom we shall meet again presently, had enjoyed seeing 21 Stukas by which they expected to be attacked drop all their bombs on one of their own columns which was holding up the force.

More alarming for Gold Group than hostile aircraft was the shortage of petrol. A certain number of vehicles had been destroyed to economise; every lorry now was carrying 35 men; everything had been jettisoned except rations, water and arms. When Gold Group got into contact with a troop of Royals searching for break out parties about 40 miles from Tengeder there was petrol for only another 30 miles and great was the relief when the Royals told them that there was plenty of petrol less than 10 miles away.

Gold Group harboured at Bel Amia. Vehicles were sent to draw petrol next morning, and soon after midday of January 31st Gold Group reached Tengeder. Here orders were received to continue to El Adem by way of Bir Hacheim, and here Gold Group arrived at 4 p.m. on the afternoon of February 1st, having achieved its long march without a single casualty and with the loss of only 31 vehicles. Among these was the water truck of the 4th Sikh Regt which had expired after running 45,000 miles in the Sudan, Eritrea and Libya, a noble vehicle whose demise was an inconsolable grief to its driver, Naik Besart Singh.

Finally we have to chronicle the adventures of Silver Group, commanded by Lieut.-Colonel G. C. Evans, D.S.O.

This consisted of:

1st Royal Sussex Regt
C Squadron Central India Horse
31st Battery 25th Field Regt
2 Troops 171st L.A.A. Battery
259th Battery 65th Anti-tank Regt.

Silver Group had had a day of much fighting when on the evening of January 28th it received the order to break out. The columns passed through the Nauuaghia minefield at 1 a.m. of January 29th and by 7 a.m. had made 40 miles. A halt was then called for breakfast at Got es Saeti, 25 miles north-west of Antelat when it was found that a platoon of the Royal Sussex and a troop of 25-pounders were missing but that during the night a troop of anti-aircraft guns and a certain number of men of the Welch Regiment had joined the group.

At 8.45 a.m. Silver Group started on the most dangerous part of its adventure. A mistake in navigation brought the columns too close to the escarpment at Eluet Abdulla, four miles north of Antelat, and the order was given to wheel sharply to the right. When direction was being changed the carrier platoon of the Royal Sussex which was guarding the left flank saw a number of enemy vehicles led by two panzers coming down the escarpment towards them. Evans at once ordered the carriers to attack. There were only six of them because the front section had not seen the convoy and had gone on. The six carriers waited until the panzers were down the escarpment well ahead of their flock. Then they cut in, and the convoy which consisted of 20 Italian lorries, two staff cars and a number of motor-cyclists turned round and fled uphill. The escorting panzers behaved with typical German contempt for their Italian allies and went on their way. The carriers intercepted the last seven lorries, one of which turned, dropped its tail board and opened fire with a storm gun; this was knocked out by a Boyes rifle. 14 Italians were killed and 28 taken prisoners; the latter were loaded with the diesel oil found in one of the lorries, and the carriers now an hour behind the main body hurried on to overtake it.

Strangely, no general alarm was given, although this little battle was fought within sight of Antelat, and Silver Group was able to cross the trails and get through the gap without interference. However, soon after 1 p.m. two Messerschmitts flew over to investigate matters. Against orders an anti-aircraft gun opened fire and hit one of them. The other German plane came back, machine-gunned

the column, and signalled for aid. An hour later two flights of Italian aircraft dive-bombed the column. An hour after that Messerschmitts flying low machine-gunned the column. Enemy armoured cars appeared on the flanks, but the Royal Sussex carriers overtook the main body just in time to drive them off and take a German prisoner.

As a result of disobedience by that anti-aircraft gun 13 were killed and 25 were wounded during those air attacks, and in the confusion Silver Group struck deeper south into the desert than was intended. By 6 p.m. when a halt was called Silver Group was 60 miles south-east of Saunnu. Evans was out of radio communication, and for all he knew Mechili and Tengeder were in enemy hands. So he decided to proceed due east in his present latitude, and if the worst came to the worst try to reach the Jarabub oasis 210 miles away on the frontier. The fuel problem was likely to be acute and orders were given to destroy the gallant carriers on account of their high petrol consumption.

At 7.45 p.m. Silver Group set out in bright moonlight over hard sand; by 5.30 a.m. on Sunday 30th the group had covered 120 miles to reach Qaret el Tarut where it halted for breakfast. Preparations were now made to bury the guns, get rid of all but essential equipment and strip the vehicles. While this work was going on a patrol was sighted to the north which to everybody's relief turned out to be from the 150th British Brigade which was stationed at Qaret el Auda 15 miles east of Tengeder. So Silver Group wheeled north and that afternoon reached the headquarters of the Tyneside brigade. Here Evans was able to get fuel and rations, rest his men, and continue his march next morning to reach El Adem on February 2nd.

The break-out from Benghazi by the 7th Indian Brigade was a blend of audacity, coolness and skill deservedly blessed by fortune, and it displayed the qualities of the Indian and the British Armies at their highest level. 4,100 officers and men under the inspiring leadership of Brigadier Briggs, Lieut.-Colonel Goulder and Lieut.-Colonel Evans accomplished a military feat to which the annals of warfare offer few paragons. Three historic battalions with many mighty names among their regimental honours would have been proud to add Benghazi to the record.

Those 4,100 brought with them 800 vehicles after 200 had to be destroyed either for mechanical defects or lack of petrol. One officer and 12 men were killed and 25 were wounded. Fourteen of the enemy were killed and 35 prisoners were brought back across the desert. One platoon of the 4/16th Punjab Regt was overrun by panzers when

its vehicles failed it in the soft sand. The platoon of the 1st Royal Sussex Regt that was missing made its way to Tobruk in safety. One 25-pounder and three light guns were lost.

> When it was about the last watch, and enough of the night remained to allow them to cross the plain in the dark, at that time they arose upon the word of command and set out on their march.

That simple sentence from Xenophon's *Anabasis*, which has been the classic narrative of a glorious retreat through nearly twenty-five centuries, might have been written of Briggs' 7th Indian Brigade on January 28th 1942.

Chapter 26

January–February, 1942. 4th Indian Division withdrawn from the Djebel—a sharp action near Carmusa—new positions on Acroma plateau—useless British petrol tins.

ON the morning of January 29th Tuker had been ordered to stand with the 4th Indian Division on the line D'Annunzio-Maraua, 25 miles east of Barce. The importance of yielding as little ground as possible to the enemy in view of an early resumption of offensive operations was stressed. However, if further withdrawal was forced upon him he was authorised to fall back 35 miles to the Cyrene-El Faida cross-roads. These instructions were qualified later that morning. Auchinleck came to Barce himself and at once decided that no attempt must be made to recapture Benghazi. The fate of the 7th Indian Brigade was now beyond the power of the rest of the 4th Indian Division to influence.

Tuker was ordered to hold a line through Barce and Charruba until noon next day and then withdraw to the D'Annunzio-Maraua line. Patrols of the 5th Indian Brigade were called in and the Tocra Pass was blown.

Tuker received artillery reinforcements in the shape of the 1st Field Regt and the 144th Field Regt, but he was dangerously short of infantry. It was vital for the safety of the withdrawal through the Djebel to protect his flank by blocking the tracks from the south available to Rommel's armour. Tuker pressed for reinforcements, and was told that no troops were available to protect either his flank or his rear. As a concession the 3/1st Punjab Regt and the 1st Rajputana Rifles were to be brought forward from Tobruk to strengthen his weak 5th and 11th Brigades. Neither battalion was ready yet for fresh activity. There were two companies of recruits in the 3/1st Punjab Regt; Wellesley's had not had time to reorganise and re-equip after its losses at Antelat and Msus. The only other troops in the Djebel were the armoured cars of the King's Dragoon Guards, a detachment of the 7th South African Recce Regt and a battalion of the Libyan Arab Force.

It was at this moment that Denys Reid's E Force arrived upon the gloomy scene. E Force had had a none too easy time since we left it. It was not strong enough in numbers or re-equipment to intervene

effectively in the fight between the 1st Armoured Division and Rommel's panzers; indeed, the force can be considered lucky in having escaped disaster during the days after the enemy occupied Agedabia on January 22nd. By January 28th E Force was being entrusted with the defence of Charruba, and next day a warning order for withdrawal to the line Mechili-Derna was issued for January 30th. Then in the small hours of January 30th E Force was ordered to move at once to join the 4th Indian Division at Maraua.

Reid's latest information was that a strong enemy force was moving towards Maraua from the south-west reported at dusk to be 10 miles from Fort es Seherif. That being so he decided that an attempt to reach Maraua by the Charruba-Fort es Seherif track was too hazardous. A lot of useful reconnaissance had been done by E Force, now reduced to the 1/2nd Punjab Regt, six 25-pounders, one Bofors gun and eight South African armoured cars, during the preparations to defend Charruba, and as a result of the knowledge of the country thus gained it was possible to find a way round to Maraua.

To the north-east of the force's position the steep ravines in the foothills of the Djebel made motor-transport quite impossible; due north there was a difficult but just feasible way between the ravines at the foot of the Djebel and Fort es Seherif by which the force might reach the Fort es Seherif-Maraua track from the east.

Before dawn on January 30th the force was assembled and at 7.45 a.m. it moved off, reaching the fort before the enemy arrived in Maraua half an hour after midday. The men had been on half rations for a week and their transport was at the end of its tether; but they were a most welcome reinforcement, and E Force was placed under command of the 11th Indian Brigade with orders to occupy a reserve position at Acquaviva, 44 miles east from Maraua along the main road. E Force had done all that was asked of it and more.

The withdrawal through the Djebel was not going to be easy. The 5th Indian Brigade would take the north road, the 11th Indian Brigade would take the south. Barce was evacuated in the afternoon of January 29th, and the all too many entrances to the escarpment from the east were blocked with demolitions. Unfortunately the rain had stopped and the rapidly drying ground would favour the enemy's attempts to strike at the flanks of the retreating 4th Indian Division. The 1st Armoured Division had promised to keep the enemy away from Charruba until noon on January 30th and Hagfet Gilgaf, 25 miles south of Maraua, which covered the Cyrene-El Faida line would be held for 36 hours longer. However, Messervy had to warn

Tuker that with the best will in the world he might not be able to keep his promise. So broken up was the 1st Armoured Division that he doubted its ability to stop more than 25 panzers. That night Tuker was ordered by Eighth Army not to stand on the D'Annunzio-Maraua position but to fall back immediately on the second position covering the Cyrene-El Faida cross-road.

The signal early in the morning on January 30th from Briggs' Headquarter Group at breakfast in the desert was a rousing tonic to everybody. It was like the sound of Roland's olifant once upon a time. The enemy was coming on fast, but the 5th and 11th Brigades reached D'Annunzio and Maraua that night, and the 4th Field Company of King George's Own Bengal Sappers and Miners went on to Lucia Razza to blow up a number of dumps and 13 captured tanks.

On January 31st the enemy tried hard to get round the forward battalions—the 4th Rajputana Rifles of Russell's 5th Brigade on the north road, the 2nd Cameron Highlanders of Anderson's 11th Brigade on the south. He was unsuccessful. The Camerons shot his lorried infantry to pieces, and Outram's made a mess of the other attempt, killing 50 Germans. Nevertheless, the activity of the enemy was becoming more of a menace all the while, and Tuker asked Ritchie to give him discretion to ignore the set period of 48 hours for holding this position and reach the stabilised line as soon as possible.

That evening a hostile force was reported to be advancing along the desert trails south of El Faida and E Force was fetched back to block this approach, while the 5th and 11th Brigades fell back during the night to Caf Tartagu and Slonta about half-way to the cross-roads of the second layback position. The divisional rearguards could not shake off the urgent enemy and when Outram's was disengaging an attempt was made by tanks and lorried infantry to upset the withdrawal. The unperturbed riflemen waited for the rush, and drove back the enemy with the loss of one of his panzers.

On February 1st the 11th Brigade was reinforced by the 3/1st Punjab Regt. The enemy's pressure increased and the 2nd Mahratta Light Infantry in disengaging at Slonta were hard put to prevent his getting behind them. By midday the Mahrattas passed through the Camerons who were hurriedly preparing a defensive position at El Faida on the forward slope of a scrubby hillside overlooking a wooded valley. A mile away the road vanished over the hillside opposite; the field of fire was poor. By mid-afternoon the enemy's lorried infantry with a tank and an armoured car were coming over the top, and to the exasperation of the Camerons 20 Kittyhawks 'paid no attention and

cruised above as if on Bank Holiday.' At this date the co-operation of the R.A.F. with the Army left much to be desired. The tank and the armoured car were knocked out by an anti-tank gun, but the German infantry deployed out of range, and the mortar and machine-gun fire and shelling from a battery made the Camerons' hillside an unpleasant place for night attacks, with no wire and a front of 500 yards for each platoon to hold. However, at dusk word came that the Highlanders were to be out of this hot spot by 7.30 p.m. The men of the last platoon fought off the enemy with bayonets as they jumped into their lorries, with the Germans lining the road behind them and firing at point-blank range.

At the same time as the enemy was pressing the Camerons he was showing himself on the front of the 5th Brigade which was covering Derna while ammunition dumps were being prepared for demolition and naval installations were being removed. This delay imposed on the 5th Brigade meant that the 11th Brigade could not withdraw east of Martuba, where the upper and the lower roads through the Djebel met to form a single highway down the eastern escarpment to Gazala.

Ritchie had assented on the morning of February 2nd to complete withdrawal from the Djebel, but he had qualified this assent with the stipulation that the 4th Indian Division's retreat should synchronise with the move eastward through the desert of the 1st Armoured Division, the withdrawal of the Free French and Polish forces from Mechili, and the arrival of reserves in the Gazala positions. When Tuker insisted that the withdrawal to a defensible position must be hastened Ritchie promised that L Force composed of Free French and Polish units based on Mechili should strike north to obstruct the enemy's advance. As ever sanguine he was convinced that Rommel had already overstepped his mark and would presently be turning round after that lucky reconnaissance in force which had turned into an improvised offensive. Unfortunately Rommel was far from being winded. In fact some of his columns had by-passed Mechili and were now moving north in the rising ground south of Derna with the obvious intention of approaching Martuba from the desert side.

The progress of the 5th Brigade down through the Derna bottleneck was slow, and the 11th Brigade was in ever increasing danger of being enveloped from flank and rear. Anderson decided to hold Carmusa where the Mechili-Derna track crossed the main lower Djebel road. Two companies of the 3/1st Punjab Regt with the 52nd Battery of the 1st Field Regt took up a covering position seven miles west of the junction. Two companies of the Mahrattas were

two miles west of Carmusa astride the road. The Camerons with the 144th Field Regt and the rest of the 3/1st were at the junction. Two more companies of the 3/1st were south of Carmusa across the Derna track. The rest of the Mahrattas and the 18th Field Company of Royal Bombay Sappers and Miners were east of Carmusa on the Martuba road. The Punjabis and Mahrattas west were acting as rearguards until the rest of the brigade had prepared defences and Anderson had just sent to call them in when a number of British lorries led by a British tank came out of the west. As ill luck would have it the two Punjabi companies which had to tackle this wooden horse were two novice companies resting at noon after a morning of hard work on a screening position without a covering party. The wooden horse was allowed to canter up without being challenged. Out jumped German instead of British soldiers and the two companies were captured with hardly a shot fired. Meanwhile, some enemy tanks which had approached under cover of the scrub turned round on the northern flank to attack the positions of the 52nd Battery of the 1st Field Regt. The gunners went into action at once; mortar and machine-gun fire swept them down and in a quarter of an hour the position had been overrun. One gun escaped and on its hurried way back met the 11th Battery of the 1st Field Regt which had been moving forward to the support of the Punjabis when calamity overtook them. Major Kitcat, the battery commander, swung his guns into action as 400 enemy vehicles came into view three-quarters of a mile away. The enemy tried to outflank the battery, but it was able to seize fresh positions farther back and pour shells into him. Four times those gallant gunners fell back to fresh positions and with the one 25-pounder from the 52nd Battery, a troop of the 65th Anti-tank Regt and a Bofors gun they held the enemy back. Then they were joined by the two forward Mahratta companies. Naik Narayan Surwase with a captured Breda gun knocked out a Mark III panzer and several lorries at 600 yards range as the Gunners and the Mahrattas fell back through the Camerons on the Martuba road. The 11th Battery had no ammunition left: it had fired a thousand rounds that afternoon.

Tuker sent a signal in Urdu that the position must be held at all costs. At 4 p.m. the attack developed against the Camerons south and west of the junction and the enemy tried under cover of shell fire until darkness fell to penetrate their position. The Bombay Sappers and Miners came into the line to reinforce the left flank of the Camerons. Here and there small parties of the enemy charged in under the guns, but the Highlanders and Mahrattas met them with

the bayonet. By 6 p.m. the enemy had had enough. He had not been able to reach the Martuba cross-roads and cut off the 5th Brigade, which reached Tmimi by road that night. The 11th Brigade reached it by way of the desert.

On February 3rd Tuker was able to establish his hard pressed division on the Tmimi perimeter. Russell's 5th Brigade held the west and north-west force. Anderson's 11th Brigade held the south-west. E Force held the south-east. The 1st Rajputana Rifles was despatched 10 miles south to make contact with L Force.

At Tmimi the 11th Brigade was joined by the six guns that remained of the 31st Field Regt. When Gold Group reached Tobruk after the break out from Benghazi Goulder had asked to be sent on with his six guns to help the division. His request had been refused. Goulder had gone on asking and in the end he and his gunners had their way. The devoted affection and confidence which all the British gunners won from the Indian troops *ubique* in the Second World War is not to be wondered at.

That afternoon enemy columns thrust down the road from the Djebel against the 5th Brigade's section of the perimeter, but the guns gave them a terrible time, and the few lorried infantry who got near were disposed of by the 1/1st Punjab Regt.

Orders now came for the 4th Indian Division to withdraw that night to the Gazala line and take up positions on the grey dreary waste of the Acroma plateau above the coastal corridor west of Tobruk. The 5th Brigade moved down the main road, the 1/1st Punjab Regt acting as rearguard, until it disengaged and passed through E Force which then became rearguard.

The 11th Brigade moved by the desert across country so fierce that even the panzers which were chasing one column could not face it. Yet the lorries somehow kept going. A few guns and vehicles were blown up on mines and booby-traps while the Alem Hamza and Sidi Breghisc battlefield was being crossed. However, by midday on February 4th the 4th Indian Division was concentrated on the Acroma plateau and in touch with columns of the 7th Brigade at Tobruk and El Adem.

The feat performed by the Red Eagles in getting out of as unpleasant a fix as any division could face with a loss of only about 600 men out of a divisional strength of 12,000 stands out as one of the most remarkable in the Second World War. This is what Major-General Tuker said about it in the summary of a detailed report to his staff officers and unit commanders:[1]

[1] *History of Fourth Indian Division*, pp. 144, 145.

The reason why Rommel was successful against XIII Corps was because when he counter-attacked from Agheila, XIII Corps was spread out from the sea right round to the south of Agheila in small groups of columns. This was a dispersion of effort, for these columns were not able to concentrate to join 1 Armoured Division in the main battle south-east of Antelat.

The first principle of war is concentration at the decisive time and place. The result was that 2 Armoured Brigade, Guards Brigade and Support Group, were beaten in detail. Fourth Indian Division had no troop-carrying transport at first, and when it got it, it was not sent to the help of 1 Armoured Division. The result was that 1 Armoured Division was attacked without a shot being fired by Fourth Indian Division, and Fourth Indian Division was attacked without a shot being fired by 1 Armoured Division.

When control of the desert area was lost by XIII Corps, Fourth Indian Division had an extremely difficult withdrawal to make because the Germans were in a position not only to follow it up but to hit at it from the desert, in flank and almost in rear. The Division piquetted its route all the way back as in Frontier warfare, in order to hold enemy attacks from its rear and flank. This succeeded, and the enemy was held every time except once, 12 miles west of Carmusa, when the stubborn fighting of 11 Brigade kept the way clear for 5 Brigade to draw out.

You will notice also that the principle of security was neglected, for nowhere west of Tobruk was there a firm base on which XIII Corps could fall back, or behind which it could rally for a counter-offensive. In modern war these firm bases are an essential part of one's method of advance.

There is no doubt that Fourth Indian Division showed up very well in the extremely difficult conditions of this deliberate withdrawal. There was never a single sign of panic. Without sufficient transport and with other difficulties, the withdrawal went through most smoothly. This was a great credit to our Brigade Commands and Staffs, and to our Signals and Administration Services.

These were the words of a soldier who was also an artist and in neither capacity content with the second best. He was fortunate in his brigadiers, two of whom would presently themselves command divisions with the greatest distinction; he was fortunate in his staff; he was fortunate in his officers; above all he was fortunate in his men, Indian and British. The transport services wrought miracles. The chronicler drives his pen over the page, but he does not always remember that throughout every episode of which he writes somebody British or Indian is driving a lorry. This comment by the 18th

Field Company expresses what every man in the Q services wanted to say:

> We have only 38 vehicles and we need 100. We have 13 different types, which make spares hard to obtain. Thirteen of our lorries are over two years old and completely worn out. Seven are relics which formerly towed trucks up the Keren railway. Their engines are finished, their steering deplorable, their frames out of alignment. The remainder are veterans of Sudan, Syria and Libya. Their mileage over rough desert is in scores of thousands, and they are constantly in the workshops.

A legend has grown up that the Eighth Army started its career at the second battle of Alamein, and this legend has been preposterously turned into bad history by those who were responsible for denying to all those who served in it before October 23rd 1942 the numeral 8 on the ribbon of the Africa Star. The only explanation for such a denial is the guilty conscience of those who were fundamentally responsible for there ever being any need for a second battle of Alamein. Long ago in Egypt a Pharaoh had ordered the Israelites to make bricks without straw; the spirit of Pharaoh was still venerated in Whitehall.

> In view of the poor design of our petrol containers a special effort was made to salve as many as possible of the very efficient German petrol and water containers. At Benghazi over two million of them were discovered, but only a few could be removed before the enemy made his counterstroke.[2]

Thus wrote General Auchinleck, and elsewhere he estimated that our 'flimsy and ill-constructed container' caused a loss of 30 per cent. between base and consumer. It is hard to believe that strong representations were not made to the Ministry of Supply for better containers, but some mummified Pharaoh in Whitehall had decided upon the design and empowered the contractors to produce these pitiable abortions of metal which the Eighth Army was condemned to use.

The lack of petrol at critical moments is a recurrent theme throughout every account of the operations in Cyrenaica, and it was probably more responsible than any other single factor for the ability of Rommel to make a counter stroke. Thousands and thousands of gallons of the vital fluid dribbled away into the sand every day soley because nobody could bring his mind to bear on what should

[2] General Sir Claude Auchinleck's Despatch, p. 106.

have been a simpler problem than was, apparently, the production of a British tank as good as the German or enough effective anti-tank guns. What would have happened in North Africa without our incomparable gunners and their splendid 25-pounders is a grim subject for meditation. And as a bitter subject for meditation may be added that if Auchinleck had possessed even a hundred well-armed, well-armoured and mechanically reliable tanks Rommel's forces would not have lived to fight another day. The failure to produce such tanks after two and a half years of war cannot be excused by the sudden need to improvise the defence of Malaya and Burma. Happily the milky-eyed medium to whom the Germans had committed their own minds never grasped his strategic opportunity in the Mediterranean, and by failing to reinforce Rommel himself or to compel Mussolini to do so and later by failing to grasp that it was vital for him to capture Malta Hitler was a great military asset to his enemies.

Chapter 27

January, 1942. Malaya—arrival of Indian reinforcements—a Japanese tank blitz—disaster at the Slim River—Indian formations pulled back to Johore.

ON January 3rd 1942 the 45th Indian Infantry Brigade commanded by Brigadier H. C. Duncan (Frontier Force Rifles) arrived at Singapore. This was a brigade of the recently formed 17th Indian Division which had been intended for operations in the Middle East. It was not nearly fully trained even for the desert and if it had reached Basra instead of Singapore it would no doubt have spent months after the establishment of the Gazala line in an intensive preparation for the task in hand for Auchinleck's forces. In the event, without a day's training for jungle warfare, this young brigade was doomed within less than a fortnight to meet the Japanese Imperial Guards Division and vanish. The 45th Brigade consisted of the 7th Rajputana Rifles, the 4th Jat Regt and the 5th Royal Garhwal Rifles, all of which were new battalions of famous regiments and as such without a previous military history of their own. After disembarkation the 45th Brigade and a non-combatant Indian Pioneer battalion which had arrived with it at Singapore were concentrated in the Segamat-Malacca area.

On January 4th Lieut.-General H. Gordon Bennett commanding the Australian Imperial Force proposed to Lieut.-General Percival that he should take over command of all troops in Johore. 'This scheme, of course, involved the disbandment of the 3rd Indian Corps, or, at least that it should cease to function as such,' General Gordon Bennett notes.[1]

Percival could not accept this proposal and told Bennett that the best solution was for III Indian Corps to be responsible for the west area and the A.I.F. to take on the east.

If the withdrawal to Johore had been started at once it is possible that for a short time, but only for a short time, the fall of Singapore might have been postponed. Percival was influenced by the insistence of the higher authorities that only by prolonging the fight farther north could the security of the island be guaranteed until the arrival of the promised reinforcements; either he was too resolutely

[1] *Why Singapore Fell*, p. 80.

optimistic about the situation, or more probably he was not in a position to persuade the higher authorities to face up to the fact that their failure to provide in advance for the air defence of Malaya had already handed over Singapore to the Japanese in spite of whatever resistance were still made by the land forces. As it was, the attempt of III Indian Corps to stand with worn-out troops on a series of positions that were not good but only the least bad available was bound to end in disaster.

Bennett notes[1] in his diary for January 7th:

'General Percival sent me a copy of a wire he had sent to 3rd Indian Corps, urging a stiffer resistance and attempting to check the retreat. This is a refreshing message.'

It may be doubted if an instruction which began by informing III Indian Corps that the Japanese were 'an army of gangsters' was the right kind of eloquence for the occasion. Nor could III Corps have been impressed by Percival's belief 'that our young and inexperienced troops are now getting their second wind.' This savoured too much of a housemaster rallying his prefects after the house fifteen, mainly colts, had been overrun by another house with most of the school fifteen in its team. 'While our policy for the moment is to keep our Forces in being as fighting formations, this does not mean that casualties must always be avoided. Provided greater losses are inflicted on the enemy, casualties can and should be expected within reasonable limits,' the instruction went on.

So far so good, but then Percival added:

'Our forces are now becoming more concentrated than hitherto, and therefore in a better position to hit back. I feel the time has now come when we should accept casualties within reasonable limits if by doing so we can damage and impose greater delay on the enemy . . . as time goes on greater risks may be accepted.'

By this time brigade and battalion commanders in III Indian Corps had lost confidence in the ability of G.H.Q. Malaya to understand the condition of troops after an exhausting, bloody and strategically futile month of operations in the course of which two Indian divisions had been sacrificed to prevent the white elephant aerodromes of the R.A.F. from becoming rogue elephants in the enemy's hands.

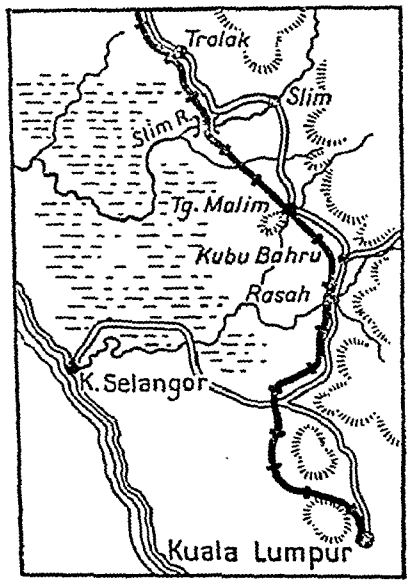
Even the instruction partly reproduced above led up to the particular immediate task of III Corps, which was to prevent the enemy's seizure of the aerodromes at Kuala Lumpur and Port Swettenham in order that the 53rd Brigade of the 18th East Anglian

[1] *ibid.*, p. 83.

Division and 50 of the oldest type of Hurricanes might reach Singapore without being heavily attacked from the air.

In spite of the fact that the 24 gallant pilots sent with these reinforcements lacked experience of tropical flying these machines did some welcome damage for a day or two, but in not much more than a week the Japanese had knocked them all out. The 53rd Brigade had had 11 weeks at sea and arrived without its transport or its guns. We shall see what happened to it all too soon.

The Slim position was the first of a series of these delaying



positions intended to keep the Japanese off the Kuala Lumpur aerodrome until the convoy arrived. From there it was proposed to fall back to the Tanjong Malim position.

The 12th Indian Brigade disposed in depth held the road that ran due south at first between jungle and then through the village of Trolak between rubber plantations to the Slim River where it turned sharp left about seven miles farther on to reach Slim Village.

The 4th Hyderabad Regt held a forward position with orders to achieve a maximum of delay without becoming involved and then to withdraw to Trolak into reserve in case a major attack developed. Behind the Hyderabads the 5/2nd Punjab Regt held about a mile of

road and railway. Behind the Punjabis the 2nd Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders held another mile of road and railway, in depth like the two forward battalions but on a wider front because it was necessary to cover estate roads where the rubber plantations began. Two of these west of the railway ran south to the Bernam and Slim rivers and thus offered the enemy a convenient line of advance if he succeeded in getting through or past the Hyderabads and Punjabis.

The positions held by the 12th Brigade were protected by wire, and weapon pits had been dug. As a tank obstacle movable concrete pillars had been erected in front of the Hyderabads, and in the Punjabis' area there were a few anti-tank mines. The Argylls held in readiness road blocks in front of their leading company and near Trolak; road demolitions were prepared for blowing.

During the days before the battle Japanese aircraft were very active over the area, bombing and machine-gunning the troops almost continuously, although thanks to the concealment afforded by the jungle without inflicting many casualties. Their effect indeed was moral rather than physical. The complete absence of air support exacerbated nerves already frayed by what had been endured.

On the afternoon of January 5th an enemy attack down the railway line was repulsed by the 4th Hyderabad Regt with heavy loss to him, and apart from sniping activity January 6th was fairly quiet. However, in the course of the afternoon the Japanese closed in along the road and the railway.

On the night of January 6/7th there was as much moonlight as the Japanese had enjoyed for the Kelantan landing a month ago. At 3.30 a.m. the enemy made a frontal attack on the Hyderabads and succeeded in clearing the anti-tank blocks, whereupon 15 tanks followed by infantry advanced down the road to the accompaniment of heavy mortar and light machine-gun fire. The advance was made in three groups by light tanks, carriers and medium tanks. The light tanks moved at about 12 miles an hour; the medium tanks which followed moved at walking pace with the infantry marching behind. The whole advance was deliberate and the lateral mortar and machine-gun fire was considerable.

At 4.30 a.m. the leading medium tank struck one of the mines in the Punjab sub-section, and another tank which tried to pass was also mined. A light tank closed up behind and was attacked with Molotov cocktails; anti-tank rifles were almost non-existent. Most of the Molotovs were useless from damp, but one did its job, and the Japanese tank crew was burnt.

By now other tanks were immobilised, but no more Molotov cocktails struck home, and the forward company of the 5/2nd came under fierce fire from the tanks, being simultaneously attacked by Japanese infantry from front, flanks and rear. The company commander telephoned the situation to Lieut.-Colonel Deakin who tried through brigade H.Q. to get the guns' help; but communication was cut, and the 350th Field Battery continued to shell the area in front of the Hyderabads' sub-sector, which by now was right out of the picture.

Within a quarter of an hour of the hold up the enemy tanks had discovered an unmined loop road, which allowed them to move on. Lieut.-Colonel Deakin got in touch with Brigadier Stewart to say he could hear the sound of tanks and doubted if his battalion would stand. Stewart told him to hold on even if the tanks broke through his area. 'The Argylls are behind you,' he said. The Argylls were duly warned and ordered to make a road block in Trolak.

Meanwhile, the blitz continued down the road through the second Punjabi company and on to the third company and battalion H.Q.

Of the scene that followed Lieut.-Colonel Deakin has written:

> The leading tank struck the mines on the trunk road . . . and was wrecked. The din which followed defies description. The tanks behind were nose to tail—their engines roaring, their crews yelling, their machine-guns spitting tracer, and their mortars and cannon firing all out. The Platoon astride the road on the cutting hurled grenades on to the tanks below them, and one tank had its tracks smashed by an anti-tank rifle. The 2-pounders of the Anti-tank Battery fired two rounds, one of which scored a bull, and then hurriedly went out of action and retired unhurt to the Argylls' area. Many men of D and B Companies were streaming back through the jungle, though I could still hear some firing in B Company's area when there was a brief lull in the din. One more tank wrecked itself on the mines. A few men tried their hands with Molotovs, but the fuses were too damp. They merely smouldered, and burnt out. . . . The chaotic conditions which reigned on that day in the Brigade area besides being beyond description leave no very clear picture in my mind of exactly what did occur.

The last remaining company and battalion H.Q. of the 5/2nd Punjab Regt held on for another hour until by 6.30 a.m. Lieut.-Colonel Deakin had only 30 men left and when the tanks discovered and began to exploit a second disused road loop he decided it was time to escape. The struggle through the jungle was hell, and when Deakin reached the Slim bridge that night only three men were left

with him. Some had been shot by Japanese snipers; some had been drowned; some wounded and sick were captured; some beyond the bounds of their endurance surrendered. The road was held by the enemy; Deakin struggled on, and during the following day his little party rose to 100 including 70 men of his own battalion. Then on the night of the 9/10th January as the party were working their way down the railway between Tanjong Malim and Kerling a Japanese convoy caught them with their headlamps and opened fire. Some managed to escape; but Deakin and two other British officers were captured and taken to Kuala Lumpur.

In the 12th Brigade all that remained of the 5/2nd Punjab Regt on January 8th were 80 men under Lieut. Crewal, the quartermaster.

And that was the last fight of the old 87th Punjabis in the Malayan Campaign.

They had fought consistently well through three exhausting weeks; in front of Trolak they had held back an overwhelming force of the enemy for two hours. There should have been time to stabilise the position behind them; owing to the failure of communications all Major-General Paris knew at 6.30 a.m. was that there had been some kind of break-through; Selby's 28th Indian Brigade, completely unaware that anything at all had happened, was deploying in leisurely style six miles behind the front line.

And the blitz went on. The tanks passed the pioneers of the Argylls just after they had started to block the road. The tanks went through C Company which was holding the road. The tanks went past Lieut.-Colonel Robertson's H.Q. There was only one anti-tank gun left; the other had started for Tanjong Malim and did not halt till it got there. Lieut. Howard manned that one gun single-handed. He loaded it, laid it, and fired six shots before the gun was overrun by the tanks. Howard himself managed to escape.

At the Tilau road junction D Company of the Argylls which had been joined by the Hyderabads' H.Q. and some of B Company put up a great fight when attacked by a Japanese battalion, and though the cost was heavy that resistance saved the 2/2nd Gurkha Rifles from an attack down the Tilau road on the flank of the Slim River which might have been as disastrous for them as the attacks on the other two battalions of the 28th Brigade. Next day only four officers and 90 other ranks of the Argylls mustered at Rasah.

Meanwhile, as the Japanese tanks went on, the 5/14th Punjab Regt, which was under command of the 12th Brigade, had been ordered forward to occupy a check position, ominously in the cemetery. At the same time the 2/9th and the 2/1st Gurkha Rifles had

desperate situation was saved by a Gurkha officer of the 2/2nd who led his company to reoccupy the bridgehead across the railway from which the Argylls had been withdrawn. The men of the 3rd Cavalry under Captain Badwhar, who were west of the railway line, remained unmoved by the confusion on their flank.

Presently the rear parties of the 2/2nd Gurkha Rifles and a company of the 2/9th were engaged by the enemy. Two shells fell on either side of the railway bridge, and as these seemed to foreshadow a bomdardment of it, A and C Companies of the 2/2nd Gurkha Rifles were diverted to a footbridge which had been discovered downstream to relieve the congestion. In the darkness the footbridge was missed and the companies tried to cross the river by a submerged tree-trunk. Many fell in and were drowned, and the enemy pressed on to finish off the two companies. Only 60 managed to cross, and many of these were saved by the courage of a mess kitchen-boy, Masalchi Piraj, who repeatedly plunged into the river under machine-gun and rifle fire to help men in difficulty and bring them safe to the bank. Both commanding officers of the 2/2nd Companies were taken prisoner, one of them being subsequently executed by the Japanese after a brave attempt to escape from Kuala Lumpur gaol. The 2/9th Gurkha Rifles suffered not less heavily than the 2/2nd in trying to cross that accursed stream with its swirling oily current. Two of its companies were lost.

At the end of this black day the survivors of the 28th Brigade had to march 12 miles along the railway-track and cross the Bernam bridge in single file. It was 2 a.m. on January 8th when they reached Tanjong Malim where they found the lorries of those grand Australian veterans to take them to Rasah.

The total strength of the 28th Indian Brigade when it mustered that day was about 700. The 2/2nd Gurkha Rifles mustered 400 men, the 2/9th 300. That any of the 28th Indian Brigade escaped to fight again was largely due to the personality of Brigadier Selby. He was a sick man; but he was able to inspire his Gurkhas to stand fast, and when the moment came it was his calm judgment which extricated them. It must have been a great moral support to see how steadfastly his own old battalion, the 2/9th Gurkha Rifles, bore themselves under the command of Lieut.-Colonel Allesbrook. The valour of the 2/9th Gurkha Rifles at the Shumran Bend on the Tigris in 1917 has been mentioned earlier. The young successors of those young heroes were not less heroic in the bloody confusion of the Slim catastrophe.

The immediate cause of that catastrophe was the failure to construct an effective block to tanks advancing down a road but

impassable on either side of it. It may be accepted that some of the troops they blasted into the jungle or the rubber might have rallied if they had not been exhausted by a month of desperate fighting, if so many of the N.C.O.'s had not lacked experience, if some of the junior British officers had not lacked experience, if communications with the rear had been better, if the Slim bridge had been blown, if there had been more anti-tank weapons; but 'ifs' are not horses and therefore beggars do not ride. The ultimate cause of the Slim disaster must be sought in the stockpot of Imperial unreadiness.

On January 8th General Wavell stopped at Singapore on his way to headquarters of the new South-West Pacific Command, known as Abdacom. General Pownall was to be his Chief of Staff. That morning Wavell accompanied by Heath visited 11th Indian Division; after their return from seeing the troops who had escaped from the Slim River disaster early that same morning, Wavell at once realised that the division was in no condition to fight any more delaying actions and must withdraw immediately to Johore.

A document was later issued with his approval. In this it was stated that as 'the result of a month's continuous fighting and retreating the men had reached a stage of overwhelming fatigue and that there could be no doubt that their morale was in consequence lowered.' At the time it was presumably indiscreet to add that throughout the retreat the troops had been bombed and machine-gunned from the air without seeing a single British plane, that tank attacks had been made by the enemy without visible evidence that Britain possessed any tanks of her own, and finally that young and inexperienced soldiers had been committed to a campaign which might have destroyed the morale of the hardiest veterans. In the circumstances we wonder not that some units failed to stand but that so many did stand.

A plan was now made for III Indian Corps to hold a position covering Kuala Lumpur for as long as possible without awaiting a full scale attack by the enemy and meanwhile to delay him as much as possible by demolitions. Thereafter the 11th Division was to be withdrawn by road and rail into Johore, leaving only adequate rearguards to cover the demolitions. The 8th Australian Division, which in effect meant the 27th Australian Brigade, was to move at once and prepare for a decisive battle on the general line Segamat-Mount Ophir-Muar. The 9th Indian Division made up from the freshest troops in III Corps and the newly arrived 45th Indian Brigade were to be placed under Gordon Bennett, the whole to be designated Westforce. It seems clear that Wavell wanted the other

troops slowly fell back. About two miles south of Serendah was the village of Choh which the Dogras found full of the enemy when they reached it. They tried to clear the village at the point of the bayonet, but suffered such heavy casualties that yet another battalion became a shadow of itself. The 2/9th Gurkha Rifles suffered heavily too and Lieut.-Colonel Allesbrook could muster only 200 men when he reached the lorries that were to take his battalion to Tampin.

Selby could not get into communication either with the Dogras or the Gurkhas that afternoon. The enemy was in strength between Choh and the 2/2nd Gurkha Rifles and there was no wireless communication, the losses of wireless sets at Slim not having been made good.

It was now that Captain North of the 3rd Dogra Regt who was at brigade H.Q. volunteered to try to get into touch with his battalion. The 2/2nd Gurkha Rifles were engaged by this time and the only chance for Captain North to reach Choh or Serendah was by carrier. Lieut.-Colonel Woollcombe called for volunteers from his Gurkhas; Naik Berman and Rifleman Lalbahadur stepped forward. The three men drove into the enemy through a storm of fire and right through into the village of Choh where the carrier overturned. Naik Berman was killed; Captain North and Rifleman Lalbahadur survived. They crawled out, saw a Japanese light automatic in action 20 yards away, crawled back under the carrier and remained there all day in a wet ditch. When darkness fell they found some clothes in the village from which they walked out as a Pathan and a coolie. Five days later on their way south they were captured by a party of Japanese, put against a wall and shot.

On January 16th Captain Pathan North recovered consciousness to find that he was only wounded. He sat up and looked round to see Rifleman Coolie Lalbahadur wounded but also sitting up and looking round. Lalbahadur happened to know of a rubber estate near Kuala Lumpur which was worked by Gurkha coolies; and to this estate the two wounded fugitives made their way. Here the Gurkha coolies hid them and fed them until after a week North was fit to travel. He set off southwards again by himself and was crossing the Gemas golf-course, 106 miles south of Kuala Lumpur, when he was taken prisoner by the Japanese. This gallant officer survived captivity.

The preliminaries for the evacuation of Kuala Lumpur were accomplished by January 10th, and during that night of the 10/11th the 11th Division got clear of the Federal capital, the bridges having

been demolished. Three days later it passed through the 8th Australian Division at Gemas and Batu Anam in North Johore.

The failure of the Japanese to exploit to the full the overmastering advantage they enjoyed in the air has led some commentators on the campaign to regard the collapse of our air defences as merely a contributory cause to the ultimate fall of Singapore. It cannot be emphasised too strongly that it was the fundamental cause. At this moment General Percival writes in his Despatch:[1]

> It was clear that the Japanese intended to press on as fast as possible down the West Coast. It seemed probable also that a landing would soon be attempted on the east coast of Johore, probably in the Mersing area, from where the enemy could either develop another thrust towards Singapore or open the lateral road to Kluang. A direct sea-borne attack on Singapore was still, as before, a possibility, though it seemed probable that this, if contemplated, would be deferred until it could be combined with an attack from the landward side. Finally, there was the possibility of an airborne landing either in Johore or direct on to Singapore Island.
>
> In order to obtain our object it was necessary that we should continue to fight the enemy on the mainland. In view of the disparity in strength between the Japanese and ourselves the safe arrival of our expected reinforcements remained of primary importance. We estimated that the most important formation, the 18 British Division, could not be disembarked and deployed on the mainland before the end of the first week in February at the earliest, *i.e.*, more than three weeks ahead.
>
> Our problem was greatly influenced by the fact that the road Jemaluang-Kluang-Batu Pahat is the only direct lateral communication in Johore and also by the fact that the newly constructed aerodromes of Kahang and Kluang were situated on this road. It was obviously necessary to fight as long as we could north of this vitally important road.
>
> It was therefore decided to deny to the enemy the line Mersing-Segamat-Muar.

The co-ordinated withdrawal of the shattered 11th Indian Division, the L. of C. troops from the west, and the 9th Indian Division from the east through the Australians already in position at Gemas was accomplished by January 14th. The two brigades of the 9th Indian Division now came under the command of Gordon Bennett. The 12th Indian Brigade reverted to Malaya Command at Singapore. The 28th Indian Brigade went to Pontian Kechil on the

[1] Paragraphs 345–6.

coast of south-west Johore. The 6/15th Brigade went to the Kluang area in mid-Johore. It was hoped to give both these brigades an opportunity to rest, reorganise and refit: that opportunity was denied to them by the turn of events.

Major-General Paris handed over command of the 11th Indian Division to Major-General Key, it being thought necessary that an officer of the Indian Army should have the responsibility for this now much shaken division.

It may be wondered why it was still considered necessary to hold dispersed positions in North Johore instead of concentrating the whole force in the 'last ditch' on the mainland; this ran from Kota Tinggi to Skudai, of which the defences about the former had been constructed before the outbreak of war.

Chapter 28

January, 1942. The Muar River action—encirclement at Bakri—butchery of wounded—acrimony in high command—the nightmare retreat from Batu Pahat.

ON January 13th Wavell had conferred with Heath and Gordon Bennett at the Segamat Resthouse. Wavell had seen the 53rd Brigade of the 18th Division arrive at Singapore from England, without its guns and without its transport. He suggested that the 53rd Brigade should be attached to Gordon Bennett's Westforce. The latter asked for his own 22nd Brigade from Mersing to be relieved by the 53rd and for the 2/19th Battalion then at Jemaluang to be sent to Westforce as soon as possible. Percival comments on this: 'The fact of the matter, apart from any other reason, was that there simply was not time in the existing situation to carry out the relief.' In the event the choice of the East Anglian Brigade soft from 11 weeks at sea and without experience of the tropics for the task entrusted to it was to prove disastrous.

Westforce therefore consisted of the 27th Brigade (2/29th and 2/30th Battalions) of the 8th Australian Division, the two brigades of Barstow's 9th Indian Division, and Duncan's newly arrived 45th Brigade of the 17th Indian Division. The other troops in Johore including the 22nd Australian Brigade were under the command of III Indian Corps and were known as Eastforce.

Gordon Bennett arranged for a well contrived ambush by the 2/30th Australian Battalion of the advancing Japanese which may have destroyed as many as 400 of the enemy. The Japanese confronted by untired troops for the first time in six weeks received a disagreeable surprise, and in the tough fighting that succeeded on January 14th and 15th they suffered heavily, though Gordon Bennett's estimate that a thousand of the enemy were killed for eight Australians is absurdly over-sanguine. On the evening of the 15th Barstow urged Gordon Bennett to prepare lines of retreat in the rear; Gordon Bennett proclaimed that there would be no retreat. The gallant fighting of the Australian troops had made him perhaps pardonably but certainly unduly confident. By the next day Maxwell commanding the 27th Australian Brigade was asking for the 2/30th Battalion to be relieved so that they could rest after their two days'

battle. Nobody could possibly accuse Australian troops of easy fatigue, and the fact that they were tired after a successful fight of two days may help to explain the ghastly fatigue of the two Indian Divisions after six weeks of incessant fighting and retreat.

Percival says:[1]

> On the left flank at Muar the 45th Indian Infantry Brigade was also in position with some Australian artillery in support as it had no artillery of its own. This new and untried brigade had an exceedingly difficult task . . . for it not only had to watch a tortuous river line on a front of 25 miles as the crow flies, but it also had to be prepared to protect its own left flank and rear against sea-borne landings. It was disposed with two battalions forward on the river line and one in reserve, the latter being responsible for watching the coastline. To make matters worse the brigade commander had been told to establish an outpost position across the river and two companies of each of the forward battalions were allotted to it. In my opinion this was a tactical error. The river obstacle should have been used as the basis of the defence and there should have been no more than a few patrols in front of it. I have the impression that Gordon Bennett's attention was concentrated unduly on what he considered to be his main front and that he looked upon the Muar sector rather as a flank from which no real danger was likely to develop.

On January 11th Gordon Bennett notes:[2]

> The 45th Indian Brigade . . . is to have outposts across the river with arrangements to withdraw to their main position on the south-east of the river. General Barstow . . . said that the orders were clear, but he considered his frontage excessive—with which opinion General Percival agreed. . . .
>
> As I wanted to see Brigadier Duncan, I crossed by the ferry and went forward to Malacca. I met Duncan and elaborated the tactics to be adopted, which were well understood by him. He impresses me as a good fighting soldier. He feels quite happy at the outcome of any clash with the Japanese by his brigade.

On January 14th Gordon Bennett notes:[3]

> I jumped i[illegible] my car and did the 67-mile run to Muar to see Brigadier Du[illegible] to [illegible]can. Everything on this part of the front is ready.

Brigadier Du[illegible]can's [illegible] brigade consisted of the 7th Rajputana Rifles, the 4th Jat Re[illegible]t and th[illegible]e 5th Royal Garhwal Rifles. None of these battalions had [illegible] previous military history, being all products of the

[1] *The War in Malaya*, p. 232. [2] *Why Singapore Fell*, p. 88. [3] *ibid.*, p. 94.

desperate effort made by India to meet the ever increasing demands of the Second World War. In their ranks were many recruits whose training had not been completed. The 7th Rajputana Rifles was not a year old. Many of the company commanders had only five months' service. Three had less, and none of these three officers had passed a language test. Against the forward companies of these raw young troops on the forward bank of the Muar came the Imperial Guards Division of Nippon, with strong tank support along the road. In that dismal swamp of nipah palms these forward companies were overwhelmed and every British officer killed.

The Japanese reached the ferry opposite the town of Muar. Next day enemy motor barges tried to enter the mouth of the river; these were stopped by an Australian 25-pounder firing over open sights. Nevertheless, by January 16th the enemy was south of the river; whether he had crossed it during the night or had landed below the town is not clear. The 7th Rajputana Rifles counter-attacked in an effort to clear the rubber area south of the Muar. The counter-attack was led by the commanding officer who together with his second-in-command was killed almost immediately. The young troops were badly shaken, but the town was held for the rest of January 16th, and the brigade did not fall back toward Bakri until the evening.

Bennett had at last realised the gravity of what was happening on the left of his front, but not his own 'tactical error.'

On January 16th he notes:[1]

> By allowing the enemy across the Muar River the side door is thrown open for a wide flanking movement to Yong Peng. Westforce has the bulk of its force 56 miles ahead of Yong Peng and there is nothing between Yong Peng and Singapore Island.

So that evening Gordon Bennett sent the 2/29th Australian Battalion to reinforce the Muar front. This battalion had been intended to relieve the 2/30th Australian Battalion for whose 'well-earned rest' Maxwell of the 27th Australian Brigade kept pleading. Furthermore he brought his 2/19th Battalion from Jemaluang which reached Bakri after a drive of 105 miles by 8.30 a.m. of January 18th.

An attempt had been made before the Australian reinforcements arrived to advance from the Bakri area against Muar, but this met with no success, and by the time it was over the 5th Garhwal Rifles had only one King's commissioned officer left—2nd Lieut. Raturi.

Meanwhile, on January 15th after 24 hours' rest the 11th Indian

[1] *ibid.*, p. 106.

Division, now commanded by Major-General Key, had been placed on four hours' notice to move to the Yong Peng area in support of the 45th Indian Brigade. Moorhead at his own urgent request had relinquished the command of the 6/15th Brigade to Brigadier Challen in order to resume the command of the 3/16th Punjab Regt to which had been added what was left of the 2/16th Punjab Regt. Paris had gone back to command what was left of the 12th Indian Brigade in Singapore.

Early on the morning of January 16th news reached divisional headquarters that the enemy had landed at the Telaga Jetty. Batu Pahat and that area were to come under the 11th Indian Division which would be reinforced by the newly arrived 53rd British Brigade commanded by Brigadier Duke. This was followed by news of the enemy's reaching Bakri, and the British Battalion was ordered to march to Ayer Hitam.

A word about the 53rd Brigade. It was a territorial brigade consisting of the 2nd Cambridgeshire Regt, and the 5th and 6th Norfolk Regt. At home it had been employed on coastal defence while it was training for desert warfare. In October 1941 it was embarked for operations in the Middle East, for which it set out by way of Canada and the Cape of Good Hope. On the way it had been diverted to Singapore which it reached after 11 weeks in a transport so overcrowded that no kind of exercise was possible. The last two days before moving to Ayer Hitam had been spent in unloading ship, storing winter clothing and drawing tropical clothing. The 53rd Brigade of the 18th East Anglian Division like the 45th Brigade of the 17th Indian Division was given a baptism of hellfire.

By January 18th the Nippon Imperial Guards Division was advancing in the Muar area and the 5th Division was advancing on the main road; further landings a few miles south-west of Batu Pahat were reported that afternoon. Gordon Bennett who had been so scornful of the suggestion three days ago that he should prepare lines of retreat in his rear soon rang up Percival for permission to withdraw the whole of his force in front of Segamat behind the river as a preliminary to withdrawal farther if necessary. Percival adds[1] that 'this decision was naturally taken with the utmost reluctance, but events were to prove that it was undoubtedly the right one.' It certainly was. The pity is that Heath's wish after Jitra to fall back at once to the Perak River was disregarded, and later that his apprehensions about the Slim position were not heeded. He had already had a wide experience in the field, and the general who was

[1] *The War in Malaya*, p. 229.

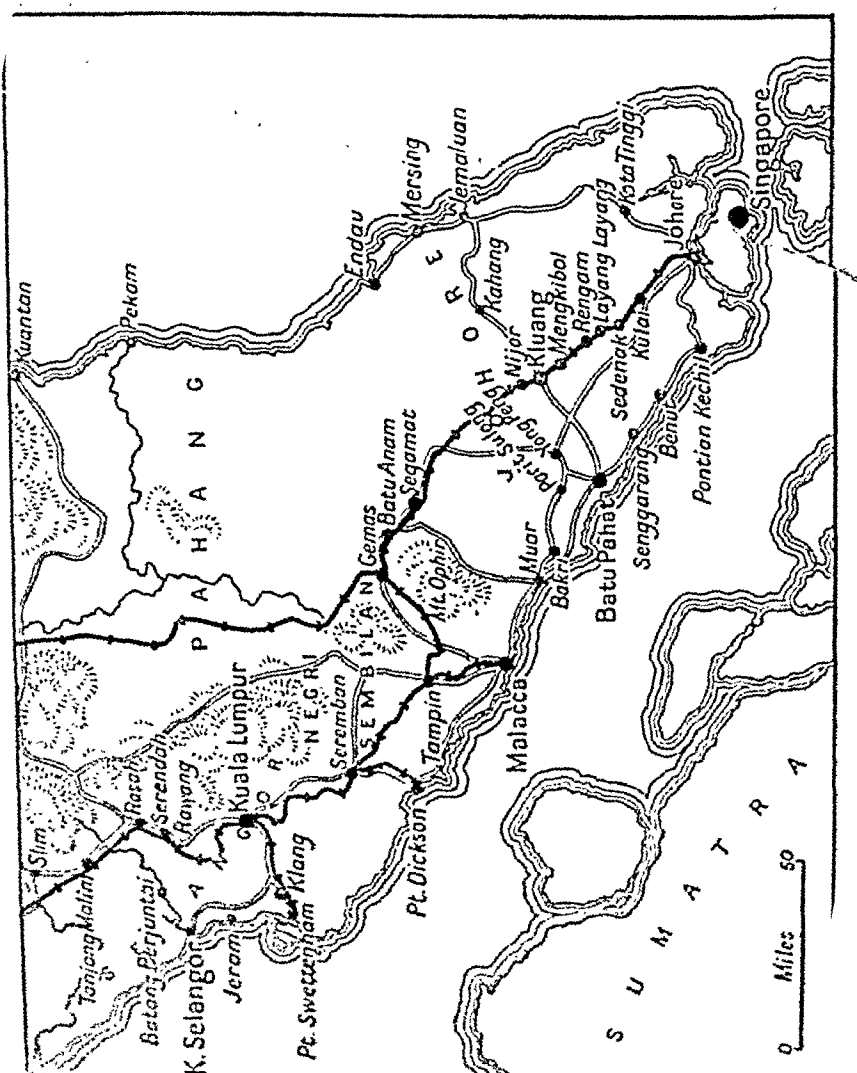
primarily responsible for the brilliant final assault on Keren should not have been considered unreasonably pessimistic. When this has been said, Percival's own position should be remembered sympathetically. Just as Heath was considered a pessimist by him so he may have been regarded as too pessimistic by Wavell, and one can safely presume that Wavell was regarded as a pessimist by Whitehall, the optimism of which was like that of the wise man of Thessaly in the nursery rhyme who having jumped into one gooseberry bush and scratched out both his eyes hoped by jumping into another to scratch them in again.

In his diary for January 19th Gordon Bennett notes:[1]

> This portion of the front was taken from my control and placed under 11th Indian Division. The units are still dealing direct with my headquarters and not with 11th Indian Division, however. A conference was called at Yong Peng crossroads . . . attended by Generals Percival, Heath, Key and myself . . . . the threat of further enemy envelopments from Batu Pahat is worse. This threat worried General Heath particularly. He endeavoured to strengthen this position by taking an Indian Brigade from my 9th Indian Division. This would have weakened my position seriously, so I raised a protest. He then wanted to take over the control of Westforce as well as his own troops. I feared that this would have been followed by a further weakening of my position at Segamat and probably a further split in the A.I.F. organization.
>
> I pressed on the conference the parlous position of my 2/19th and 2/29th Battalions and the remnants of the 45th Indian Brigade, and was given permission to withdraw them if I could—no easy task. Seeing that they are normally under control of the 11th Division, this permission seems to prove their lack of interest in the fate of these men.

That last sentence was penned by the general who maintained it was his military duty to leave his men to surrender without him in Singapore. The 45th Indian Brigade now consisted of the 4th Jat Regt, and the two Australian Battalions commanded by Lieut.-Colonel C. G. W. Anderson. After Brigadier Duncan was killed the valour and endurance of these two Australian battalions, only a quarter of whom survived that bitter and bloody fighting to get back to Yong Peng, are beyond praise. They were superbly led by Lieut.-Colonel Anderson of the 2/19th A.I.F., who was awarded the Victoria Cross, and by the gallant Major Anderson of the 2/15th Punjab Regt, his liaison officer with the 11th Division, who was killed.

[1] *Why Singapore Fell*, p. 112.



Southern Malaya

Let us return to those two Australian battalions and what was left by now of the 45th Indian Brigade round Bakri. The road from Yong Peng runs westward for about six miles between marshy land with rubber plantations beyond on either side until it crosses a causeway, after which it runs on as straight as a Roman road between jungle-covered hills through what was called the Defile, seven miles beyond which, rising to surmount the Bukit Payong saddle, the road crosses a bridge at Parit Sulong over a sinister-looking dark stream called the Simpang Kiri about 14 miles from Bakri.

Since January 17th the 6th Norfolks of Duke's 53rd Brigade had been in position on Bukit Payong to command the Defile with a platoon forward to hold the Parit Sulong bridge. On the morning of the 19th Key visited the Norfolks and found these young troops who had been trained to operate in the desert completely mystified by the tropical scene. It was late to start instructing those young East Anglians in jungle warfare against fight-hardened Japanese troops of the finest quality, but Key did his best to give them some elementary tips.

Bad news came from Bakri, two miles south of which the transport lines had been attacked and the road behind the 45th Brigade blocked. Worse news came from the Defile which in spite of gallant work by C Battery of the 155th Field Regt and the carrier platoon of the 6th Norfolk Regt had been captured by the enemy. At one point six gunners led by Battery Sergeant-Major Roadnight charged a Japanese platoon a hundred yards away and routed them with grenades and the bayonet.

Key decided that an effort must be made to put the Japanese out of the Defile, and Brigadier Duke who now had Moorhead and his 3/16th Punjab Regt in his brigade agreed to his making a night advance before the enemy had time to consolidate on Bukit Belah and Bukit Pelandok.

The Punjabis guided by Lieut. Sewell of C Battery who knew the way were to occupy Belah by dawn and under cover of their enfilading fire the Norfolks were to attack Pelandok. At 4 a.m. Moorhead and the Sikh company reached the jungle-track and began to scramble up the hill. Just before they reached the clearing at the top Moorhead with Lieut. Thatcher, his adjutant, went forward to the leading section. As they came up with it there was a volley of fire which killed four of the eight Sikhs in the section, and then the 'enemy' charged with a British cheer. The enemy was D Company of the Norfolks which unknown to anybody was occupying the top of Bukit Belah. Moorhead managed to stop the

firing and ordered forward the rest of the Sikh company. He was giving his instructions when about a dozen grenades burst among the company. The Sikhs gave their war-cry; Moorhead and Lieut. Palmer, the company commander, rushed forward to stop any fighting, supposing it was the Norfolks again.

But this time it was the Japanese. Moorhead fell wounded. Palmer fell at the same moment, and when the latter revived his orderly was dressing his wound. Thatcher the adjutant was beside him and said that Moorhead had died of his wounds ten minutes after he was hit. Palmer's orderly tried to carry him back; he was killed, and Palmer fainted again. When he came to for the second time Thatcher was beside him, also wounded; he was killed later. A British gunner and two Sikhs slightly wounded carried Palmer back to the regimental aid post. Here was Sewell also wounded and some 20 other men. Of that Sikh company only 10 wounded men got back to headquarters of the 3/16th Punjab Regt.

They reported that the company inspired by the exhortations of their dying colonel had gained the summit of Belah, but there they had been counter-attacked from all sides by the enemy and were practically annihilated as also was D Company H.Q. of the 6th Norfolk Regt.

From The Ledge on the Patani road to the Defile the bahadurs of the old 33rd Punjabis had fought in accord with all that was most glorious in the annals of the Indian Army, the influence of their colonel being continuously active whether he was temporarily away from them in command of a brigade or back with his beloved men. When Moorhead was gone from them for ever that influence stayed paramount until the end of the campaign and even afterwards through the horrors of captivity.

A havildar of the 3/16th Punjab Regt when he heard of Moorhead's death said: '*Mera dil tutgaya. Aisa bahadur admi kabhi nahin honge.*' My heart is broken. There will never be a man more brave than he.

Let Pakistan and India remember that such a man led Mussalman and Sikh in amity once upon a time and let Britain remember that she wasted heroes like these because mammon took more from India than self-sacrifice was able to repay.

The dawn attack by B Company of the 6th Norfolk Regt on Bukit Pelandok failed as was inevitable in the circumstances, and Duke represented to Key that his brigade, which now consisted of what was left of the 3/16th Punjab Regt and Norfolks with the 2nd Loyal Regt sent as reinforcements from the Singapore garrison, was in no shape to attempt the recapture of the Defile.

At Parit Sulong the two platoons of the Norfolks which had received no rations since the evening of January 18th and had been out of communication since the morning of yesterday abandoned their post and reached Batu Pahat on January 21st.

At 4.30 a.m. on January 20th orders were issued that the withdrawal from Bakri should begin. Australian troops formed the vanguard and rearguard of the column. Indian troops guarded the flanks of the guns and vehicles moving along the road. After marching two miles the first road block was encountered and cleared at the bayonet's point by the 2/19th Australian Battalion, which cleared two more road blocks that day. At noon the 2/29th Australian Battalion was fighting equally hard with Japanese tanks and infantry pressing on from the rear. It was on this day that the 4th Jat Regt restored a critical situation by a counter-attack which was led by Brigadier Duncan, and in which he was killed.

It was 2.30 a.m. on January 21st when the exhausted column halted three miles north of Parit Sulong. Late that morning orders came that the 45th Indian Brigade would revert to Westforce. This did not upset Key who had never been notified that it had been placed under his command. On the following day the 53rd Brigade was placed under the command of Westforce. Key had already given orders for the 53rd Brigade to make another effort to recapture the Defile, to which Gordon Bennett agreed.

In the end the counter-attack on the Defile was postponed until dawn of January 22nd, and the 3/16th Punjab Regt and 2nd Loyal Regt to whom the task was entrusted had to spend the day in the open under almost continuous bombing from the air. January 21st was a bad day for the unfortunate 45th Brigade, but the two Australian battalions fought as their fathers fought at Anzac. The 2/19th in the van tried in attack after attack to break through the powerful Japanese force which had cut the road to the Defile. The 2/29th in the rear beat off attack after attack by the enemy in the course of which eight of his tanks were destroyed. The young partially trained Indian troops were sore tested after a week of desperate fighting, but the 4th Jat Regt won praise from the gallant Colonel Anderson for their 'great élan' in clearing a number of light machine-gun posts from which the enemy was harrying the flanks.

In the evening Anderson tried to pass the wounded through under cover of the Red Cross. When the leading ambulance reached the enemy's lines a Japanese officer came forward under a flag of truce and informed Captain Worling of the R.I.A.S.C. that if the brigade surrendered the wounded would be allowed to pass through. This

offer was of course rejected, and the Japanese refused to allow the ambulance which was on a slope to go back. However, after dark Captain Worling, who himself was wounded, released his brakes and the ambulance ran back to the Australian lines. That night Gordon Bennett signalled Anderson to break off the action and let his troops get away as best they could.

The order to make for Yong Peng as best they could was given by Anderson to his men next day after the 2/19th and 2/29th had repulsed strong attacks during the two hours after dawn. 360 Australian and about 50 Indian troops managed to reach Yong Peng; a few escaped to Batu Pahat. 171 Australians were captured during their escape. So of the 2/19th and the 2/29th there were only 531 survivors because the wounded who had had to be left behind under the protection of the Red Cross were all butchered by the Japanese.

A light is thrown upon this outrage by the adventures of Lance-Havildar John Benedict of the 13th Field Company, Queen Victoria's Own Madras Sappers and Miners. Benedict had been doing sterling work in the Muar area from January 7th to January 19th. He had prepared bridges for demolition and constructed temporary bridges with his section, most of the time without any infantry support. Then he rejoined his platoon which on the night of January 15/16th loaded charges in the Parit Sulong bridge; unfortunately owing to the abandonment of the bridge by the detachment which was holding it the bridge was never blown.[1]

On January 17th the platoon rejoined the 13th Field Company which was in position across the Parit Sulong-Muar road at Milestone 101. The company area was bombed from the air and under shell, mortar, and very heavy small arms fire from dusk of the 17th until midnight on the 19th, and there was much hand to hand fighting with parties of Japanese who had penetrated into the area. Lance-Havildar Benedict showed great courage and coolness all the time in controlling the men of his section at their tasks of improving the defences of the 2/29th Australian Battalion, of evacuating the wounded and of burying the dead.

On the morning of January 19th an Australian sergeant making his round of the positions was attacked by a Japanese who had been hiding in a slit trench. The sergeant was down and nearly out when Benedict shot the Japanese and killed him.

During this period twelve sappers were killed and eight wounded in

[1] These charges were still in the Parit Sulong Bridge when the present writer saw it in March 1947.

Benedict's platoon, and on January 19th he himself was shot in the leg. Nevertheless, he carried on until his platoon commander ordered him to the regimental aid post.

Next day Lance-Havildar Benedict was captured with other wounded (110 Australians and 35 Indians) and they were all taken to the P.W.D. bungalow at Milestone 100½. That evening the Japanese dragged their wounded prisoners, two or three at a time, to the banks of a stream about 100 yards from the bungalow and here they beheaded them.

From *The Times*, June 23rd 1950:

Melbourne, June 22.

> The war crimes court at Los Negros to-day found Takuma Nishimura, a former Lieutenant-General in the Japanese Army, guilty of the murder of 110 Australian and 35 Indian prisoners-of-war in Paritsulong in January, 1942, and sentenced him to death . . . Nishimura said he was sorry that through his carelessness the massacre had occurred. His counsel said the survivors of the divisional staff of the Japanese Imperial Guards had manoeuvred to put the whole of the responsibility for the massacre on him.

When it came to Benedict's turn he was taken by three Japanese to the bank at the same time as his company havildar-major by three other Japanese. Benedict knocked a rifle out of the hands of one of his escort, broke loose, and dived into the stream swimming along under water while the Japanese were firing. In the confusion the company havildar-major also got away. Benedict swam on until he found some fallen trees among which he was able to hide, and here until darkness fell he watched the massacre of the wounded go on. Hearing a cry for help from the opposite bank, Benedict swam across and found two sappers, one of them Sapper Periasamy with his head half severed. He managed to get both these men across to the opposite bank and for 15 days he looked after them in the middle of the 2,000 Japanese with which the area was maggoty. Then the three of them made an attempt to rejoin our troops, but on February 2nd they were recaptured at Muar, and later were prisoners of war in Sumatra where during the forcible construction of the railway by European prisoners of war Lance-Havildar John Benedict never lost a chance to help them. All three men rejoined their unit at Bangalore, and in the autumn of 1945 Major Whitman the company commander, noticing the scar on the neck of Sapper Periasamy, heard for the first time of John Benedict's heroism. He was awarded the Military Medal and later was promoted to jemadar.

Under the date January 22nd Gordon Bennett wrote in his diary:

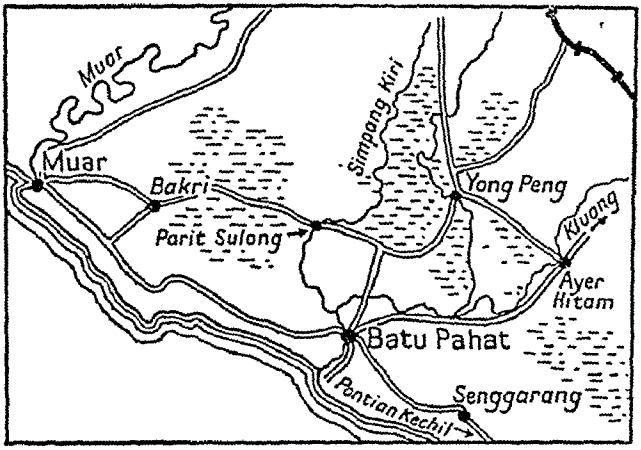
> The same lack of spirit is evident at Batu Pahat where the resistance shows signs of cracking. I had sent my 2/26th Battalion to hold the Ayer Hitam-Batu Pahat road so that any communications will be kept secure. Immediately the 11th Division asked for this battalion to be placed under its control. I objected. The divisional commander took it up with the Malaya Command who ordered me to transfer this battalion to the 11th Division. I protested strongly as I felt that the battalion would be used to pull other peoples' chestnuts out of the fire with the result that it would suffer heavy casualties and that I would lose its services at a time when I needed them. The transfer was not effected.
>
> Held usual press conference to-day. Same correspondents representing British, American, and Australian press. They were waiting for me just as I sent the Bakri men my last message. I told them the story but am afraid my chagrin and disappointment made me somewhat bitter and critical.

Meanwhile, at Mersing on the east coast, Taylor's 22nd Australian Brigade under the command of III Corps was making things extremely difficult for the Japanese. At Batu Pahat, however, the situation was deteriorating steadily. Key argued that the troops at Batu Pahat were likely to find themselves in the same position as the 45th Brigade if the reported additions to the enemy's strength by nightly landings were true. He suggested that the position from Kota Tinggi through Skudai to Pontian Kechil should be occupied as soon as possible. He was told that the only position prepared in all Johore was some concrete defences at Kota Tinggi made before the outbreak of war. Percival says[1] that the pre-war project to construct defences had made little progress 'largely for financial reasons.' The troops in the Batu Pahat area now under Key were Challen's 6/15th Indian Brigade consisting of the British Battalion and the 2nd Cambridgeshire Regt. When Key was notified that the 2/26th Australian Battalion was being sent to Ayer Hitam he decided to send the 5th Norfolk Regt to reinforce Batu Pahat where Heath still had hopes of establishing a strong point, hopes it must be added which had not the faintest chance of being fulfilled. During this time the wireless was screened and the difficulties of the command were added to by the impossibility of communicating with the units. Attempts to get ammunition convoys through from Ayer Hitam and Pontian Kechil showed that the strength of the enemy was increasing rapidly and that he was very soon likely to be in a position to cut both these roads.

[1] *The War in Malaya*, p. 235.

In Westforce the 9th Indian Division had been withdrawn on the night of January 21st to Kluang and the 27th Australian Brigade to Yong Peng. It was then that the 2/26th Battalion was sent to Ayer Hitam. A second dawn attack on the Defile by the 53rd Brigade was cancelled by Duke when he heard that the 45th Brigade had been authorised to escape. So the 3/16th Punjab Regt and the 2nd Loyal Regt had another morning of being bombed and machine-gunned from the air. The Loyals were withdrawn into reserve, but the Punjabis were left in their position and suffered 56 casualties.

On January 23rd owing to a muddle over milestones the 5th Norfolk Regt failed to establish contact with the British Battalion on



the road to Batu Pahat. Challen unable to get in touch with divisional headquarters ordered the British Battalion to return to Batu Pahat.

During the evening of January 23rd the wireless between the 6/15th Brigade and D.H.Q. came to life long enough for orders to reach Challen to open the road to Koris Corner long enough for the 5th Norfolk Regt to escort an ammunition convoy by 6.30 a.m. next morning. Then the wireless went dead again, and Challen was left to meditate on what by all reports was a most menacing situation. Finally he decided that he must get his brigade clear of Batu Pahat as soon as possible. News of his intention reached divisional headquarters by chance after the Cambridgeshires were already clear of the town and the evacuation was immediately countermanded, although Key well understood Challen's anxieties and pressed to be allowed to give him orders to withdraw.

Percival, however, had laid down that the general line Jemaluang-Kluang-Ayer Hitam-Batu Pahat was to be held, and that no withdrawal from this line was to be made without his personal permission. After the campaign he would express his doubt whether that decision to keep the final authority in his own hands was a wise one.[1] As events were to turn out a disaster at Batu Pahat comparable to that at Muar was barely avoided.

Percival was handicapped at this time by the failure of South-West Pacific Command[2] to appreciate hard and unpleasant facts. For an air directive issued about now the epithet 'fatuous' is kindly. After laying down that the protection of convoys should take precedence over all other tasks, which was intelligible, it went on to say that all available air effort should be directed against expeditions threatening the east coast of Malaya or endeavouring to pass south of Singapore. It then stressed the importance of slowing up the Japanese advance on land by attacking Singora and by intervening in the land battle, and of reducing the scale of the Japanese air-attack. For a few days the newly arrived Hurricanes had put up a show, but by now they were all shot down and how a few obsolescent or obsolete machines were to reduce the scale of attack by 700 front-line enemy aircraft the Johnny Head-in-Air who wrote that directive did not explain. Perhaps he thought *Matador* was still a feasible operation. Percival has recognised[3] that Challen's decision to withdraw from Batu Pahat to Senggarang was probably sound. It certainly was.

Selby's 28th Indian Brigade had reached Pontian Kechil on January 14th and was engaged in coast-watching and the construction of defences. The latter included a company position known as the Boulder position at Milestone 22 on the Skudai road.

It had now been decided to send the 5th Norfolk Regt and the 6/15th Brigade to the coastal road; Selby and Challen were instructed to open it for this purpose. The move of the Norfolks started at 4 a.m. and when they reached the 6/15th Brigade's area at 7.15 a.m. after a quiet journey the various units of the 28th Brigade returned to their positions in the Pontian Kechil area.

In and around Batu Pahat the state of affairs was by no means quiet. One company of the Cambridgeshires had been heavily attacked on the bauxite mine road at 1 a.m.; and another company at the Ferry, after being harassed by parties of Japanese who had not been disposed of when the town was reoccupied the night before, was presently involved in heavy street fighting. Challen was visited by

[1] *The War in Malaya*, p. 239. [2] *ibid.* [3] *ibid.*, p. 240.

Colonel Harrison, the G.S.O.I. of the 11th Indian Division and informed that it was still the intention of Malaya Command to hold the Mersing-Ayer Hitam-Batu Pahat line but that a provisional plan for withdrawing to Singapore had been made; this was communicated by Harrison to Challen with orders to keep it to himself. In the event of withdrawal the destination of Challen's brigade would be Benut, and the code word for that withdrawal would be the pregnant word—*Nuts*.

Challen argued the urgency of an early withdrawal to avoid a repetition of the Muar disaster and was told that the divisional commander was reiterating this urgency all the time. Harrison, making the best of a poor prospect, pointed out that the road was still open and that, whereas the 45th Brigade at Bakri had been 30 miles from the Defile, Challen's brigade was only 14 miles from Senggarang which was to be occupied by the 53rd Brigade next day.

By 3 p.m. that afternoon the Japanese were round the east flank of Batu Pahat in considerable strength and in possession of a low hill overlooking the Pontian Kechil road. An attempt by a company of the Cambridgeshires to put the enemy off this feature was unsuccessful.

Next day Duke's 53rd Brigade reached Benut and detachments were sent to hold Rengit and Senggarang. The head of this column arrived quietly, but about 800 yards south of the village a platoon of the 6th Norfolk Regt and a section of the 336th Field Battery were ambushed and 15 men killed. This was ominous.

All that morning the Cambridgeshires were heavily engaged, and the British Battalion discovered that a Japanese battalion was hidden in the rubber between Koris Corner and Senggarang. Key with this disquieting evidence of the enemy's intention to cut the Pontian Kechil road telephoned to III Corps to urge again the immediate withdrawal of Challen's brigade from Batu Pahat. He was told that a decision would be taken at a conference which Key himself would be attending that afternoon.

Gordon Bennett in his account of this conference gets muddled between the 53rd Brigade and the 6/15th Brigade, and tries to suggest that he was prepared to stand between Kluang and Ayer Hitam.

In commenting on Gordon Bennett Percival says with an obviously meticulous anxiety to be fair to him:[1]

> Among the senior officers who had, so to speak, been out of harness for some years was the commander of the A.I.F. . . . It is not for me to criticize a system under which such appointments

[1] *ibid.*, p. 34.

are made, but modern war gives little time for commanders to learn their trade.

At the end of that conference Heath and Key were under the impression that the whole force would in a series of withdrawals reach Singapore Island, January 31st being provisionally fixed as the very earliest date for crossing the causeway. The record of the minutes prepared by Brigadier Torrance next day makes no mention of crossing the causeway, nor indeed of any ultimate positions.

Key tried to communicate with his divisional headquarters; he could not get through, and it was not until he returned in person about 4 p.m. that the message *Nuts* could be sent to Challen. This was amplified in another message to say he was to reach Benut on January 27th.

Challen wasted no time. He ordered the withdrawal to start at 8.30 p.m. The Cambridgeshires were to move to Senggarang whence they would act as advance guard. They would be followed by the guns and vehicles. The 5th Norfolk Regt would pass through the British Battalion and act as rearguard from Koris Corner. The British Battalion would move to Senggarang as the 5th Norfolk Regt cleared their sector north of Koris Corner. The 53rd Brigade was ordered to open the road from Rengit to Senggarang by dawn on January 26th.

At 6 a.m. on that day divisional headquarters received a message that the 6/15th Indian Brigade was clear of Koris Corner without opposition. Everybody was relieved because the dangerous part of the withdrawal was expected north of Koris Corner.

For the rest of the day the wireless between D.H.Q. and the 6/15th Brigade would not function; the 53rd Brigade reported it was out of touch with Senggarang and Rengit. The unreliability of wireless in Malaya was a major handicap throughout the campaign. At 10.30 a.m. the divisional commander arrived at Duke's headquarters in Benut. There was still no word from Rengit or Senggarang, and Key decided to open the road to Senggarang with a special column under the command of Major Banham of the 135th Field Regt (Hertfordshire Yeomanry). Bancol consisted of 112 reinforcements of the 6th Norfolk Regt (the only infantry available), a troop of the Volunteer Armoured Car Company, two carriers of the 3/16th Punjab Regt, two carriers of the 6th Norfolk Regt, a section of Major Banham's own battery, and a number of motor ambulances for the evacuation of casualties. Challen was to be told to reach Rengit by January 27th instead of Benut.

Bancol reached Rengit by 1.30 p.m.; only 150 yards north of the

village it encountered a road block and within two minutes the column was shattered. Out of the 112 young reinforcements all except 18 were killed in their lorries. The leading gun after coming into action over open sights lost so many of its team that Lieut. Mackwood ordered it out of action and got it back to Rengit; Stebbing, the other subaltern, was killed. The second gun was saved by Bombardier Thompson. His driver was killed, his two sergeants were mortally wounded. He assumed command, unlimbered the gun, climbed into the driving-seat of the quad, managed to turn the unwieldy tractor on the narrow road under continuous fire, loaded the quad with wounded and unwounded gunners and infantry, and drove back huddled below the armour with the side door just enough ajar for him to see the road through the chink between the hinges. One more heroic and skilful gunner had saved not only his gun but many lives with it.

Of the two rear armoured cars one was hit and crashed, but the crew got back to Benut next day, having picked up on their way two Loyals who had escaped from the Defile and two Australians who had escaped from Parit Sulong.

Banham was in a carrier of the 3/16th Punjab Regt. He told Naik Bakhtawar Singh he must try to get through and warn Brigadier Challen of what was waiting for him at Rengit.

'Acchia, Sahib,' said the carrier commander. All right, Sahib. Then he turned to the driver, Lance-Naik Naranjan Singh, 'Chelo, bhai.' Drive on, brother.

And through the bullets Lance-Naik Naranjan Singh drove on. No jockey ever rode such a nightmare steeplechase as Lance-Naik Naranjan Singh rode that day. The first fence just ahead was a fierce barrier of tree trunks and tar barrels. He took his carrier up. He took his carrier over and down. He took his carrier on toward Senggarang, and we must leave him at the start of that fearful steeplechase to find out what had been happening to the 6/15th Indian Brigade. The spirit of Moorhead, his dead commanding officer, was beside Lance-Naik Naranjan Singh.

The brigade had disengaged on the dark night of January 25th at Batu Pahat, and by 5 a.m. the Cambridgeshires had reached Senggarang, the men, who had been fighting hard for two days and nights, much exhausted. The village had been under mortar fire all night and Lieut.-Colonel Lywood commanding the 6th Norfolk Regt told Lieut.-Colonel Thorne of the 2nd Cambridgeshire Regt that there was a road block 600 yards beyond the bridge over the Sungei Senggarang.

Thorne decided to rest his men until 9 a.m. but an hour before this Challen reached Senggarang with the rearguard and ordered Thorne to advance at once because he wanted to put the river between his brigade and the enemy who was likely to be following up in strength from Batu Pahat.

The Cambridgeshires struggled on through marshy land, and were in no condition at all to clear the road block. Indeed, they were fast becoming disorganised. Two hours later Lieut.-Colonel Morrison reported to Challen that the British Battalion was closed up in Senggarang with the 5th Norfolk Regt in depth between Koris Corner and the village. By now Japanese planes were overhead and had begun to bomb the troops. Key had asked for air support and had even arranged a Bomb Line, north of which the R.A.F. could operate. Not a single R.A.F. plane came over.

Further attempts by the Cambridgeshires failed to clear the road block and the battalion was by now in some confusion. It was already 2 p.m. Challen was on the point of giving orders to bring up the British Battalion and the 6th Norfolk Regt for an attempt to clear the block by a combined effort of the whole brigade when suddenly over the wired 3-feet tree trunks and galvanized sheets of the road block appeared a carrier. It climbed slowly up, wobbled for a moment on the top before it descended, and then came on at full speed. It was Lance-Naik Naranjan Singh who had leapt or charged or driven round three major road blocks and three minor road blocks in that nightmare steeplechase from Rengit so that Major Banham and Naik Bakhtawar Singh could report to the Brigadier Sahib in Senggarang.

Banham's news of the Rengit road convinced Challen that the miracle achieved by the carrier was impossible to a whole brigade. It would seem that he still thought he had to reach Benut 18 miles away. He felt that the two young battalions recently arrived in Malaya were not fit to fight the kind of struggle they might be called upon to fight in order to break through the Japanese. He decided that his only course was to destroy his guns and vehicles, take his brigade across country, and leave the wounded under the protection of the Red Cross. At 6.15 p.m. on January 26th the 6/15th Indian Brigade, having destroyed its guns and vehicles, set out. The Reverend Captain Duckworth, a former cox of the Cambridge boat, Captain Walsh and Captain Marks of the 198th Field Ambulance and 26 others volunteered to remain with the wounded who, it is a relief to record, were not butchered by the Japanese.

At divisional headquarters the Signals had been repeating

Brigade's call without a stop all that day asking in vain 'Where are you?' 'Where are you?' Key begged for at least one aeroplane to drop medical supplies to the brigade and ascertain its whereabouts. The R.A.F. had no aeroplanes available. Then Flight-Lieut. Dane of the Malay Volunteer Air Force volunteered for the dangerous flight in his little De Havilland Moth. He flew all the way a hundred feet above the ground, so low that no Japanese fighter dared to dive upon him. And he reached Senggarang and he dropped his medical supplies to the brigade just before it was leaving. On his way back he dropped a message to divisional headquarters that Senggarang was congested with transport and with British troops who had waved at him.

Meanwhile, the detachment at Rengit was heavily attacked all day, and a gallant attempt by Lieut. Witherick of the 6th Norfolk Regt to get through to Benut ended in the carrier's being smashed up and all its occupants' being killed. However, 2nd Lieut. Hayes who had volunteered to follow behind the carrier with three men of the Norfolks managed to bring the bad news from Rengit to Brigadier Duke. Duke went forward with Lieut.-Colonel Toosey of the 135th Field Regt in an armoured car driven in reverse, and being held up by a strong road block about three-quarters of a mile south of Rengit had to return to Benut.

In Rengit the fight went on till midnight by which time D Company of the 3/16th Punjab Regt had been overwhelmed and there were only 74 unwounded survivors holding a 50-foot water-tower. It was decided to escape, and at 1 a.m. on January 27th the detachment crawled out along a ditch by the roadside.

At D.H.Q. there was no news of Challen's brigade by dawn, but Flight-Lieut. Dane again volunteered to make a reconnaissance in his Moth. He reported that Senggarang was packed with transport, that the bridge over the river had been destroyed, and that this time he had been greeted with bullets instead of cheers. This heroic volunteer, who had been manager of the Perak Hydro-Electric Company, died later in captivity.

Duke was ordered to hold Benut until dawn of January 29th in the hope that the lost brigade might still arrive. The 53rd British Brigade which now consisted of what was left of the 3/16th Punjab Regt was then to withdraw to the Boulder position by Pontian Kechil.

At noon Lieut. Zarif Khan, the commander of D Company of the 3/16th Punjab Regt, reached Benut with 35 men, most of whom were wounded. He had been cut off from Campbell Orde's headquarters in the water-tower and had withdrawn two of his platoons after

heavy casualties when they were running out of ammunition. He had been unable to establish contact with his third platoon which had been lying beyond a marsh the farther edge of which was held by the enemy. Then late that afternoon Jemadar Atta Mohammed reached Benut with 12 wounded men. He reported that every other man in his platoon had been killed or wounded and that all his ammunition had been expended before he withdrew. The village of Rengit was then in Japanese hands. At 5.30 p.m. Lieut. Calder reached Benut with four officers and 74 men. They had made a wide sweep to the east of Rengit through swamps and over irrigation channels (*parits*) across which 2nd Lieut. Ransome had helped the many who were unable to swim.

At 6 p.m. Mr Wallace of the Malay Police, covered with mud and much exhausted, reached Benut to report that Lieut.-Colonel Prattley and 1,200 men of the lost brigade were resting in utter fatigue seven miles away. He himself had come on ahead. He had crossed the Benut in a sampan and by luck had found a bicycle on which he had ridden along a narrow muddy path. He had no news of the rest of the brigade, but insisted on returning at once on foot to guide Prattley and his men to Benut. He did not think that bicycling along that path in the dark would be 'fun.'

Key ordered Duke to remain at Benut until Prattley and his party arrived and sent 44 lorries to meet them.

At 10.30 p.m. Brigadier Selby rang up D.H.Q. to say that the brigade major of the 6/15th Indian Brigade had just landed at Pontian Kechil from a sampan, and was being sent right along in a truck. A few minutes later a scarecrow with a blackened face strolled into divisional headquarters under escort. It was the well-loved Major Laman. He reported that about 1,500 of the brigade under Lieut.-Colonel Morrison were at Ponggor on the coast, but that Brigadier Challen himself was missing. Key at once rang up Lieut.-Commander Scott at Pontian Kechil and Brigadier Torrance, the B.G.S. of Malaya Command, to press Rear-Admiral, Malaya for the help of the Royal Navy to rescue this party. Five hours later Lieut.-Commander Clarke of H.M.S. *Dragonfly* stepped ashore on the mudflats at Ponggor to greet Lieut.-Colonel Morrison with the words 'Dr Livingstone, I presume.'

Just before midnight Lieut-Colonel Prattley's men were beginning to reach Benut.

Chapter 29

January, 1942. 22nd Indian Brigade cut off—a desperate march and a catastrophe—all troops ordered back from Johore on to Singapore Island.

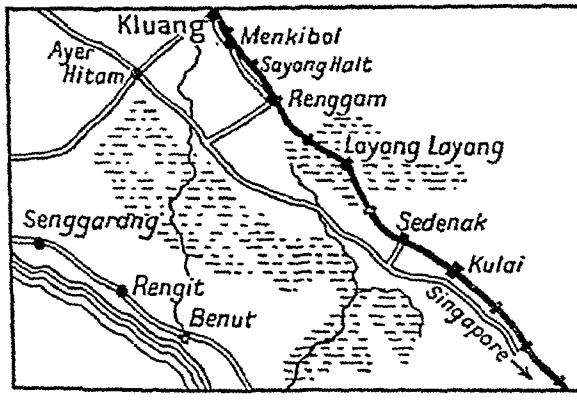
BEFORE relating in more detail the adventures of the 6/15th Indian Brigade after it left Senggarang we must turn to the tragic withdrawal of the 22nd Indian Brigade.

The 22nd Australian Brigade which had fought well against Japanese troops moving down along the coast from Kuantan was withdrawn from Endau, a likely landing place for sea-borne invasion on the east coast of Malaya. Here both the 12th Indian Brigade and the 22nd Australian Brigade had put in much hard work on defence works before the Japanese went to war. Air reconnaissance reported the arrival of a large convoy at Singora, and it has been ascertained since that this convoy brought two fresh divisions with the intention of landing them at Endau and Mersing. When the success of the west coast operations made this unnecessary the bulk of these divisions was sent to the Kluang area by land.

The new defence of the 22nd Australian Brigade was concentrated round Jemaluang; Mersing was held only as an outpost. On January 26th two enemy transports escorted by two cruisers and 12 destroyers approached Endau. Two attacks were made on this convoy by Wildebeestes, but the landing was not prevented and in that attack what was left of the Air Force in Malaya practically vanished. Two British destroyers, one of which was sunk, also attacked the convoy.

The fresh troops landed at Endau at once marched south crossing the river west of Mersing. The 2/18th Australian Battalion was able to plant an effective ambush which disposed of about 300 Japanese from the leading battalion and enabled Eastforce to fall back toward Singapore Island according to plan. Westforce, which it will be remembered consisted of the 9th Indian Division and the 27th Australian Brigade, had been lucky in withdrawing successfully from Segamat. The Kluang area with its vital aerodrome was now seriously threatened, and on January 24th the 5th Sikh Regt was ordered to make a flanking march and attack the Japanese from the west as part of a counter-attack by Painter's 22nd Indian Brigade, the other two battalions of which, the 2nd Frontier Force Regt and the 2nd

Royal Garhwal Rifles, had suffered heavily in the Kelantan and Kuantan fighting. Presently the counter-attack was cancelled which left the 5th Sikh Regt, now in contact with the enemy at Nijor the task of disengaging. Fortunately they had as their commanding officer Lieut.-Colonel Parkin, a miniature of a man with the heart of a lion and a genius for tactics. Parkin at once made up his mind that he must attack the enemy first if he wanted to disengage without heavy casualties, and attack he did, his Sikhs driving the Japanese before them at the bayonet's point and killing at least 150 of their enemies. By noon the 25 wounded had been brought in and the withdrawal began; the battalion reached a harbour north of



Renggam at 2 a.m. Since 2 p.m. on January 24th it had marched over 33 miles and been in action for 18 hours.

Even Gordon Bennett was impressed by this achievement of the Indian soldiers and in his diary paid them the compliment of exaggerating the casualties they had inflicted.

At 10 a.m. on January 26th the battalion moved on again. It was now known that all forces were to be withdrawn from the mainland. The 9th Indian Division was to withdraw down the railway. Maxwell's 27th Australian Brigade with the 2nd Gordon Highlanders who had replaced the 2nd Loyal Regt had the much easier route down the Ayer Hitam-Johore road. The two brigades of the 9th Indian Division were presently astride the railway line in two perimeters, the 22nd Brigade in front, the 8th Brigade some three miles behind. The latter had now been joined by the 1st Frontier Force Rifles who before withdrawing from the Menkibol area fought a success-

ful little action in which 30 Japanese were killed. Both lines of withdrawal were bombed by the Japanese from the air.

The position allotted to the 5th Sikh Regt one and a half miles south of Renggam was a bad one. It included the railway on the west and the first of a network of roads stretching four miles to the east, which converged and joined before entering Layang Layang, a village on the railway about six miles to the south. Rubber on both flanks offered the enemy good cover with easy going in front and on both flanks; on the east flank he had plenty of roads for transport. Parkin asked Brigade to be responsible for the railway and leave his battalion responsible for the road approaches. This was refused. Brigade admitted that the position was tactically bad, but said that there was no alternative because it was ordered to keep north of a line east and west through Milestone 435 on the railway until 4 p.m. on January 28th.

This miserable position was occupied by 4.30 p.m. on January 26th. The enemy was very active in the air, and therefore much of the night had to be spent in digging to make the best of that position. Later that evening Brigade notified the battalion that everything on wheels had to be clear of Milestone 435 by 5 p.m. next day, when the 8th Brigade would pass through the 22nd. Then on January 28th the 22nd Brigade would withdraw down the railway at 4.30 p.m. These orders meant that the 22nd Brigade would have to fight for 24 hours in a position admitted to be tactically unsound without artillery support, without carriers, without mortars, without reserve ammunition and without means of evacuating the wounded. Moreover, no sapper help for blowing that network of roads would be available; in any case they would have to be left open to let through the transport of the 8th Brigade. At the end of the 24 hours the 22nd Brigade would withdraw some 10 or 15 miles to the position the 8th Brigade was going to occupy which was not yet known (and never was known to the 22nd Brigade) without supporting arms or transport for the wounded.

The quartermaster was ordered to send up two days' cooked rations for the 5th Sikh Regt by noon next day without fail. The battalion had rations only for the morning meal of the 27th.

On the morning of January 27th Parkin reconnoitred as far as a mile south of Layang Layang where he found what for Malaya was a reasonably good defensive position. Here he met Brigadier Lay who still did not know what position the 8th Brigade was going to occupy.

That afternoon hostile air action was continuous and the enemy began to shell Layang Layang with heavy stuff, which was unusual

in the Malayan Campaign. By 4 p.m. the 1st Frontier Force Rifles, the rearguard of the 8th Brigade, withdrew through the 5th Sikh Regt, the enemy close upon them. The Sikhs were given half an hour's artillery support before the guns had to move back, and the mortar platoon volunteered to carry the only two 3-inch mortars still left.

Permission was again asked of Brigade to withdraw gradually after dark down the road to Layang Layang. Parkin who had a superlative tactical instinct suddenly decided to pull back to a position half a mile south of where the battalion was. The 5th Sikh Regt slipped quietly out at 7.30 p.m. and 20 minutes later heavy mortar and machine-guns opened on the old position before the enemy attacked to find nobody there. He came in on both flanks and missed the rear party by less than 100 yards.

By midnight the battalion thanks to its commanding officer's inspiration was settled into new positions.

The reason for Gordon Bennett's insistence that the 9th Indian Division should remain was his solicitude for the 27th Australian Brigade. The division was kept there in order to deny the track to the Ayer Hitam-Johore Bahru road until Maxwell was safe.

'Maxwell is very worried about his withdrawal to-night to the Kulai position.'[1]

On January 28th Major-General Gordon Bennett records in his diary the following:

> After a hasty lunch at Rear Headquarters, I called on his Highness the Sultan of Johore. . . . He entertained me at lunch and appreciated the visit. As usual he displayed his generosity by presenting me with gifts.[2]

When Gordon Bennett returned to his own headquarters he was told that Major-General Barstow, the commander of the 9th Indian Division, had been ambushed by the enemy and was believed to have been killed. Barstow, who had with him Colonel Trott, one of his own staff and Major Moses, his liaison officer with the A.I.F., had been worried by the gap between his two brigades and unaware that the enemy was already between them had walked forward along the railway to elucidate matters. A little south of Layang Layang the party was fired at. Barstow threw himself down one side of the embankment, the two staff officers down the other side. The latter escaped, but Barstow himself was killed, and his death

[1] *Why Singapore Fell*, p. 133. [2] *ibid.*, p. 131.

sealed the doom of the 22nd Indian Brigade which was now out of communication. Bennett found it 'difficult to understand how a complete Brigade Group with Headquarters and all units intact is unable to force its way through the enemy party which had cut them off.'[1]

At 1.30 a.m. on January 28th from the network of roads eastward of the 5th Sikh Regt's position came an ominous sound.

> It was a distant rumble like thunder or like a short burst of machine-gun fire, a sinister sound with a sinister meaning. At intervals, too, could be heard the clear throb of motor-cycles moving south, they too passing over the bridge which told us that the doors of the trap were now fast closing around us.[2]

After half an hour with a recalcitrant telephone Parkin got through to the brigade major and told him that unless the battalion moved back to Layang Layang at once it would be surrounded by dawn. The brigade major agreed and roused the brigadier; Painter reiterated Gordon Bennett's orders that the brigade was to remain north of its present position until midday and that he intended to remain where he was.

The rumble of lorries crossing a wooden bridge close at hand continued at intervals of two minutes until the break of dawn. If 20 Japanese infantry were reckoned in every lorry, at least 2,500 of them must have crossed the bridge that night. The 8th Brigade had had to move south so fast that no demolitions at Renggam had been carried out before it left. At 4.30 a.m. Parkin sent out C Company to take offensive action at a road junction a mile to the east with a route to bring them back to brigade headquarters by 10 a.m.

At last at 8 a.m. the battalion was ordered to withdraw and join the brigade at Milestone 435. By now the battalion was hungry because the rations for two days which should have been delivered yesterday at noon had been dumped in a railwayman's hut close to brigade headquarters. When the battalion reached the milestone at 9.30 a.m. the British officer and sepoys who went to collect them under fire found they had been looted and that nothing was left except chapattis and dal scattered on the floor of the hut.

By 10 a.m. C Company had not returned, and the brigadier, a British gunner with a good reputation as a staff officer but without a word of Urdu and devoid of practical experience with Indian troops, wanted to move off without it. However, he could not stand

[1] *Why Singapore Fell*, p. 132.

[2] From the privately printed account of a British officer of the 5th Sikh Regt.

up to Parkin's wrath at this suggestion, and a quarter of an hour later C Company got back with the good news of having stalked a Japanese company eating a meal beside the road and at 150 yards letting the picnic have it. The Japanese had bolted into the rubber leaving between 70 and 80 of the company killed and wounded on the roadside.

There was no news of the whereabouts of the 8th Brigade or anybody else, but as soon as C Company got back the 22nd Brigade moved off in the direction of Layang Layang. The 5th Sikh Regt formed the advanced guard.

> The battalion had not fed since the previous morning. We therefore set forth with a battalion of men who were already marching on an empty stomach, who carried on them only sufficient food for one cold, uncooked, sparse meal, and this at a time when they were likely to be called upon to rise to unknown heights of energy and vitality.[1]

At noon B Company, the Punjabi Mussalman company in the van, came under very heavy fire from the front and left flank and a number of men fell. Parkin quickly had the situation in hand. B Company fixed bayonets and supported by a platoon of C Company, commanded by the dauntless Jemadar Ajit Singh who had saved the day at the Kuantan Ferry, they charged the enemy. He at once disappeared into a dense patch of jungle beside the railway and for half an hour the noise of a savage fight resounded. Mortar shells were bursting all round. Small arms fire rattled. The war cries of 'Ya Ali' and 'Sat Siri Akal' and Japanese yells rose above the din of battle. In the end the enemy was driven across the railway eastward.

Just south was a marsh dense with elephant grass 10 feet high. On the map there appeared to be a ridge south of the swamp lying across the way of the battalion's advance, and also overlooking the area of the fighting. D Company, sent to occupy this high ground, gained its objective after the men had waded through the swamp up to their armpits. It was a fine achievement by Captain Gurmit Singh and his company and it settled the issue of the fight. Casualties were 20 killed and 35 wounded, 10 of whom were able to walk. For the rest the whole brigade could provide only 15 stretchers. What were wanting had to be improvised from ground sheets and wood cut from the rubber trees. The only medical equipment was a small box carried by the doctor with an inadequate supply of drugs.

[1] From a privately printed account.

Great gallantry was displayed by all in getting the wounded back to what there was of a regimental aid post. Jemadar Munsabdhar Khan after leading his platoon in a gallant attack crossed a bullet-swept stretch of open ground seven times to carry back seven of his wounded men. Sepoy Basta Singh, another hero of the fight at Kuantan Ferry, had his knee shattered at the beginning of the attack, and lying in the open under fire he saw a couple of Japanese sniping from a tree-top 200 yards away. He managed to crawl over to a light machine-gun and shot the two Japanese out of their nest. Then later when two sepoys had been wounded in trying to convey him back he shouted to his platoon commander not to send any more men to his aid but to shoot him before the battalion went on. Jemadar Sher Khan led the pioneer platoon in the work of rescue and he himself carried back a badly wounded Sikh much bigger than himself for over 200 yards. This brotherhood between Muslim and Hindu soldiers was built up through the years by British officers of the Army in India who loved their men and counted a life in which they had led such warriors into battle as well spent.

But what of the 8th Indian Brigade? There was no sound of battle in the neighbourhood of Layang Layang. It was learnt later that the 8th Brigade had blown the railway bridges and withdrawn somewhere six miles south the previous evening when Parkin had so pertinaciously argued the madness of waiting longer north of Milestone 435.

It was decided at a brigade conference to abandon the attempt to push on to Layang Layang and instead to attempt a flank march through jungle west of the railway in the hope of making contact with the 8th Brigade in the neighbourhood of Sedenak. The 5th Sikh Regt was still the vanguard with a platoon of the 2nd Royal Garhwal Rifles to cut a way through with their kukris. Parkin led the march himself when the 22nd Brigade moved west for a mile and then turned south into dense jungle, soon after entering which darkness fell. The rate of progress was about a quarter of a mile an hour.

> We plodded on through an intolerable night. Every three or four minutes the column would halt and officers and men would fall down on the ground and drop instantly to sleep . . . in a sitting position against their comrades, their senses numbed . . . when we advanced we dragged our legs along in a kind of dream, our eyes constantly closed. Then there would be a sudden check and we would lurch forward over the man in front while the man behind did the same . . . the stretcher bearers were

struggling on manfully, the weight of the wounded was driving the slightly made stretcher poles into their shoulder bones . . . numberless tree trunks lay fallen across the way, some of them three feet in height and over every one of these the wounded were carried. . . . Their groans were clearly audible in the quiet of the night whenever the column was halted. There was no relief, no comfort, no food, only one cup of tea on the 29th and again on the 31st, no possible hygienic arrangements, and above all, only a very faint ray of hope with which to infuse them with the will to stick it out. Yet in all this time I never heard one single complaint from any of these marvellous men whose sufferings must have been unspeakable.[1]

Some of them were even able to smile when Parkin could occasionally get back to them and say a few words of encouragement. Five died during that first night.

When dawn broke on January 29th the column was on the edge of a swamp. Hutchinson, the brigade intelligence officer, was sent ahead with five men in an endeavour to establish contact with the 8th Brigade. He found them at last at Kulai, well south of Sedenak, a remarkable feat in the circumstances.

Gordon Bennett writes:[2]

During last night a report came in from the liaison officer of the 22nd Indian Brigade that the brigade was returning by a wide sweep and should arrive at about midday (January 30th) behind Sedenak. As we withdrew from Sedenak last night, I told the 9th Division to send out some parties to try and contact the brigade and guide them through the gap between the Indians and the Australians. Unfortunately, only one party was sent out and this returned saying it could not get through the Japanese. It was decided that to-night's withdrawal across the causeway should be postponed five hours to give a chance for the brigade to get in.

It had only been Heath's direct orders which had secured that postponement. Meanwhile, Gordon Bennett himself left Johore Bahru at 7 p.m. for his new headquarters on Singapore Island, and was able to record in his diary that night:

My new quarters near Bukit Timah village are very comfortable but small. My home is a delightfully furnished, comparatively new bungalow on a hill.[3]

[1] From a privately printed account.

[2] *Why Singapore Fell*, p. 135.

[3] *ibid.*, p. 136.

Then he ventures to add:

> The 9th Indian Division left me, after sixteen days' very happy association, their commander (Barstow) having endeared himself to all of us. . . . The troops of the division have been through a long and strenuous retreat from Kota Bahru and Kuantan, without rest. They have been on the move since 8 December—over seven weeks. Yet they have not complained. This is due to the excellent leadership of General Barstow.

Some time during the night of the 28/29th an Indian medical officer joined the lost brigade. He said he had been captured by the Japanese just south of Layang Layang on the morning of the 28th. Under the threat of decapitation he was sent by the enemy with a letter written in English which was to be delivered to the Indian troops, in which they were urged to surrender to the Japanese with a promise of being well treated. The letter was delivered to brigade headquarters.

All through January 29th the heartbreaking progress of the 22nd Brigade continued. Parkin knowing that the wounded were delaying the brigade asked leave to proceed with his battalion independently; but the brigadier who by now obviously felt that Parkin's leadership was essential to him refused it.

There were now 12 stretcher cases, and each company in turn took on the duty of stretcher-bearing through the 24 hours. Down precipitous slopes, up steep hill sides, through jungle and swamp the march went on.

That night the going was worse than ever, and heavy rain made footholds for the hunger weakened men a torment. Besides agonising ravines there were several stretches of swamp.

> There was the pitiful picture of stretcher bearers floundering in the bog up to their knees while their stretcher lurched on its side at an angle of 30 or 40 degrees and the wretched wounded man clung helplessly to the shafts at the side. The pathetic cry of alarm which escaped his lips was yet another reminder of what war can mean.[1]

Some time after midnight there was a halt and the whole brigade fell instantly fast asleep, so that when Parkin, the Garhwali platoon and the brigade H.Q. staff went on they went on for some time alone; the second-in-command luckily woke up in time to get the battalion moving on again.

[1] From a privately printed account.

When dawn broke on January 30th the brigade was on the edge of a wide belt of undulating country under pineapple cultivation, which meant at any rate food of a kind. The brigadier told his commanding officers to meet him at the top of a high hill, at the end of the range whose lower slopes had been traversed during that horrible night.

The intention, which was a survey of the country, was good; Parkin ordered his company commanders to meet him later on top. Climbing that hill on a blazing day after two days and nights of incessant effort without sleep or food was a severe strain on everybody. The brigadier himself failed to attend the conference, and the commanding officers decided that the brigade should move across the pineapple land in open formation and make for a belt of rubber on high ground away to the south. The hill on which this decision was taken was ominously named. It was Bukit Hantu—the hill of the ghosts.

When the party descended the brigadier's orderly reported that on his orders he had left him half-way up the hill in a state of exhaustion. The indomitable Parkin went up again with his own orderly and found the brigadier lying on the grass in the shade of a boulder. He told Parkin to take over command of the brigade and leave him. However, Parkin persuaded him to make another effort and with his orderly's help he got him safely down to where the column was resting, and after another half-hour's rest he declared himself ready to move on.

There was much air activity, but the brigade camouflaged with tufts of grass passed across the pineapple land in open formation without being seen, and the eating of the pineapples was a tonic to the men. On the way across the plantation seven Dogras of the 2nd Baluch Regt in Malay dress joined the column and said that the 8th Brigade had withdrawn from Sedenak two nights ago. Their information was mistrusted at the time; nevertheless, it was correct.

Near dusk a Chinese offered to guide the column between the railway and the main road to Sedenak. About midnight this man disappeared near a hut in which there were two other Chinese who warned the brigadier that about 500 Japanese were in bivouac a few hundred yards ahead; indeed, the sounds of a carousal were audible. The exhaustion of the officers and men precluded any possibility of a night attack. The brigadier accepted the offer of one of the two Chinese to guide the column round the enemy forces in the neighbourhood. Meanwhile, the whole brigade had fallen fast asleep, and without waiting to see if the men had been roused the brigadier and

his staff set off at once with the new guide. Owing to this ill-considered haste B Company of the 5th Sikh Regt and the A.A. platoon were left behind and lost. They did not surrender to the Japanese until April 15th 1942, exactly two months after the capitulation of Singapore. Eleven men of B Company were captured by the merciless enemy in March and these were all beheaded.

Finally after many perplexing changes in direction the Chinese left the brigade in a rubber plantation about a mile east of the railway, saying that it was now clear of the Japanese in the neighbourhood and could proceed straight ahead.

Beyond the rubber was a stretch of very bad marsh, and the brigadier who now seemed determined to atone by haste for his collapse on the Hill of the Ghosts decided that this must be crossed at once without even a short rest.

> The bog through which we had to pass was like quagmire which dragged one down to one's knees. . . . I placed myself in the narrow flow of stream . . . and proceeded with the aid of the torch to conduct the stretcher teams across. This was a ghastly undertaking, far and away more frightful than on the previous night when conditions had been bad enough. It was accomplished because these men who were carrying the wounded showed the will and courage to go through with it no matter what the effort cost them. I saw the leading men of the first team step off into the bog and cautiously pick their way over the stream, soon to find themselves sinking slowly down until the mud had engulfed their feet as far as their knees. The men in rear had only reached the shallow waters of the stream and were therefore standing nearly two feet higher than the two at the forward end of the stretcher. This naturally tilted the stretcher forward at a steep angle . . . shortly all four men were floundering in the bog. The man on the off fore position suddenly staggered and his knees were shaking wildly. He sank on one knee with a shout of terror in his hoarse voice and the stretcher lurched over on its side throwing the wounded man against the head and shoulders of the spare file who assisted as best he could at the side . . . on the other side of the crossing the same difficulties were encountered. . . . And through this hell passed 12 stretchers, 12 wounded men who were by now gangrenous, delirious and half-mad, 48 gallant men who carried the stretchers, 24 others who accompanied them. . . . I must have stood and squatted in my position in the stream water for over an hour while the labours of the men and the sufferings of the wounded went on before my eyes in a slowly moving picture of unforgettable misery.[1]

[1] From a privately printed account.

A few hundred yards beyond the swamp the whole brigade was asleep. Some time later the staff captain came along in a state of agitation to ask what these exhausted men were doing sleeping when it was essential to push on at top speed.

At 11 a.m. of January 31st a halt was called in a large rubber plantation; the brigadier hearing from a Tamil that half a mile away there was a large coolie settlement with a dispensary decided that the wounded must be taken to it and there left. A Company under Captain Lyons was detailed to take over the wounded, see them fixed up in the dispensary with the doctor, and then proceed independently to the coast east of Johore Bahru. It is comforting to be able to record that these wounded ultimately recovered and returned from Japanese captivity to India. Two of the platoons of A Company under the command of Subadar Bahadur Singh tried through a mistake to catch up the brigade and were lost. Lyons and Martin, his subaltern, with the remaining platoon struggled on for two days through Japanese patrolled country; at last with 20 other ranks they reached the coast and were taken across to the island in a naval launch.

When the wounded were left Brigade ordered all loads to be lightened and ammunition to be reduced to five magazines for each V.B. gun and the two 3-inch mortars with 70 bombs which had been so valiantly carried by the mortar platoon on this fearful march to be abandoned. The remaining two companies of the 5th Sikh Regt with battalion H.Q. still formed the advance guard. The course was now slightly east of south about two and half miles east of the railway, through undulating rubber country. At 5 p.m. a halt was called close to one of two large native houses recently deserted in which several sacks of rice were found.

Discipline had grown somewhat lax when the hungry men passed through a plantation of sugar-cane and scattered from the order of the march to gather the canes; and during the afternoon the staff captain in order to keep men from brigade H.Q. from encroaching upon advance guard H.Q. tied a dirty piece of white cloth to the branch of a tree and had it carried by an orderly to mark the foremost limit of brigade H.Q. It was an unfortunate action, the possible significance of which did not suggest itself to officers whose minds were numbed by hunger, fatigue and lack of sleep.

By 2 a.m. of February 1st everybody in the brigade was too utterly exhausted to move farther and a halt was called until dawn for three hour's sleep.

Two enemy cycle patrols were seen that morning when the

column was advancing, and about 11 a.m. a Japanese party of 60 or so opened fire on the column from the front and right flank. Subadar Sampuran Singh and five of H.Q. and C Company were hit in the first burst of fire, and there was much confusion except in Jemadar Ajit Singh's platoon which he led straight at the enemy, killing three of them and capturing a mortar and its ammunition, which they brought in later.

However, it was painfully clear that by now most of the troops in the brigade were incapable any longer of a real offensive effort, and the brigadier decided not to risk it. The 5th Sikh Regt was detailed as rearguard and the rest of the brigade withdrew through the rubber. There had been a shout that the Japanese troops visible were British, and the brigadier had sent a man forward to see if this was true. The brigade had moved on before this man came back and when he did the greater part of C Company turned round and went over to the enemy. Then on the other flank the men of the mortar platoon moved away into the undergrowth and shouted to the men of D Company not to fire because they were being held by the enemy. Parkin ordered Gurmit Singh to fire at every Japanese his company could see, and his men did. He then ordered them to fix bayonets and stand to fight where they were. For 20 minutes D Company and the few men left of C Company continued to fire until the scanty supply of ammunition was nearly exhausted. The Japanese, perhaps preoccupied with their prisoners, did not follow up when the rearguard still in formation fell back. There were less than 100 men now left, many of whom fell on the ground before half a mile had been covered and declared themselves unable to go any farther. Then Parkin who had been with the rear party went forward with his compass to exhort the men to carry on for another mile before they rested. Soon afterwards Gurmit Singh now commanding the rearguard collapsed; most of his company remained with their captain.

A little later after crossing a ravine the few that were now left of the 5th Sikh Regt could see from the crest the whole of D Company lying on the ground. There was no response to their commanding officer's shout. A man was sent to tell them that they must make one final effort; the man himself did not return.

Twenty minutes later after crossing various estate roads Parkin called a halt to hold a conference with the four British officers, Subadar-Major Lucka Singh and Jemadar Ajit Singh. There were not quite 30 men of the battalion left. It was then that Parkin, broken-hearted, took the two Indian V.C.O.'s aside to ask an

explanation of what happened to his magnificent battalion which had fought so valiantly, endured so long and suffered so much.

> They looked at the C.O. strangely and said, 'Sahib, we all knew that the General Sahib had decided not to fight and when you suddenly called upon the men to fight they were unprepared for such an eventuality.'[1]

Then observing the look of astonishment in the C.O.'s eyes they added,

> 'You see, we saw the white flag at Brigade Headquarters yesterday evening.' So the dirty white cloth which the Staff Captain had attached to a branch to denote the whereabouts of Advanced Brigade H.Q. had conveyed—not unnaturally—a confession of failure, the ignominy of a will to surrender.

All that was left of the 5th Sikh Regt pressed on toward the coast. They reached jungle too dense for progress. They wheeled south and marched under the equatorial sun along a road for two miles and then through acres of open pineapple plantations. The noise of approaching motor-transport was heard, and hurriedly preparing an ambush they waited for its arrival just below a crest. Over the crest came a large lorry full of sugar for tinning the pineapples and crowded with Chinese coolies, and not far behind a four-seater open tourer of great antiquity with only a hand-brake. Both were commandeered. The sugar was unloaded and with a cheer from the men, Parkin driving the tourer, and one of his officers the lorry, they drove on.

Some three miles along the road what was left of the 22nd Indian Brigade was found, and it was arranged for the 5th Sikh Regt's party to carry on to the bridge over the Tebrau River and send back the transport to the brigade in its present position. When it got back the brigade was gone. A guide had offered to show them a ford over the Tebrau River.

The Sikh party eventually reached the coast about a mile east of its mouth, and finally was taken across to the island by a naval patrol boat. Two or three officers of the 2nd Frontier Force Regt from the 22nd Brigade managed to get away; the rest of the brigade had surrendered to a Japanese battalion, the men being too much exhausted to put up a fight.

The arrival of Lieut.-Colonel Prattley with his party at Benut has already been noted. They had been the rearguard and had lost

[1] From a privately printed account.

touch with the rest of the 6/15th Indian Brigade about midnight of January 26th. Mr Wallace, of whose splendid determination and skill we have heard, undertook to guide them to Benut, on their way to which they picked up A Squadron of the 3rd Cavalry and some 500 men of the 5th Norfolk Regt so that Prattley's party numbered 1,200 by 3 p.m. on January 27th when it halted by the Benut River and Wallace went on alone to discover the position in Benut.

Wallace persuaded a Chinese to provide ten sampans and by midnight of the 27th the whole column was on the other side. That Chinese was 'a great chap—he had coffee ready for the wounded, and a lot of coco-nuts and pineapples, and he absolutely refused a cent in payment.'

By 3 a.m. of January 28th Prattley's column was in Benut. They went on in lorries to Skudai, where Key had arranged for hot rations, tea and rum to be ready for them. By 11 a.m. they were in the Braddell Road Rest Camp in Singapore, having reached it with 70 per cent. of their rifles and 20 per cent. of their light automatics.

The remainder of the 6/15th Brigade lost touch with the rear-guard and half their arms and equipment at the same time in crossing a big stream. When dawn broke the exhausted men of the Cambridgeshires and 6th Norfolks were in a poor state of discipline. A burst of machine-gun fire and a salvo of mortar bombs scattered the leading company. The panic spread; many men were drowned in the swamp. Challen went off to regain control. He found one company more or less together and ordered it to stand fast while he went back to Lieut.-Colonel Thorne of the Cambridgeshires. What happened to him will be told presently.

The British Battalion under Lieut.-Colonel Morrison which was closed up on the other flank paid little attention to the sudden revelation of the enemy's nearness. These men of the Leicesters and East Surreys who had held out that day at Kampar stood firm. Morrison tried to get in touch with Challen; he could get in touch neither with him nor with Thorne. Ascertaining that the unfordable river in front of his battalion was held by the enemy he decided to abandon the idea of reaching Benut and made for the coast.

Meanwhile, Thorne found his rear company where Challen had left it, and managed to get it across the river past the enemy's flank by a rope-way improvised from rifle-slings. Patrols discovered that the area between the bank of the river and the road was strongly held by Japanese. Thorne decided that to advance in a formed body must end in disaster. So he ordered his men to escape in small parties and make for the coast. He himself with Captain Howard

and three N.C.O.'s reached the lines of the 28th Indian Brigade at Pontian Kechil by boat two days later, where he found that most of his company had already arrived and been sent on to Singapore. The other companies of the 2nd Cambridgeshire Regt were collected by Captain Beckett who joined the British Battalion with eight officers and 400 men on its way to the coast. Captain Wallis of the East Surreys, who with the formation of the British Battalion had been Morrison's right-hand man, had already collected his gunners, sappers, and Lieut.-Colonel Lywood's detachment from Senggarang. Morrison's handling of what at one time seemed a desperate situation succeeded in getting 1,500 men in good order to the coast at the village of Penggor about three miles from Rengit. He organised two areas for defence while the Japanese airmen searched in vain for the 6/15th Brigade. Laman, the brigade major and Captain Peel-Yates of the East Surreys volunteered to sail to Pontian Kechil in two sampans and inform the divisional commander of the situation. We have heard of Lieut.-Commander Clarke's arrival in H.M.S *Dragonfly*. One platoon was embarked and *Dragonfly* went back to Singapore to arrange for the evacuation of the rest of the troops in this miniature Dunkirk after dark next day.

The discipline preserved at Penggor throughout that long day of waiting was magnificent. The road along which enemy transport was moving all day was only 1,100 yards away; Japanese planes were constantly overhead. It was discipline, and discipline alone, which saved those 1,500 men of the 6/15th Brigade, and Morrison was the inspiration of that discipline.

On the night of January 28/29th H.M.S. *Dragonfly*, H.M.S. *Scorpion* and other small ships evacuated all except 400 of the 2nd Cambridgeshire Regt and 150 of the 5th Norfolk Regt. During the next two nights the rest were evacuated. So thanks to the determination of Lieut.-Colonel Morrison and Lieut.-Colonel Prattley 2,700 men of the 6/15th Indian Brigade reached Singapore. Most of these men belonged to the 53rd British Brigade which was now reconstituted with its own battalions in Singapore.

To return to Brigadier Challen: when he left the rear company of the Cambridgeshires to look for the rest of the brigade, all he could discover was a section of the battalion whose N.C.O. told him he was close to Rengit. He made his way toward the road, and soon found himself in the middle of Japanese. After his orderly had been badly wounded Challen lay low till dark. Then, frequently fired at, he reached the road, walked along it, and climbed over a road block guarded by two Japanese sentries who paid no attention to him. At

dawn he found a bicycle, which he gave up after riding through an enemy sector, when he took to the country. He hid in a hut during the night of the 28/29th and at dawn walked out into the arms of a Japanese section. He was sent to Kuala Lumpur gaol as a prisoner of war.

The story of the last days on the mainland of the 6/15th and 22nd Indian Brigades has been told in some detail because it is an epitome of the whole unfortunate campaign, and illustrates almost every aspect of it.

The Australians themselves fought in accord with their finest traditions as warriors and when the 22nd Australian Brigade found itself in Eastforce under the command of III Indian Corps it showed complete confidence in Heath whose timing in the withdrawal from Mersing was perfect. The Jat/Punjabi Battalion which was under Brigadier Taylor during that last fortnight on the mainland was treated by him, his officers and his men with a consideration beyond praise. Brigadier Anderson V.C. who took over the hapless 45th Indian Brigade when Duncan was killed was equally considerate to those half-trained young Indian troops who fought with him at Bakri.

It is unnecessary to enlarge upon the exhaustion of the troops or the absence of air support and reconnaissance, upon the skill with which the highly-trained Japanese infantry took advantage of the country, or upon the Spartan valour with which they fought. Yet even they with the repeated use of fresh troops admitted themselves to be tired at the end of those seven weeks, and the tribute they paid to the resistance put up by those two star-crossed Indian Divisions is an irrefutable answer to Gordon Bennett's aspersions upon British and Indian officers and upon British and Indian troops. Let it be remembered that these were published in his diary while his brother officers were in the captivity he had himself avoided. In his diary for February 15th Gordon Bennett notes:

> I had made this decision some time previously, having decided that I could not fall into Japanese hands. My decision was fortified by the resolve that I must at all costs return to Australia to tell our people . . . of the best means of defeating the Japanese tactics.[1]

Orders were received in the early morning of January 28th that all troops in Johore would cross the causeway on the night of

[1] *Why Singapore Fell*, p. 166.

January 30/31st. The 11th Indian Division was given the task holding the Skudai Corner until Westforce was clear when it would pass through two bridgeheads the outer of which was to be held by the 22nd Australian Brigade and the 2nd Gordon Highlanders, the inner by the 2nd Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders reinforced by two companies of Royal Marines, and the 4th Hyderabad Regt. The 53rd Brigade which now consisted of what was left of those wonderful 3/16th Punjabis and the Jat/Punjabi Battalion would cross the causeway. It had been intended to put the 11th Indian Division into reserve, but it was now ordered to hold the coast of the island between the River Seletar and the Bukit Timah road running from the causeway to Singapore City.

On January 29th the 22nd Australian Brigade withdrew down the Kota Tinggi road without interference. On the trunk road along which the 27th Australian Brigade was withdrawing, a fine counter-attack by the 2/30th Australian Battalion extricated the 2nd Gordon Highlanders from what had been a menacing attack by the enemy.

The 28th Indian Brigade had some nasty moments in its withdrawal along the Skudai road, and the last battalion through was the 2/2nd Gurkha Rifles which cleared the corner at 1 a.m. on January 31st.

It may be mentioned that the carrier platoon of the 2nd Dogra Regt had a brief action with Japanese patrols near Kota Tinggi on January 29th, the only troops of this fine battalion which were in contact with the enemy. The 2nd Dogra Regt originally in the 11th Indian Division was put in the Fortress Garrison until toward the end of the campaign it was sent to the east coast. On crossing the causeway the battalion was sent to garrison Tekong, a small island east of Singapore at the entrance of the straits. Here it remained until two days after the capitulation of Singapore when it was ordered to lay down its arms. It seems strange that this well-trained battalion was never used to reinforce its old division.

It has not been possible to devote the attention it deserved to the exploits of the Federated Malay State Volunteer Force, but it and the Volunteer Air Force did all that was asked of them and a good deal more, and the Indian Divisions fully recognised this. Flight-Lieut. Dane made several attempts in his Moth to discover the whereabouts of the lost 22nd Indian Brigade, but he was unlucky and his generous courage was unrewarded.

It was 5.30 a.m. on January 31st when the last battalion of the 11th Indian Division crossed the causeway; two hours later the last troops from the inner bridgehead crossed. These were the 2nd

Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, the old Thin Red Line, their two pipers playing them over to the tune of *Hieland Laddie*.[1]

At 8.15 a.m. a 70-foot gap was blown in the causeway by the Royal Navy.

It had been confidently expected that the crossing of the causeway in calm weather by the light of a full moon would be attended by much Japanese air activity. In the event there was hardly any. The enemy could afford to wait.

A Japanese account says;

> In 55 days the Japanese Army had covered 1,100 kilometres by road, repairing 250 bridges, and 650 kilometres by launches.
> In these 55 days we had fought 92 battles.

The great majority of those battles, be it added, were fought by the 11th Indian Division.

[1] Another account says that the Argylls were piped over by the 2nd Gordon Highlanders to the tune of *Jenny's Black E'en*.

Chapter 30

January–February, 1942. Singapore Island—layout of defences and disposition of garrison—Japanese land under heavy bombardment—wedge driven in defences.

THE Island of Singapore is 15 miles from north to south and 26 miles from east to west with an area of about 220 square miles, roughly the size and shape of the Isle of Wight. On the north and west the island is separated from the mainland by the Straits of Johore which at the Putri Narrows near the north-west corner of the island are 700 yards wide. Near the causeway the straits are just over 1,000 yards wide.

The greater part of the island was under rubber or covered with a scruffy type of jungle. The surface is undulating with many low small hills of which the highest point Bukit Timah, almost in the middle, rises to 581 feet. Communications were good. There was abundance of excellent metalled roads and there were many unmetalled estate roads. The main line of the railway crossed the Johore Causeway and went on down the middle of the island to the port and city of Singapore.

The coastline of the western half of the island is almost entirely low and fringed with wide areas of mangrove swamp inset with numerous navigable creeks. The northern coastline of the eastern half of the island is similar. From Changi peninsula to Pasir Panjang five miles west of Singapore on the south the coastline is more or less regular with extensive sandy beaches and very little mangrove. The sea edges of the mangrove swamps could not be covered by direct or observed fire.

The civilian population of the island at the time of the campaign was over 800,000 of whom two-thirds were Chinese. This was at least a quarter of a million in excess of the peacetime population.

When the Supreme Commander arrived from India on January 9th he ordered that plans for the defence of the island against attack from the mainland and the construction of defences should be urgently undertaken. Until this date plans for defence had been based on repelling sea-borne attacks on the island and holding land attacks in Johore or farther north. Little or nothing had been done to put the northern side of the island into a state of defence apart from arrangements to blow the causeway.

On January 20th, the Chiefs of Staff in London, with the grim and desperate deediness of a man who has suddenly woken up after oversleeping himself, brought to the notice of Malaya Command points of importance that would require attention if the troops on the mainland should be forced to withdraw to the island.

Among these points were the use of fortress guns against landward attacks, the obstruction of land approaches to the straits and landing places, the diversion of some of the beach defences and machine-gun posts from the south to the north of the island, the control of boats and small craft, the creation of self-contained defensive localities and switch lines, measures against surprise night landings, the defence of aerodromes against air-borne attacks, the dispersal and control of the civil population, the suppression of fifth column activity, the use of personnel in fixed defences for tasks in local defence schemes, and the development of a good signal communications system within the fortress and to aerodromes in use in southern Sumatra.

Most of these arrangements were already in hand, and the completion of arrangements to defend Singapore Island was being urged on Malaya Command by Wavell after his visit on January 9th. It will be remembered that on January 1st the Chiefs of Staff had drawn Auchinleck's attention to the fact that the defence of Singapore was second only in importance to the defence of the United Kingdom itself.

Mr Churchill's account of these days is not available at the time when these words are being written. It may clarify what seems a nightmare of indecision, cross-purposes and myopia at home.

General Percival, writing with considerable restraint and anxious not to give the impression of being too much concerned with his own reputation, says:[1]

> The fact that no defences had been constructed on the north and west coasts of the island in pre-war days, and only limited defences even after the war started, has been the subject of much critical comment even in the highest quarters. It has been imputed to a lack of foresight on the part of successive general officers commanding. Such criticism is most unjust. In the first place, general officers commanding had no authority to construct defences when or where they liked. The defences of Singapore were built up in accordance with a War Office plan, though of course recommendations of the local commander always received consideration. Then there was the question of the object of the

[1] *The War in Malaya*, p. 254.

defences. It was quite definitely the protection of the Naval Base—not the defence of Singapore Island. Now a very ordinary principle of warfare is that you site your defence in advance of the object to be protected; the distance in advance depends upon the range of the enemy's weapons and increases as that range becomes greater. The Naval Base itself lies on the north shore of Singapore Island, and it would have been sheer folly to have sited the defences also on the shores of that island allowing the enemy to bomb, shell, and machine-gun the Naval Base at will. It would have been very nice no doubt to have had defences there in addition to those up-country, but finance prohibited that. As has already been stated, the expenditure on the defences in Malaya was always strictly controlled from home, and such money as was made available, apart from the defences on the south coast of the fortress, was of course spent, and quite rightly so, on defence works on the mainland. Even for these works there was never sufficient money available.

It may be observed at this point that in 1939 the managers of the Japanese estates which covered southern Johore had gone in for road building on a grand scale and that all these roads led to the coast of Johore. In the two years before the Japanese struck a convenient wealth of motorable roads was prepared for the attack on Singapore. Alas, in Whitehall the will to believe that Japan would not enter the war was too fervid for anybody to pay undue attention to intelligence reports of a disagreeable nature. Moreover, any attempt to prevent the construction of these roads would have upset the attitude of appeasement that was laid down as our policy toward Japan.

The fortress guns of the heaviest calibre in the fixed defences had an all round traverse, and many of the other fixed defence guns had arcs of fire over the mainland. So the gibe that all the guns on the island were pointing the wrong way is not entirely true.

However, the ammunition for the 15-inch guns was all armour piercing and the 9·2-inch guns had only 25 rounds of high explosive to each gun. Therefore they were practically useless for offensive artillery action against the mainland.

The food situation for the whole garrison after the withdrawal across the causeway and the arrival of all expected reinforcements was satisfactory. There was meat for three months, flour and tinned vegetables for four months, and enough other items for five months. The stocks of food for the civil population were enough for four months, with flour for six months and meat for nine months which could have been used to supplement army stocks.

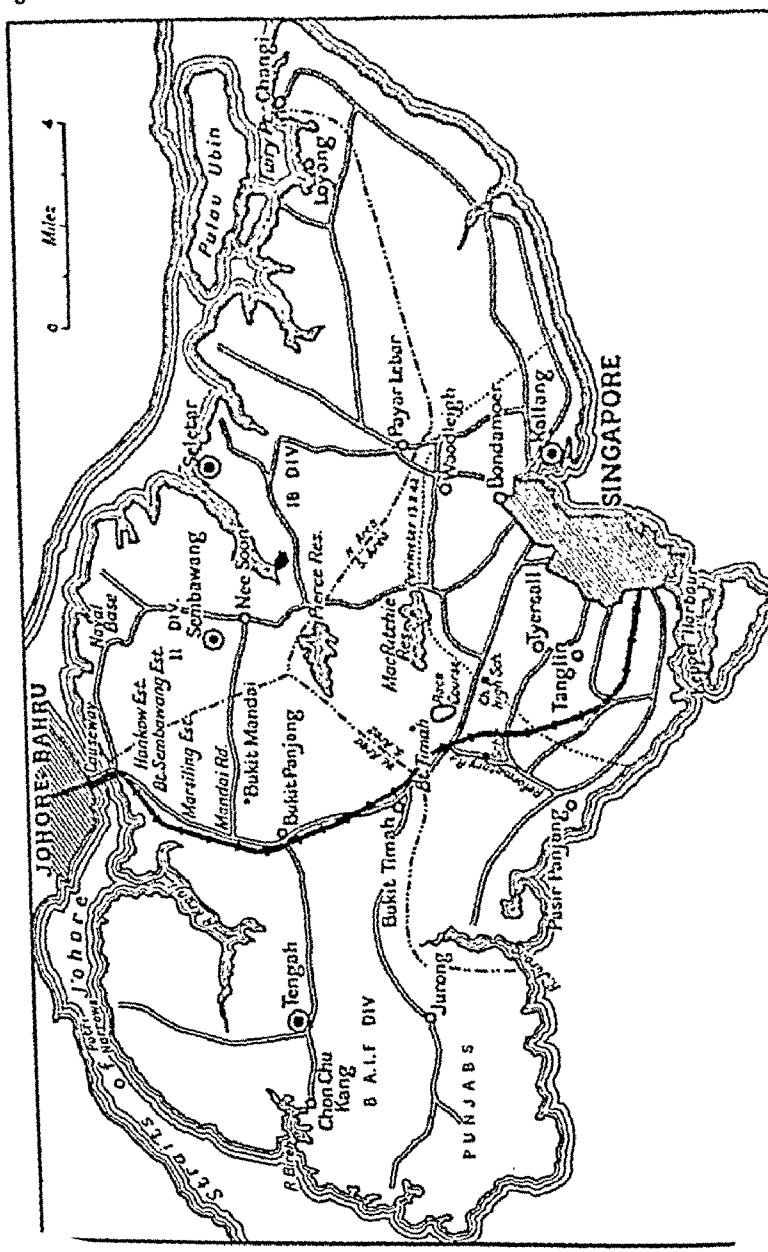
There was ammunition for pistols and Thompson sub-machine guns for 12 days, for ·55 anti-tank rifles for 23 days, for ·303 rifles, grenades and mortars for six weeks, and for artillery for over three months; but it was calculated that there would be no reserve stocks of weapons and no spares when units had drawn arms to replace losses on the mainland.

Much of the water supply for Singapore Island had depended on the Gunong Pulai catchment area in south Johore which was now in enemy hands. However, on the island itself there was a catchment area of 6,000 acres and there were two large reservoirs, MacRitchie and Peirce, which could provide 14,500,000 gallons daily. The loss of the 15,000,000 from the mainland would entail a measure of rationing. Moreover, the distributing pipes were close to the surface of the ground and easily put out of order by bombing from the air.

The three northern airfields at Tengah, Sembawang and Seletar were now within range of observed artillery fire from the mainland, and the only airfield still free from artillery but not from air bombardment was at Kallang close to the city of Singapore. All that was left of the fighter units except one flight of eight Hurricanes and one flight of eight Buffaloes had already been moved to Sumatra. These were based on this civil airport, but they did not last long.

The general plan for the defence of the island was to fight the enemy on the coastal perimeter wherever he might land.

A word about reinforcements. The bulk of the two remaining brigades of the 18th (East Anglian) Division had landed at Singapore on January 29th, but the transport *Empress of Asia* bringing the last units was sunk by enemy aircraft off the north-west coast and all the arms and equipment of the troops were lost. Wavell has been criticised for allowing the troops of the 18th Division soft after weeks of a sea-voyage and trained for desert warfare to disembark at Singapore as a forlorn hope, and with our knowledge of what was to happen in Burma it is natural to regret that they were not diverted again to Rangoon, to which they had originally been diverted from the Middle East. The only alternative open to Wavell at the time was to use those two brigades of the 18th Division in the Dutch East Indies where they would have been as ineffective as they were in Singapore, and if Wavell had sent them to Batavia, with doubtful Dutch co-operation, the critics would probably have declared that their presence in Singapore might have turned the scale and averted capitulation. These remarks apply equally to the landing of the 44th Indian Brigade consisting of the 6/1st Punjab Regt, the 7/8th Punjab Regt and the 6/14th Punjab Regt commanded by Brigadier



Singapore Island

G. Ballantine (2nd Punjab Regt). These were all young battalions of the 17th Division raised and partially trained for desert warfare. Other reinforcements were 7,000 troops for the sadly depleted Indian Divisions. They were all young and untrained with very few of the non-commissioned officers so urgently needed now in the Indian units. Only a proportion of these men had been drafted to the units they were intended to reinforce, and the rest were kept in reinforcement camps on the island. Equally raw reinforcements arrived from Australia. Many of the 2,000 men despatched had been no more than a few weeks in the army, and were not of the best material. Some had not yet fired a rifle.

The disposition of the troops to hold the island was organised directly under General Percival.

The Western Area extended from the River Jurong round the west coast and eastward along the north coast as far as the causeway (inclusive). This, considered the most dangerous area, was given to Gordon Bennett, whose two Australian Brigades were believed likely to be able to offer strong resistance to a Japanese landing. The south-western portion of Gordon Bennett's area was entrusted to the 44th Indian Brigade under his command.

The Northern Area extending from the causeway to Fairy Point at Changi was under the command of Heath to whose shattered Indian Divisions was added the 18th British Division. The 12th Indian Brigade was kept as Malaya Command reserve.

The Southern Area extended from Changi inclusive round the south coast to the River Jurong and comprised practically all the original Singapore fixed defences constructed against a sea-borne landing. This area was commanded by Major-General Keith Simmons, his troops being the 1st and 2nd Malaya Infantry Brigades and the Straits Settlements Volunteer Force.

A force of Chinese irregulars which had been operating on the mainland under the command of Lieut.-Colonel J. D. Dalley was rapidly enlarged and armed and equipped as well as possible, which was not very well at that late date. Dalforce became the centre of the resistance movement after the capitulation.[1]

The 6/15th Indian Brigade temporarily commanded by Lieut.-Colonel Morrison held the eastern part of the 11th Indian Division's sector. The British Battalion was on the right, the 3/16th Punjab Regt in the centre, and the Jat/Punjabi Battalion in the dockyard on the left. The frontage was 6,500 yards of coast.

[1] Far the best account of these irregulars is given by Lieut.-Colonel F. S. Chapman D.S.O. in his remarkable book *The Jungle is Neutral.*

The 28th Indian Brigade held the 6,000 yards of coast between the dockyard and the causeway. The 2/9th Gurkha Rifles were on the right as far as the naval base. The 2/2nd Gurkha Rifles with a company of the 2/1st Gurkha Rifles and a machine-gun company of the Manchesters were on the left, their flank connecting with the right flank of the 2/30th Bn of Maxwell's 27th Australian Brigade 400 yards east of the causeway. The 5/14th Punjab Regt was in reserve.

The 8th Indian Brigade now commanded by Brigadier Trott and consisting of the 1st Frontier Force Rifles, the 2nd Baluch Regt and two companies of the Bahawalpur Infantry was in divisional reserve. It was to be joined by the Garhwal Battalion which was being formed from survivors and reinforcements of the 2nd and 5th Royal Garhwal Rifles.

Another reinforcement was the 100th Light Tank Squadron under Major Alford with nine obsolescent tanks, each manned by two men, and those exiguous crews only half-trained.

On February 5th the 6/15th Indian Brigade was relieved by the 53rd Brigade. The 2nd Cambridgeshire Regt took the place of the British Battalion, the 6th Norfolk Regt of the 3/16th Punjab Regt and the 5th Norfolk Regt of the Jat/Punjabi Battalion. The last was now dissolved. The 1/8th Punjab Regt became itself again, and the 2nd and 4th Jat Regt were formed into the Jat Battalion and placed under the command of Lieut.-Colonel Cumming V.C. who by some miracle of the human will had managed to recover by now from his wounds and emerge from hospital. The 6/15th Indian Brigade left the 11th Division to join the 12th Indian Brigade in corps reserve.

Key had sent a detachment to keep a look out from McAdam's Hill for the lost 22nd Brigade, and when on the night of February 1/2nd the code signal was flashed that it was arriving there was a moment of exhilaration and gratitude. All that came, however, were Parkin, his British officers and 60 of the 5th Sikh Regt, the British officers of the 2nd Frontier Force Regt, and a few riflemen o the 2nd Royal Garhwal Rifles.

For the first eight days on the island the 11th Indian Divisi like all the other troops was working all day at the construction of shore defences, support lines, gun positions, wiring and underwater obstacles, in other words to try to make up in eight days for 14 years eaten by the locusts since Singapore had been erected into Britannia's throne from which to rule the Far Eastern sea. At the same time the sappers of the division were preparing demolitions in the naval base,

but out of sight of the troops whose morale at this time was high and who were ready to die in defence of those impressive installations.

On February 5th the Japanese artillery which had been preparing for action opened with unexpected weight.

According to the Japanese sources already quoted it 'is said to have been the heaviest concentration of fire ever put up by the Japanese Army. The guns used were of all calibres, but the main punch came from modern 240 mm. howitzers which had been specially built for this very purpose . . . for three days the artillery duel went on, and all the while Japanese bombers droned overhead in successive waves, unopposed by any enemy airplanes; and after the first day, with little if any anti-aircraft fire to bother them.'

This suggests a greater weakness in anti-aircraft artillery than in fact there was.

For two days and three nights the artillery bombardment was concentrated on the naval base, the gun positions and observation posts of the 135th Field Regt, and of the 27th Australian Brigade on the left flank of the 28th Indian Brigade.

The Hertfordshire Yeomen and the Sikhs of the 4th Mountain Battery replied gloriously. The cables of the 135th Field Regt were repeatedly cut, but communication between the guns and observation posts was never interrupted. Lieut.-Colonel Toosey had spent many months in England waiting for the Germans. He had duplicate and quadruplicate lines which the regimental signallers by night and day were repairing under fire.

Not a single forward observation officer abandoned his O.P. Jemadar Jogindar Singh of the 4th Mountain Battery and Lieut. Skene of the 135th Field Regt had an O.P. on Bukit Mandai, and the overhanging rock above received 25 direct hits by heavy shells. Nevertheless, the two officers remained calm and directed the counter-battery fire of their own guns so accurately that the enemy's guns shelling the naval base were temporarily silenced on two or three occasions.

Lieut.-Colonel Toosey inspired all his men by his courageous direction and never was a D.S.O. better earned. He was well backed up by his divisional commander who, when the original scale of 20 rounds per gun a day for harassing fire was halved on February 7th, used his discretion liberally to authorise a much higher expenditure. On February 6th three of the enemy's shells landed through the doorway of a magazine in which a platoon of the 2/1st Gurkha Rifles was resting. Ten men were killed and 13 wounded. Naik Choe Singh rescued five wounded men one after another from the magazine

which contained many tons of explosives. He was wounded himself the fourth time he went back, but he went back again for a fifth man.

The heavy concentration of fire on the sectors held by the 27th Australian Brigade and the 28th Indian Brigade seemed to indicate that these would be the immediate objective of the enemy's assault troops. Nevertheless, patrols of the 53rd Brigade and the 28th Indian Brigade to the Johore coast could discover no sign of Japanese concentrations east of the causeway.

In the early morning of February 8th two Australian patrols which had been on the mainland for 24 hours returned with news that on the previous day large bodies of enemy troops had arrived in the rubber plantations opposite the north-west coast of the island held by the 22nd Australian Brigade with a frontage of about three miles to a battalion; and at 10 a.m. the heavy concentration of fire on the 27th Australian Brigade and the 28th Indian Brigade was now directed against the area occupied by the A.I.F.

All the signs pointed to an imminent assault upon the north-west sector of the island. It would seem that some of the Australian artillery was shelled out and that their communications were seriously interrupted.

Just after 10 p.m. Toosey telephoned to D.H.Q. that he had seen red and blue lights on the front of the 22nd Australian Brigade; he had not heard any firing by the Australian guns and presumed it was a Japanese S.O.S. signal.

In fact those red and blue rockets proclaimed that the first assault group of crack troops from Matsui's 5th Division and Mutaguchi's 18th Chrysanthemum Division were across the straits with the Tengah airfield as their first objective. It will be remembered that the 5th Division was the one which landed at Singora and advanced down the trunk road and that it was the 18th Division which landed at Kota Bahru. These skilled troops crossed in armoured landing craft which had been taken in lorries from Singora to Penang, sailed from there to Batu Pahat whence they were again carried in lorries to those roads built on Japanese-owned estates during the previous two years for this very operation. They were then floated upon the rivers Skudai, Malagu and Pendas in perfect secrecy.

No detailed account of what happened on those north-west beaches is available. Gordon Bennett says in his diary of February 9th:

> Word came through from a few men who escaped that the 2/18th and 2/20th Battalions had been overrun. No word had been received from the 2/19th. All battalions were out of touch

with brigade. The enemy bombardment had destroyed all beach lights and beach guns and machine-guns and caused heavy casualties among the gunners . . . during the afternoon General Percival called and seemed very worried.

Percival had good reason to be worried. In justice to the Australian infantry it must be borne in mind that the 2/19th Battalion had been shattered in the Muar fighting and that it now contained a large proportion of untrained reinforcements. This was also true of the 2/29th Battalion which had been taken from the 27th Australian Brigade as 22nd Brigade reserve. The weight of the Japanese attack was formidable. It was learned later that 13,000 troops were landed on the island during the night of February 8/9th and another 10,000 shortly after dawn.

The only reserve Percival had was Paris's weak 12th Indian Brigade and even if he had not waited till 8.30 a.m. of February 9th before he moved it forward to come under Gordon Bennett's command, 250 Argylls, 150 Royal Marines and 440 4th Hyderabads, many of them newly arrived reinforcements, would not have affected the issue.

The 44th Indian Brigade had repulsed an attempted landing by the enemy on its right in the creek of the River Bireh, but it was not engaged again. Percival debated the possibility of using this brigade to attack the Japanese right flank, but finally decided in agreement with Gordon Bennett to fall back to the left of the front it was proposed to establish between the head of the Kranji Creek, which had divided the 22nd Australian Brigade fron the 27th, and the River Jurong. The withdrawal from the coast was effected that evening. The Kranji-Jurong position was not selected: it was the line to which the 22nd Australian Brigade had already been driven back.

The 6/15th Indian Brigade now commanded by Brigadier Coates was taken out of III Indian Corps and placed under Gordon Bennett's orders. It was to move to a position on the Bukit Timah road near the racecourse with the object of denying to the enemy the petrol and food dumps east of Bukit Timah.

By dusk the Japanese were in possession of the Tengah airfield which had been held by troops of the Jind Infantry, a good unit of the Indian States Forces. It may be observed here that the defence of aerodromes in Malaya entrusted to the Mysore, Jind, Bawahalpur and Kapurthala States Forces never had the faintest prospect of success; it was merely one more of those liabilities with which the R.A.F. loaded the Army.

When Percival returned to his headquarters he worked on a plan

to hold a perimeter to include the Kallang airfield, the MacRitchie and Peirce reservoirs, and the Bukit Timah depots in the event of a Japanese advance down the Bukit Timah road. This contingency was communicated verbally to Heath and Keith Simmons on the evening of February 9th. Soon after midnight it was issued in writing as a secret and personal instruction to senior commanders and staff officers. That Percival was right in preparing for the worst is unquestionable, but some of his senior commanders may have wondered if he had always fully appreciated as promptly the inevitability of retreat down the mainland. And Percival adds:[1] 'Gordon Bennett was not quite so confident as he had been up-country. He had always been very certain that his Australians would never let the Japanese through and the penetration of his defences had upset him.'

The 27th Australian Brigade had not been attacked during February 9th, but its left flank resting on the Kranji had been uncovered by the overrunning of the 22nd Australian Brigade. The enemy's artillery bombardment continued through the night Patrols of the 2/2nd Gurkha Rifles in touch with the 2/30th Australian Battalion on their left had received reports of 'all quiet' u to 4 a.m. on February 10th and there were no sounds of battle.

Half an hour later the Gurkha officer in command of the platoon on the extreme left of the area of the 11th Indian Division was given a torn scrap of paper by two Australians, on which was scrawled: *Position on Mandai road near Bt. Mandai and 195 feature near 13 M.P.* Captain Bucknall, the company commander, at once ordered the platoon to send a patrol to the area of the 2/30th Australian Battalion. The patrol returned with the news that the battalion's forward post on its right was empty.

By 6.30 a.m. divisional headquarters was in communication with the 8th Australian Division's headquarters and was told that news had just come in of the 27th Australian Brigade's withdrawal from its position, and that it was believed the brigade was occupying an area round Mandai Road village. A suggestion that the position by the causeway should be reoccupied could not be accepted with regret owing to lack of troops.

The enemy could now cross the straits west of the causeway without interference because the causeway itself would defilade even the gunfire of the 2/2nd Gurkha Rifles whose flank was now open and overlooked by the hills quitted by the 2/30th Battalion. Moreover, the area, being covered with rubber and scrub, would allow the

[1] *The War in Malaya*, p. 275.

Japanese to penetrate unobserved west of the Bukit Timah road and on south of the naval base in the rear of the 28th Indian Brigade. Gordon Bennett says in his diary of February 10th:

> The 27th Brigade is now in trouble. Enemy parties in boats crossed the Kranji River, outflanking several posts held by the 2/26th Australian Battalion which withdrew behind Bukit Timah road. This brought about the sympathetic withdrawal by the left flank of the 2/30th Battalion, thus uncovering the Causeway.[1]

Key discovered that the 27th Australian Brigade was holding a position, facing west, one mile east of the Bukit Timah road. The 2/30th Battalion was in touch with the Garhwal Battalion and with the 2/26th on the lower slopes of Bukit Mandai. So these dispositions left the Bukit Timah road open to the enemy and Key urged Maxwell to move his line forward and hold the village to stop the enemy from an unopposed march along the main road to the city.

Meanwhile, Captain Bucknall had led his reserve platoon under cover of a congestion of railway trucks to a position from which he could attack Hill 95 which was now in Japanese hands after being abandoned by an Australian machine-gun post. Bucknall on going forward with a section to reconnoitre his objective found a trench occupied by eight wet and naked Japanese who were all killed. Bucknall himself then went forward with his orderly and was killed in getting through a wire fence. Lieut. Coombe went forward on hearing the shots and was also killed.

The Gurkha officer commanding the platoon, finding that the hill was strongly wired, withdrew to report that the area between Hills 125 and 95 was full of Japanese. Lieut.-Colonel Woollcombe had already heard that the enemy had penetrated between one of his companies and battalion H.Q. The commander of the Northumberland Fusiliers machine-gun company in accord with the glorious traditions of the old Fighting Fifth formed a rifle platoon from men of his company and placed it at Woollcombe's disposal. Immediately the sergeant in charge of the 5th Searchlight Battalion's detachment offered Woollcombe two light automatic sections. These gallant and most welcome reinforcements held a track leading from Hill 125 to battalion H.Q.

The need to stop the gap between the 27th Australian Brigade and prevent the isolation of all the troops in the naval base was most urgent. Key ordered Trott to occupy the Hankow, Bukit Sembawang, and Marsiling estates, the advance of the 8th Indian Brigade to be

[1] *Why Singapore Fell*, p. 149.

supported by the yeoman gunners of Hertfordshire. By 10 a.m. news came that the Garhwal Battalion had occupied the Bukit Sembawang Estate without opposition.

Selby had sent a company of the 5/14th Punjab Regt to occupy that vitally important Hill 95; there was no news of it when Key reached the headquarters of the 28th Indian Brigade, and he ordered another company to go forward and attack the position with support from the 135th Field Regt.

Wavell, who was paying his last visit to Singapore, reached divisional headquarters of the 11th Indian Division at noon.

> I ordered General Percival to stage a counter-attack with all troops possible, but I left Singapore on the morning of February 11th without much confidence in any prolonged resistance.[1]

It seems improbable that Wavell's apparent confidence in the possibility of a firm resistance which he expressed on his visits to the Malayan mainland in January was inspired by Gordon Bennett. Anyway, he appreciated the efforts the 28th Indian Brigade was making to restore a situation imperilled by Maxwell's incomprehensible withdrawal of his 27th Australian Brigade, and he communicated this appreciation to those who met him that morning at D.H.Q. He was pleased to hear of the dauntless bombardment of the Japanese by the Hertfordshire and Sikh gunners. In the last 24 hours they had fired 7,000 rounds. Key had unlocked his discretion wide. It will be remembered that the allowance had been cut to a daily 10 rounds per gun.

No news had come by 10 a.m. of the missing company of the 5/14th Punjab Regt, but Lieut.-Colonel McAdam who had gone forward to look for them had now been joined by the second company on Hill 125. News from the 8th Indian Brigade was not too good. An officer of the Garhwal Battalion arrived in a carrier to report that three companies were pinned down by much superior forces on the Marsiling Estate and that Lieut.-Colonel Smith who had gone forward into the thick of the fight had been killed. The Cookies[2] and the 2nd Baluch Regt were dispersed in the difficult country of the Hankow and Bukit Sembawang estates, and the inner flanks of the 8th and 28th Indian Brigades were commanded by Hill 95. Trott was told by Key that if the attack by the 5/14th Punjab Regt had failed he must be ready to attack it with the 1st

[1] Despatches on Operations in South-West Pacific. General Sir Archibald Wavell, par. 27.

[2] 1st Frontier Force Rifles (Coke's Rifles).

Frontier Force Rifles and at dawn attack the Marsiling Estate with the 2nd Baluch Regt.

On his way back from Trott Key found that the 27th Australian Brigade was where it had been in the early morning with the Bukit Timah road still open to the enemy. He insisted to Lieut.-Colonel Ramsay of the 2/30th Battalion that the immediate occupation of the Mandai Road village was too vital to wait for orders from Gordon Bennett who was probably preoccupied with the rapidly worsening situation in the west. Back at D.H.Q. Key sent a message to Maxwell urging the necessity of occupying the village and apprising him of the situation on the Marsiling Estate.

Word arrived from McAdam on Hill 125 that he could not attack Hill 95 from where he was because between the two hills was a high iron paling fence heavily wired, in climbing which his company would inevitably be wiped out.

That evening news came that Hill 95 had been captured by the Cookies from the other side and that at dawn Percival and Gordon Bennett would launch an offensive to throw the Japanese off the island. The capture of Hill 95 had been unopposed, but the Japanese were in possession of the Marsiling Estate; of the Garhwalis at least two-thirds were casualties, three more British officers being killed after desperate hand to hand fighting with ever increasing enemy forces.

After the Cookies occupied Hill 95 Lieut.-Colonel Gilbert sent the Pathan company to get in contact with any Garwhalis who might still be in the Marsiling Estate. Subadar Gul Din Khan, the company commander, led the advance with the forward section of his right platoon. Soon the company was held up by very heavy fire from strongly entrenched Japanese. Subadar Gul Din Khan worked his way forward with his section, but by the time he was within charging distance of the enemy only four men of the section were unhurt. Subadar Gul Din Khan led his four Pathans in a charge against a machine-gun post and when the gallant four fell Subadar Gul Din Khan charged on alone; as he reached the enemy's position he was killed. The rest of the company taking advantage of their subadar's valour continued their advance and succeeded in driving the enemy from the outskirts of the estate. Then they encountered overwhelming opposition and could advance no farther.

At 9 p.m., not a minute too soon and some hours too late, the 27th Australian Brigade was put under the command of Key to whom Maxwell reported that the Mandai Road village was now held by the 2/30th Battalion. Key impressed on him the need to hold

at position at all costs because the enemy had been ferrying large orces over west of the causeway all day since Maxwell had abandoned his original position, so that if the village was not held the Japanese would be able to advance down the Bukit Timah road and get behind the 8th Brigade on the Chon Chu Kang and Jurong roads. At the same time Maxwell was informed of the dawn attack by the 2nd Baluch Regt on the Marsiling Estate which would secure his right flank at Mandai Road village.

At 10 p.m. Trott was informed that the village was now held by the 2/30th Battalion and that the Marsiling Estate must be occupied. Trott asked that the 2nd Baluch Regt should start its attack from the south to avoid a repetition of the Garhwalis' losses. This had just been agreed to when Trott said that the commanding officer of the 1st Frontier Force Rifles had now come in to announce that his battalion had left Hill 95, apparently without having been attacked. Key might have been excused for supposing that Hill 95 was bewitched. The Australians had left it in a hurry without being attacked. The 5/14th Punjab Regt had shied at attacking it when it was empty of the enemy. Now the Cookies had left it without bein attacked. Key ordered its reoccupation by 6.30 a.m. next morni by them; but Selby had already heard that the hill was empty and had ordered the 5/14th Punjab Regt to reoccupy it at 4 a.m.

We may glance for a moment at what had happened in the west. After Percival's visit that morning to Gordon Bennett when he found him not quite so confident 'as he had been up-country' he ordered Heath to withdraw three battalions from different brigades of the 18th British Division and send them to the Bukit Timah road under Gordon Bennett's command. This force was commanded by Lieut.-Colonel Thomas of the 9th Northumberland Fusiliers and was known as Tomforce. After leaving Gordon Bennett's headquarters, where Wavell and Percival narrowly escaped being killed by Japanese bombs, the two generals passed

> an undisciplined-looking mob of Indians moving along the road. They were carrying rifles and moving in no sort of formation. Their clothing was almost black. I must confess I felt more than a bit ashamed of them and it was quite obvious what the Supreme Commander thought. Only recently have I learnt the truth. This was the administrative staff of a reinforcement camp on the move. The quartermaster had some rifles in store and, good quartermaster as he was, had determined that they must be taken. So, having no transport, he had given one to each man to carry. The blackened clothing came from burning oil. That is another point

behind the company of the 2/30th Battalion. By now Toosey's guns were almost in the front line, and he was ordered to withdraw his batteries and come into action near Nee Soon in support of the 8th Indian Brigade.

Maxwell and Trott were at D.H.Q. when Key returned. The former reported that he had been ordered by Gordon Bennett to occupy Bukit Panjang village if possible and that if it was impossible he was either to move south and join the 8th Australian Division[1] or if the way south was blocked to rejoin the 11th Indian Division. He had already sent off his two battalions less the company of the 2/30th in action on the Mandai road, but he had not had any news yet of their progress.

It is hard to believe that a divisional commander could have given such orders as those given by Gordon Bennett or that he should have moved the 27th Australian Brigade without informing III Corps or Malaya Command of his intention, but that is what he did. Heath and Percival were unaware of these orders, and Gordon Bennett in his diary says nothing to elucidate his action.

His diary under the date, February 12th, notes:

> The 2/15th [*sic*] Indian Brigade and part of the 44th Indian Brigade withdrew from their positions.

The result of this unexpected withdrawal of the 27th Australian Brigade from its positions was that the 11th Indian Division's line of communications now depended on the ability of that single company of the 2/30th Australian Battalion and the 2nd Baluch Regt to secure Nee Soon against an advance by the enemy down the Mandai road. Percival had noted on the previous day:

> Key was well forward with his troops and in close touch with the situation, but a bit anxious about his left flank. The junction of the Mandai and Bukit Timah roads was clearly the key to the situation here, and I sent a personal instruction to the 27th Australian Brigade to try to push forward and get control of it again.[2]

Heath now telephoned that two more battalions had been taken away from the 18th Division to form Massey Force under the command of Brigadier Massey-Beresford. These were the 5th Suffolk Regt and the 1st Cambridgeshire Regt to which was added the newly

[1] That presumably meant H.Q. The 22nd Australian Brigade by now was in dissolution.

[2] *The War in Malaya*, p. 276.

Chapter 31

February, 1942. Heavy fighting on island—abortive counter-attacks—plight of civil population—the capitulation—pressure on Indian prisoners—situation in Pacific theatre.

GORDON BENNETT'S counter-attack from which so much had been hoped was called off; the Japanese attacked first, and during the night of February 10/11th they penetrated deeply into the area under his command. The Jat Battalion never received the order of cancellation and started off at dawn on a counter-attack all alone. The tale shall be told later.

A sign of the rawness of the 44th Indian Brigade which lacked junior leaders of experience was given that afternoon when the whole brigade was thrown into a sudden panic and got itself four miles from where it ought to have been. However, when further progress was barred by the beach of Pasir Panjang, the officers regained control and the only damage was a long walk back.

Just after 8 p.m. a strong attack was made by the enemy on the village of Bukit Panjang which is seven miles north of Pasir Panjang on the other side of the vital village of Bukit Timah. The remnants of the 12th Indian Brigade were astride the road at Bukit Panjang where they were overrun by Japanese tanks, the first appearance of them on the island. The tanks were stopped close to Bukit Timah village, but that was the end of the 12th Indian Brigade except for about 50 Argylls and 100 Marines who were able to go on fighting.

Up at D.H.Q. of the 11th Indian Division they were warned that it might be necessary at any moment to withdraw the whole of III Indian Corps to a perimeter round Singapore City.

At 7.30 a.m. on February 11th the 27th Australian Brigade received orders from Gordon Bennett to leave Key's command. Key therefore went off at once to find how the 2nd Baluch Regt's attack at dawn on the Marsiling Estate was going. He was disagreeably surprised to find the battalion halted on the Mandai road behind the 2/30th Australian Battalion, and not less disagreeably surprised to find that only one company of the Australians remained in position and that they were *still* one mile east of Mandai Road village in close action with the enemy. Key cancelled the Baluchis' attack and ordered them to occupy a defensive position astride the Mandai road

behind the company of the 2/30th Battalion. By now Toosey's guns were almost in the front line, and he was ordered to withdraw his batteries and come into action near Nee Soon in support of the 8th Indian Brigade.

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[2] *The War in Malaya*, p. 276.

constituted Sikh Battalion under the command of Lieut.-Colonel Parkin, who had received a bar to his D.S.O. for his indomitable bearing in the tragedy of the 22nd Indian Brigade.

At dawn on February 11th the 6/15th Indian Brigade had found itself alone on the appointed start line of the counter-offensive, with the enemy in possession of Bukit Timah. Coates was out of touch with the Jat Battalion as already mentioned. Soon after dawn the British Battalion and the 3/16th Punjab Regt were attacked by enemy infantry and tanks. Simultaneously tanks attacked the rear of brigade H.Q. from the direction of Bukit Timah, when Gauvain the brigade major was mortally wounded. Coates, with his brigade isolated and the enemy exerting pressure fore and aft, ordered his two battalions to withdraw south-east to Reformatory Road, which runs due south of Bukit Timah to the coast at Pasir Panjang. Attacked from all sides by Japanese infantry and bombed from the air the withdrawal became an escape.

Of the British Battalion 300 men led by Captain Wallis reached the 44th Indian Brigade and remained with it until the capitulation. Of the 3/16th Punjab Regt 110 men from C and D Companies got back. What happened to A and B Companies is not known. It was a tragic end for that superb battalion which had always done all and more that was asked of it from its first fight with the Japanese by The Ledge on the Patani road.

The Jat Battalion, re-formed on February 6th from what was left of the 2nd Jat Regt of the 11th Indian Division and the 4th Jat Regt of the 45th Indian Brigade, was under the command of Lieut.-Colonel Cumming V.C. Of the former 120 men and three British officers were left, of the latter 100 men and two British officers. The rest of the battalion was made up of some 300 recruits hastily sent from the training battalion at Bareilly.

At dawn of February 11th unaware that the counter-attack had been cancelled they captured their objective and by doing so found themselves in Japanese territory completely cut off. An attempt was made to march by compass to a position where there had been a British division, and for two days they marched by night and lay low by day with such little food as they could find until on the morning of February 13th they found themselves back on Hill 220, their original objective in the cancelled counter-attack. For two more days and nights they marched and lay up until on the night of February 15th the Japanese guns were silent.

On the afternoon of February 16th when it was clear that Singapore had capitulated a durbar was called for all British officers and

V.C.O.'s at which it was decided that the main body should surrender by marching up the main road into Singapore. Those who wished to attempt to escape from the island in small parties were free to do so. The British officers, with the subadar-major and the two jemadars, succeeded after a series of strange and perilous adventures in reaching Sumatra. It may be asked why at least two of the British officers did not remain in charge of those who elected to bury their arms and surrender, but all the men were free to make an attempt to escape, and in the circumstances there was no point in any British officers marching the men in merely to surrender. This was the argument used by Lieut.-General Gordon Bennett, and it could be maintained that the moral responsibility of a lieutenant and a lieutenant-general for the men under their command differs only quantitatively. It is not for the writer to express an opinion.

The situation was pretty desperate by nightfall of February 11th. A wavy line ran from the southern banks of the MacRitchie reservoir to the Chinese High School and from there to the Reformatory School and on to Pasir Panjang, if the perforations that hold together a sheet of stamps can be called a line.

That day the Indian Base Hospital at Tyersall, which was a hutted camp, caught fire. The survivors of the Argylls and Marines spent the rest of the day rescuing hundreds of wounded from blazing huts, but about 200 of the wounded were burnt to death.

In the evening a Special Order of the Day dated February 10th reached the defenders of Singapore from Wavell:

> It is certain that our troops on Singapore Island heavily outnumber any Japanese who have crossed the Straits. We must destroy them.
>
> Our whole fighting reputation is at stake and the honour of the British Empire. The Americans have held out in the Bataan Peninsula against far heavier odds; the Russians are turning back the picked strength of the Germans; the Chinese, with almost a complete lack of modern equipment, have held back the Japanese for four and a half years. It will be disgraceful if we yield our boasted Fortress of Singapore to inferior enemy forces.
>
> There must be no thought of sparing the troops or civilian population, and no mercy must be shown to weakness in any shape or form. Commanders and senior officers must lead their troops and if necessary die with them. There must be no question or thought of surrender. Every unit must fight it out to the end and in close contact with the enemy.
>
> Please see that the above is brought to the notice of all Senior Officers and by them to the troops.

> I look to you and to your men to fight to the end to prove that the fighting spirit that won our Empire still exists to enable us to defend it.

It is questionable whether at the time General Wavell wrote that order of the day he had realised the weight of the Japanese attack. He was presently to learn from bitter experience how swift was to be the collapse of the Netherlands East Indies and how bloody the cost of a Burma as ill prepared to resist aggression as was Malaya. This order of the day was not 'featured' at home, but it was published in several papers and its publication gave the world an entirely false impression of the Malayan Campaign.

There may have been 85,000 British, Indian and Australian troops on the island, but by the time this order of the day was issued the great bulk of those 85,000 consisted of administrative units and half-trained troops soft after long voyages. There was indeed a scarcity of troops to resist the three crack seasoned Japanese divisions which, with two and possibly three reserve divisions of fresh well-trained troops on the mainland, had landed with 175 tanks under the drumfire of a powerful mass of artillery and with the support of 700 first-line aircraft with which there was not a fighter left to interfere.

The Prime Minister in a speech to the House of Commons in secret session stated that 100,000 British and Colonial troops in Singapore had surrendered to 30,000 Japanese. He may have sincerely believed this at the time, but when the stress of mortified emotion had relaxed and more accurate information was available he made no attempt to correct his mistake, nor did he mention the complete domination of the air by the Japanese.

It does not suggest an overwhelming superiority in numbers to find that an infantry battalion had been hastily got together on that evening the order of the day was received under the command of Lieut.-Colonel Taylor R.E. consisting of Madras and Bombay Sappers and Miners who throughout the withdrawal had served the 11th Indian Division with unfailing gallantry and skill. This battalion was sent to reinforce the 44th Indian Brigade and hold a sector of the Reformatory Road area.

The comparison of what was happening in Singapore with what the Americans, Russians and Chinese were doing was certainly unjust and possibly injudicious. The Americans in the Bataan Peninsula were outnumbered, but they did not have to fight any crack Japanese troops until after Singapore had fallen when many of those seasoned troops were transferred to the Philippines. Moreover, the

terrain favoured the defenders on the Bataan Peninsula because it compelled the Japanese to attack frontally and the encircling tactics they used in Malaya were not feasible with secure flanks. Finally the Americans had for a last stand a genuine fortress in Corregidor.

The last stand in Singapore would have to be made in a swarming city the unfortunate inhabitants of which were being killed at the rate of over 2,000 a day by Japanese bombs, the water of which was failing, and the prospect of which was a hideous massacre by the Japanese if the maddened enemy broke through.

Neither of the other two comparisons is relevant to the situation in Singapore. Neither Russia nor China is the size of the Isle of Wight.

From the garrison's point of view Wavell was on the edge of absurdity when he spoke of the disgrace of yielding our boasted Fortress of Singapore to inferior enemy forces. Who boasted that Singapore was a Fortress? Not the luckless commanders of the Indian units, not the sepoys, not the lads from Norfolk and Suffolk and Cambridgeshire, and certainly not the Australians when they saw it. The boasting was done on instructions from home. The troops were like the poor dog who went to the cupboard for a bone; when they got there they found Britannia dressed up like Old Mother Hubbard and not less vague about the situation.

So much having been said, let it be added with all emphasis that Wavell was throughout these days moral and physical courage incarnate and that the impression he made on all ranks was deep and abiding.

Of him may be said what Tacitus said of Agricola:

> Quidquid ex Agricola amavimus, quidquid mirati sumus, manet mansurumque est in animis hominum, in aeternitate temporum, in fama rerum.
>
> What we have loved in Wavell, what we have admired, abides and will abide in the hearts of men, in the procession of the ages, in the records of history.

Wavell's order of the day was accompanied by one from Percival, in the course of which he said:

> In some units the troops have not shown the fighting spirit which is to be expected of men of the British Empire.
>
> It will be a lasting disgrace if we are defeated by an army of clever gangsters, many times inferior in numbers to our own. The spirit of aggression and determination to stick it out must be inculcated in all ranks. There must be no further thought of withdrawal without orders.

> There are too many fighting men moving about in back areas. Every available man who is not doing other essential work must be used to stop the invader.

We may view with abhorrence the bestial cruelty of the Japanese to their prisoners, we may be nauseated by their revolting lack of humour, but the last word we can apply to them as soldiers is 'gangsters.' Not since Sparta has the world seen such selfless warriors, and their final defeat in Burma by the Fourteenth Army must count as a martial achievement second to none in the story of Imperial Britain and second to none in the campaigns of the vastest war mankind has so far suffered.

Those orders of the day probably did not reach most of the battalions west of Singapore, but they were sent to all units in the 11th Indian Division with a covering letter by Key which added:

> The Divisional Commander directs that all ranks should be informed of the gist of these Special Orders, and that General Sir Archibald Wavell, during his visit to the Division yesterday, expressed himself well pleased with the conduct of the 11th Indian Division since its arrival on Singapore Island.

On February 12th Heath was instructed by Percival to withdraw all his troops from the northern and north-eastern shores of the island because the time had come to establish a perimeter defence round the city. There was heavy fighting when the enemy tried to capture Nee Soon village in which the 2nd Baluch Regt distinguished itself against the Japanese Imperial Guards with tanks which were now coming over the causeway already mended by the enemy's engineers. What was left of the 22nd Australian Brigade, which had been fighting hard in the Pandar area for 48 hours, was withdrawn to the Tanglin area after dark. South of that the 1st Malaya Brigade was fighting beside the 44th Indian Brigade, and a particular tribute is due to the young soldiers of the 2nd Malay Bn for the valour and steadfastness of their defence. Ill-formed criticism at home was allowed to blacken the name of all classes in Malaya, and this opportunity is taken of observing that if the great majority of the people of Great Britain had come through the ordeal endured by the people of Malaya as creditably the people of Great Britain would have deserved the praise that the people of London rightly gained for their behaviour under the German air assault. Responsibility for this ill-informed criticism rests upon those in high places who could not afford to shake public confidence in their conduct of the war by admitting the real reasons why Malaya was lost.

On Friday February 13th the main Japanese attacks were made by the Chrysanthemum Division along the Pasir Panjang ridge west of the city. If the line was broken here it would mean that the Alexandra area with the main ammunition magazine would fall into the enemy's hands. For two days the 2nd Malay Bn fought on until it was almost obliterated.

In the Tyersall-Tanglin area Gordon Bennett had gathered the 27th Australian Brigade and what was left of the 22nd Australian Brigade into a perimeter defence. Presumably he was worried by the prospect of a desperate last stand, for he sent a cable to the Australian Prime Minister[1] to advise him that 'in the event of other formations falling back and allowing the enemy to enter the city behind us' it was his 'intention to surrender to avoid any further needless loss of life.' He did not, however, apprise the Australian Prime Minister of his intention to escape himself if he could. Nor did Gordon Bennett notify Percival of his intention to surrender, which hardly seems in accord with the tradition of military discipline.

Early on February 14th the municipal water engineer warned the Director-General of Civil Defence that the water supply might not last another 24 hours, though the two pumping stations at Woodleigh and Mackenzie Road were still working. The Woodleigh pumping station was now in the front line. The British water engineer in charge was still at his post; his wife was beside him. Yet water pumped like the heart's blood of that devoted pair became mud for pink and yellow journalists alike to fling at better men than themselves.

Singapore in those last three days was a corner of hell.

Here is what the G.S.O.I. of the 11th Indian Division wrote:

> And all this time Singapore was being bombed and shelled. There was hardly a corner of it which was not a fair military target. Lorries stood herded in open parks and nose-to-tail in the streets; the perimeter, too large for the troops who were still standing, was all too small for the miscellany of administrative etceteras which aid the British Army to victory but are merely a hampering burden in defeat; and there were guns here, there and everywhere. Many of the streets were blocked by craters or by a muddle of riven telegraph posts and tangled wire. Drainage and water systems were disrupted. Fifth Columnists, Japanese infiltrators, and panic-stricken members of our own troops vied with each other in causing alarm and despondency by their shooting matches within the city. And the poor wretched crowded, nerve-wracked civilians, the tally of their killed and wounded ever

[1] *Why Singapore Fell*, p. 160.

mounting, crowded in their hovels or padded aimlessly up and down the streets, hating the soldiers whose presence had brought them to this pitch of misery and longing for the end of it all.

The 11th Indian Division was still standing firm on Sunday February 15th, and on its left the 5th Norfolk Regt and 2nd Cambridgeshire Regt of the 53rd Brigade, heavily engaged from dawn until the moment of capitulation arrived, did not flinch.

The 2/9th Gurkha Rifles with the divisional signals in a close perimeter round Bondamoer still hoped to die fighting. That wonderful battalion had lost 11 British officers and 750 other ranks.

On the last day the spirit of Moorhead was still with his 3/16th Punjab Regt. A small feature known as Petrol Hill was captured by the enemy, but he was immediately thrown off it by the last detachment of the 3/16th Punjab Regt whose casualties since the Patani road had been eight British officers (seven of whom were killed), 16 of the original 19 V.C.O.'s (12 of whom were killed) and 700 other ranks.

That morning Percival received a telegram from Wavell:

> So long as you are in a position to inflict losses and damage to enemy and your troops are physically capable of doing so you must fight on. Time gained and damage to enemy are of vital importance at this juncture. When you are fully satisfied that this is no longer possible I give you discretion to cease resistance. . . . Inform me of intentions. Whatever happens I thank you and all your troops for your gallant efforts of last few days.

Percival, after consultation with all his commanders, agreed with their unanimous opinion that the only alternative to surrender was a resistance capable of holding out only long enough to madden the Japanese and thereby provoking an indiscriminate massacre of the civil population.

Yamashita, the commander of the 25th Japanese Army, demanded Percival's own presence and refused to parley with any representative. He even refused to guarantee Percival a safe-conduct unless a Japanese flag was flown over the Cathay Building as a guarantee of no further fighting by the troops under his command.

To the eternal shame of certain newspapers a photograph of that unfortunate commander marching along the dreary Bukit Timah road in the heat of that afternoon, with him one soldier carrying a white flag and another the Union Jack, was published in England. Those responsible should have been put ashore on the coast of

Malaya and allowed to fall into the hands of the Japanese. One day on the railway of death in Siam would have cured them of exploiting the mortification of brave and honourable soldiers for the morbid curiosity of their readers.

The parley took place in the bleakly pretentious Ford factory close to Bukit Timah village. On the floor were inscribed the names of Japanese officers where each had his seat. 1,297 days hence Percival would be present in Manila when Yamashita surrendered to MacArthur, to be hanged in due course for the crimes committed by himself and his troops.

At 7.30 p.m. orders came that the 'Cease Fire' would take place at 8.30 p.m. and that all guns, wireless sets, etc., would be kept 'for handing over in their existing condition.' The guns and wireless sets of the 11th Indian Division had all been completely destroyed; at 8.30 p.m. every post of the 11th Indian Division was intact.

On February 16th the following Special Order of the Day was issued by Lieut.-General Percival:

> It has been necessary to give up the struggle, but I want the reasons explained to all ranks. The forward troops continue to hold their ground, but the essentials of war have run short. In a few days we shall have neither petrol nor food. Many types of ammunition are short, and the water supply, on which the vast civilian population and many of the troops are dependent, threatens to fail. This situation has been brought about partly by hostile air and artillery action. Without these sinews of war we cannot fight on. I thank all ranks for their efforts throughout this campaign.

There is no doubt whatever that Percival's decision to surrender when he did was the only decision possible.

Here is an extract from a Japanese account of the last moments:

> The enemy still continued to fire stubbornly at the advancing Japanese troops who had by that time advanced to a line whence they could charge into the city at a single dash. Just when the High Commander had made up his mind that this last charge could not be averted in spite of the danger to civilians, a British messenger bearing the white flag of truce arrived at the Headquarters of the Japanese troops. The time was exactly 4.30 p.m., the place was the Ford Automobile Works.

At the cessation of hostilities the most conservative estimate would allow a minimum of 100,000 Japanese troops in Singapore Island

and in Southern Malaya. There were probably considerably more. There was a minimum of 175 Japanese medium and light tanks on the island.

The total of British forces on Singapore Island at the time of the first Japanese assault was about 85,000, which included not only the sick and wounded but also the troops for whom no arms were available and thousands of non-combatants. There was one squadron of obsolescent light tanks.

Before we pass to the equally tragic story of the Japanese invasion of Burma it may be as well to muster a few facts about the position in the South-West Pacific.

On December 8th 1941 the Allied land forces in that area amounted to the equivalent of eight divisions to deal with which the Japanese had some 26 divisions within striking range. During the campaign the Japanese usually had about three battleships, 28 cruisers, seven aircraft carriers, 71 destroyers, four sea-plane carriers and 34 submarines in the South-West Pacific and adjacent areas.

After the loss of the battleship *Prince of Wales* and the battle-cruiser *Repulse* the Naval Commander-in-Chief was left in control of Allied naval units amounting to one heavy cruiser, eight light cruisers, two sloops, 23 destroyers and 36 submarines. Most of the British ships and some of the Dutch and United States ships were constantly employed on convoy escort and cover.

Besides the British air force (and the U.S. air force in the Philippines the numbers of which are not known at the time of writing) there were six Dutch bomber squadrons and four fighter squadrons in the Netherlands East Indies. Against these the Japanese could call on 1,300 first line aircraft in the S.W. Pacific area of which about 300 were on their aircraft carriers. The Japanese naval and army air forces for the Malayan Campaign consisted of the 22nd Air Flotilla numbering 150 aircraft and the 3rd Flying Division numbering 550.

After the Chiefs of Staff announced on January 1st 1942 those New Year's resolutions of His Majesty's Government which have already been quoted,[1] the strategic result of them was the collapse of the offensive in Cyrenaica and the loss of Malaya and Burma, because they led to nothing more than the piecemeal arrival of reinforcements too little and too late to influence the main issue.

Several ships of the British, Dutch and U.S. naval reinforcements ordered to the South-West Pacific Command failed to arrive. Two cruisers arrived early in the campaign and two at the end of Feb-

[1] p. 178.

ruary. There was also a reinforcement of five destroyers and three submarines. The 53rd British Brigade and the 45th Indian Brigade arrived early in January 1942. The former was equipped and partially trained for the Middle East, reallotted to the defence of Burma and diverted at sea to Malaya. The latter was without artillery or wireless and made up of units raised in 1940–41.

On January 23rd one Australian machine-gun battalion and 2,000 reinforcements for the 8th Australian Division reached Singapore. Their equipment and what training they had had was for the Middle East and many of them had not yet fired even a rifle.

On January 25th arrived the 44th Indian Brigade from India equipped like the 45th Brigade and partially trained for the Middle East. With it arrived the transport of the 18th British Division, but this was not landed owing to air attack and had to be backloaded.

On January 29th the remaining two brigades of the 18th Division reached Singapore with the 100th Indian Light Tank Squadron from India and reinforcement drafts for III Indian Corps from India. The day after they were landed all British forces were withdrawn to the island.

In the middle of January 232 Fighter Squadron R.A.F. reached Singapore with 51 obsolescent Hurricanes and 24 pilots most of whom were reserve pilots without battle experience. The gallantry of these young men could not save that squadron from swiftly being destroyed. 48 Hurricanes of a later model were flown off the carrier *Formidable* into Singapore on January 26th and were used to equip two of the original five fighter squadrons in Malaya. What were left of them had to be flown to Sumatra when the enemy had practically destroyed the Singapore airfields. 39 Hurricanes reached Batavia on January 31st and were assembled by 605 Fighter Squadron, which was one of three squadrons just arrived in Singapore without aircraft. Anti-aircraft reinforcements mostly reached the Dutch islands after the fall of Singapore.

It seems likely that history will declare that February 15th 1942 was the beginning of the end of European domination throughout the East.

One immediate result of the capitulation was to expose some 45,000 Indian troops to Japanese influence. On February 17th the 45,000 Indian ranks in Singapore were separated from their British and Australian comrades and handed over to the Japanese in Farrar Park as prisoners of war.

After a formal ceremony the assembled men were exhorted to join an Indian National Army by Captain Mohan Singh who was taken

prisoner by the Japanese on December 15th 1941 after the 1/14th Punjab Regt was overrun at Asun in that tempest of rain.

About 5,000 men refused to break their oath of allegiance. The remainder dazed by the Singapore disaster and the apparent end of two centuries of British leadership in the Indian Army succumbed to the effect of moral persuasion and physical coercion, together with a campaign of terrorism ruthlessly conducted against them for the next four months.

No more will be said at present about the Indian National Army except to insist that the freedom of India and Pakistan was won not by the Indian National Army but by the two and a quarter millions of Indian volunteers, who besides playing such a great part in defeating the Germans and the Italians, played the chief part in defeating the Japanese on land and thereby did as much to destroy Japanese confidence in ultimate victory as even the mighty achievements of the United States Navy. Nevertheless, it would be wilful blindness not to recognise the influence of the Indian National Army on political opinion in India, by giving it a military self-consciousness of which it had not dreamed since the Great Mutiny.

And those Indian soldiers who had beheld the British Raj seemingly impotent against Japan in Malaya were to hear presently of equal impotence in Burma, an impotence which might open the direct road to freedom for India when throughout the East freedom from European domination was in the hearts of millions of Asians. It may be the verdict of history that Singapore was lost in Whitehall before a shot was fired in the Malayan Campaign, and that may be the verdict about the First Burma Campaign on the tragedy of which the curtain now rises.

Chapter 32

1941. Burma—communications with India—confusion over command—strengthening of forces—reinforcements diverted to Singapore—General Wavell and offer of Chinese troops.

ON April 1st 1937, following on a report of the Indian Statutory Commission of 1930 (the Simon Commission) and the decision of Parliament in the United Kingdom, Burma ceased to be a province under the Government of India and was constitutionally separated from India. Until that date, as far as India was responsible for her own defence, the defence of Burma had been India's responsibility. Between 1931 and 1936 the Government of India consulted with its local government in Burma about the defence of Burma after the impending separation. In July 1936 the Viceroy made his recommendations on Burma's land defence to His Majesty's Government. Nine months later the Government of India was no longer responsible for that defence, but was conditionally committed to reinforce Burma in an emergency.

Before separation there were no distinct establishments in Burma for local naval and air defence. Provision for these after separation was to be settled between H.M. Government and the Government of Burma. India was notified that Burma would undertake the protection of Imperial air routes through Burma, and of airfields as far as possible with the land forces at her disposal, but that it was not considered necessary to maintain a permanent air force in Burma for internal security or against local aggression on her frontiers. India was further notified that Burma, unable to maintain forces of her own for local naval defence, would rely on Singapore preferably for reinforcement and failing Singapore on India.

India reminded Burma that sufficient airfields were essential for air reinforcement and the accumulation of armaments and maintenance equipment most important. The Government of India considered that the local naval defence of India and Burma was a single strategic problem and that it could not be undertaken from Singapore. The Government of India would prefer to be responsible for the local naval defence of Burma at the expense of the latter. Control over all the armed forces in Burma was vested in the Governor with the administrative help of a Defence Department, but there

was little difference between the armed forces for land defence before and after separation. The civil force of Burma Military Police was reorganised, two-thirds of it being allotted to a Burma Frontier Force commanded by an Inspector General under the Governor; the other third was allotted to internal law and order under the Home Minister.

The Army in Burma commanded by a general officer under the Governor comprised:

1 Headquarters Army in Burma, which was about the same size as the former Headquarters Burma District.
2 Headquarters Rangoon Brigade Area.
3 Two British infantry battalions. Four Burma Rifles battalions, each with its own training company for recruits.
4 One Indian mountain battery and one field company Indian Sappers and Miners. Both these were on loan from India and the latter was to be replaced by a company of Burma Sappers and Miners in 1940.
5 A minimum of ancillary units and services without provision for second line transport.
6 One battalion of the Burma Territorial Force.

These military forces were expanded between 1939 and the end of 1941, but the additional strength was impaired by defects inherent in the organisation as it stood before separation. The small and independent military command now set up had been carved out of the experienced Indian organisation with its comparatively large resources; adequate though this may have been for peacetime conditions it was quite inadequate to deal with the expansion imposed by a great war. The officers were drawn from the British service and the Indian Army with little hope of reinforcement in time of war except for the untrained resources of Burma. Before the outbreak of war with Japan and for some time afterwards Burma Army Headquarters was simultaneously a War Office, a G.H.Q., a Corps H.Q. and an L. of C. Area H.Q. Matters of detail could have been worked out more quickly and efficiently by G.H.Q. in India if the Army in Burma had been placed for command and general administration under the India Command. As it was, up to November 1940 Burma was directly under the War Office at home; it was then placed under Far Eastern Command at Singapore. Neither arrangement even bordered upon common sense, but although three times in 1940 and 1941 successive commanders-in-chief urged the authorities in the United Kingdom to place Burma within India

Command, it was not done until December 15th by which time it was too late.

A word about overland communications between India and Burma. For many years the construction of a railway had from time to time been discussed, but commercial interests were against it and military interests were much more concerned with communications on the North-West Frontier.

On May 11th 1936 the Viceroy Lord Linlithgow with truly remarkable prescience[1] wrote to Sir Robert Cassells, the Commander-in-Chief, about the possibility of a Japanese invasion of Burma:

> . . . The position becomes infinitely more anxious if and when British naval forces based on Singapore are crippled or beaten. My contention is that . . . the first and most vital precaution that is within our power to effect is the construction of proper communication by land between Bengal and Burma. I suppose it will be agreed that this should take the form either of a double-track standard-guage railway, or of an adequate military road. . . . Even though the initial landing and occupation of Burma by the Japanese were successfully accomplished, such an Indo-Burma railway or road would render possible the effective employment in Burma of the Army in India, whether or not the control of the Bay of Bengal were in enemy hands.

An examination of the road and rail communications for moving rather less than one division overland into Burma, maintaining it there after concentration east of Rangoon, and then moving it through Tenasserim to the frontier of Malaya was ordered by the Commander-in-Chief in India.

It was estimated that it would take eight years to build a railway link by way of the Hukawng Valley, and five years for a motorable road from Manipur to the Chindwin. Air transportation was also considered, but the Chief of the General Staff, India, thought that it would be many years before they could 'rely on aircraft for the transportation of troops in considerable strength over long distances.'

Cassells, minuting on a file on September 25th 1936, wrote:

> We have now sufficient material in hand to tackle this scheme if and when the time does come for tackling it seriously.

There the matter rested until October 1941 when the scheme for driving a road from India to Burma was taken out of the archives. In the middle of December orders were given to begin the formidable task at top speed. India was to widen the existing road from Dimapur

[1] File Defence Problems 1936 in Historical Section (India).

to Imphal and build a road on from there to Tamu over the existing bridle-track. Burma was to construct a road from Kalewa to Tamu. The road was not finished, but a rough track cut through the jungle of the Kabaw Valley was just passable enough to let the Burma Army through as the monsoon was breaking in 1942. By how perilously narrow a margin that army got out we shall see. It is no exaggeration to give Lord Linlithgow's strategic imagination the virtue of having saved many lives, for although nothing was done until over five years after his enquiry it may be doubted if it would have been done even then without it, and we may feel reasonably sure that if His Majesty's Government had been clearer-sighted over the strategic future of Burma and entrusted its defence to India the road would have been started earlier.

In the spring of 1941 India sent the 13th Indian Brigade commanded by Brigadier Curtis (Sikh Regt)[1] with ancillary troops and services to Burma. The 13th Brigade was composed of the 5/1st Punjab Regt, the 2nd Rajputs and the 1st Royal Garhwal Rifles.[2]

At the same time as the 13th Indian Brigade was sent to Burma the only two modern air squadrons which India had were lent to Far East Command.

[1] Major-General A. C. Curtis, C.B., D.S.O., M.C.

[2] The 5/1st Punjab Regt as the 82nd Punjabis took over the honours of the 22nd Madras Infantry when the latter was disbanded. During the First World War the 5/1st wore blue putties with their khaki and on one occasion during confused trench fighting in Mesopotamia these blue puttees saved the situation because an officer shouted an order for the 'Kala Pattis' to stand fast, and stand fast they did. This feat was commemorated after the First World War by giving the 5/1st a dark blue fringe in the *pallah* in full dress uniform.

The 2nd Rajputs had a military history of nearly a century and a half, it and the 1st Rajputs being the only two units still surviving that could trace their beginnings back to the Bengal units of Lake's Grand Army. Later the 2nd became the 4th Prince Albert Victor's Rajputs. It fought at the Pass of Leswarree which finished off French ambitions in Northern India. It fought well in the First Afghan War and during the First World War equally well in Mesopotamia.

The 1st Royal Garhwal Rifles was originally the 1st Bn 39th Garhwal Rifles. It was already in the trenches of France by October 1914, having landed on October 13th and relieved the 13th British Infantry Brigade. Now it was with the 13th Indian Infantry Brigade in Burma. In the defence of Festubert Naik Darwan Sing Negi won the Victoria Cross and was the first Indian soldier to be decorated by the King-Emperor on the field of battle. At Givenchy and Neuve Chapelle both battalions of the Garhwal Rifles suffered such heavy casualties that in April 1915 they were amalgamated as one until after Loos the regiment was withdrawn and became three battalions. The 1st Bn was in Mesopotamia by the end of 1917 and made a famous forced march of 34 miles to reinforce the Indian brigade that was holding up at Sharquat the retreat of the Turkish army.

When during 1941 the threat to India from Japan was approaching nearer the War Office could not get it into perspective. Spasmodic air raids were the most serious threat that seemed likely to the Chiefs of Staff Committee in London, and Far East Command must have first claim on air reinforcement. We have heard the melancholy tale of the way in which Far East Command was in fact reinforced. As for India, when Japan struck in December 1941, owing to her effort to help Malaya she had less aircraft than a year before. So when the air bases in Burma were captured the North-East of India was exposed to air attack on a serious scale.

In November 1941 General Wavell, now Commander-in-Chief India, visited Burma; so dangerous did he consider the situation then that, although Burma was not under India Command, he ordered the despatch to Burma of another Indian infantry brigade and took up the now urgent question of building a road from Assam to Burma.

Before going any further it may be as well to return for a moment to that question of India's control over military operations and administration in Burma.

Until September 1940 Burma was under the War Office. In that month operational control was transferred to Far East Command which had no interest in Burma except as an air reinforcement route to Singapore. Administration remained with the War Office. In October 1940, Auchinleck, who was then C.-in-C. India, made an effort to have Burma put operationally and administratively under India to ensure a single plan of defence for both; he was unsuccessful. In September 1941 Wavell, now C.-in-C. India, during a visit to England made another effort to secure the change, but the Chiefs of Staff again rejected his plea on the grounds that the whole question had been fully considered when Far East Command was set up. By this time the Japanese had already invaded Indo-China, and that was a direct threat to Burma. Nevertheless, London was determined to sit on a fence and smile at what Mr Churchill called 'the inscrutable glare'[1] of Japan.

On his return to India Wavell visited Burma and Malaya where he found the civil and military authorities in both most anxious for India to assume responsibility for Burma. Accordingly on November 11th 1941 in a cable to the C.I.G.S. he once again recommended the transfer of Burma to the India Command. He pointed out that the defence of Burma was vital to India but not to Malaya. An enemy in occupation of Burma could bomb the principal munition factories in

[1] *Second World War*, vol. ii.

India and the oilfields in Assam. Land reinforcement of Burma must come from India, and if India received the promised air forces air reinforcement would be easier from India than from Malaya. India depended on oil supplies from Rangoon; Malaya did not. These were only some of the arguments which Wavell used. They failed to impress Whitehall and his cable was not even acknowledged.

However, a few days after Japan entered the war Burma was placed under India Command, but when Wavell was appointed to South-West Pacific Command Burma was taken away from India and added to his own already unmanageable responsibilities, and that in spite of his strong recommendation that the defence of Burma should remain under the C.-in-C. India. This was overruled on the grounds that Chiang Kai-Shek must feel himself connected with the new South-West Pacific Command (Abdacom).

In his Despatch of July 1st 1942 General Wavell wrote:

> From my headquarters in Java, 2,000 miles distant from Rangoon, and concerned as I was with an immense area and many international problems, it was impossible for me to give as close attention to the defence of Burma as was desirable; nor had I any reinforcements at my disposal to aid Burma. They must come entirely from India. Moreover, administration of the forces in Burma had necessarily to be conducted from India; and it is always wrong to separate operational and administrative responsibility.

He could have added to this that communication between Abdacom and Burma, even by wireless, was irregular, inaccurate and slow. The unfortunate G.O.C. in Burma, Lieut.-General Hutton[1] hardly ever received a message with any bearing on the actual situation and at the same time he was receiving messages from the War Office about the defence of Rangoon which contradicted those he received from Wavell.

For six weeks this wretched handicap, for which on all the evidence the War Cabinet and the Chiefs of Staff bear the grave responsibility, was obtusely imposed. Then Abdacom closed down, and on February 23rd 1942 Burma was again placed under the India Command, to which Wavell returned on February 27th as Commander-in-Chief.

In December 1941 besides the 13th Indian Brigade now incorporated in the incomplete 1st Burma Division, the 16th Indian Brigade commanded by Brigadier J. K. Jones (1st and 6th Gurkha Rifles) had reached Burma from Kohat. The battalions which com-

[1] Lieut.-General Sir Thomas Hutton, K.C.I.E., C.B., M.C.

posed it were the 1st Royal Bn Jat Regt, the 4th Frontier Force Regt and the 1/7th Gurkha Rifles.[1]

All these Indian troops were of similar quality to those in Malaya. They were mostly young and untried. They were not trained or equipped for jungle-fighting. They had been steadily milked of experienced V.C.O.'s and N.C.O.'s and of their British officers to meet the task of expanding the Indian Army from 200,000 to 2,000,000.

Besides the Indian infantry there was an Indian mountain battery on loan since the separation and a number of Indian Army officers and other ranks with the Burma Army. There was also one flight of the Indian Air Force with obsolete aircraft.

The construction of airfields was well advanced by December 1941, but the air forces to occupy them were sadly weak. The Air Ministry's programme had been to provide ultimately six fighter squadrons, seven bomber squadrons, two army co-operation squadrons, and one general reconnaissance squadron. In January 1942 the A.O.C. Burma asked for 14 fighter squadrons. In the event in the whole course of the First Burma Campaign two fighter, one bomber, two army co-operation squadrons, and one-third of a general reconnaissance squadron were what he received. To these India contributed 60 Squadron R.A.F., whose aircraft were in Malaya, a coast defence flight of six Wapiti and Audax aircraft,

[1] The 1st Jat Regt was formerly the 6th Jat Light Infantry and its full title now was 1st Royal Bn, 9th Jat Regt (Light Infantry). It had a long record of distinguished service. When the British-Indian force at Kabul was overwhelmed three companies of the 1st Jat Regt were sent from Quetta to the little fort of Kelat-i-Ghilzai which with the old 2nd Bombay Pioneers they defended against thousands of Afghans all through the icy winter of 1841–2. They returned to India by way of Kabul and the Khyber Pass with a certain amount of fighting all the way, and in recognition of its valour the battalion was created Light Infantry and the men received a medal inscribed *Victoria Vindex*. The young avenging Queen had been on her throne only five years then.

The battalion was with Sam Browne at the storming of Ali Masjid, and after years of Frontier service went to France in 1914. From here it was brought back to help raise the siege of Kut. After the attempt to storm the Turkish lines at Hannah hardly an officer or a man in the battalion was unwounded. The 1st Bn was created Royal in 1921.

The 4th Frontier Force Regt was once the 54th Sikhs (Frontier Force). The men all volunteered for the Burma War of 1852, and this was the first Punjab battalion to cross the sea. The 4th Sikh Infantry as it was then called led the assault at the relief of Pegu. Just 90 years later it was now back in Burma.

The 1/7th Gurkha Rifles had had less luck than the 2nd Bn in famous occasions; in the First World War the 1st Bn took part in the capture of Mosul and remained in Kurdistan until 1930.

28 Army Co-operation Squadron R.A.F., and one army co-operation squadron of the Indian Air Force seeing active service for the first time. This was the small beginning of much great prowess over Burma and the North-East Frontier in the years to come.

In spite of the fact that military intelligence was unanimous in discounting a Japanese invasion of Burma in much strength, the Commander-in-Chief, India, when for a brief while the command of Burma was his, despatched the headquarters of the 17th Indian Division with the 46th Indian Brigade to be followed as soon as possible by the 44th and 45th Indian Brigades; a special allotment of anti-aircraft guns, four squadrons of fighter aircraft and six squadrons of Blenheim IV's. So when on December 21st Wavell visited Rangoon he had as he thought 'ample forces in sight for the defence of Burma.'[1]

He already had in Burma the 13th and 16th Indian Brigades mentioned, the 1st Gloucestershire Regt and the 2nd King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry, eight battalions of Burma Rifles of variable fighting quality, four mountain batteries and one four-gun 18-pounder battery. His air forces were very weak; but the War Cabinet's programme for reinforcement was almost lavish, and although it did not materialise Wavell could not be blamed for expecting that it would.

Indeed, he felt justified in announcing his intention to make Burma a secure base for future offensive operations. He put his own Chief of General Staff, Lieut.-General Hutton, in command. He pointed out the administrative deficiencies, particularly in transport and medical services. He drew attention to the inadequacy of the staff. He offered to supply the main deficiencies from India, but insisted that replacements for them must be sent urgently from England.

Almost immediately the rapid and alarming deterioration of the position in Malaya changed everything. The remaining brigades of the 17th Indian Division were sent to Malaya where their unhappy fate has been told. The 18th British Division was simultaneously diverted with equally unhappy results. The anti-tank and anti-aircraft artillery also went to Singapore. The two East Africa Brigades which were expected by the middle of February had not embarked by then, and in the end did not reach Burma at all. India did her best. The 48th Indian Infantry Brigade was recalled from the North-West Frontier and reached Burma by February 1st to join the 17th Division; the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade disem-

[1] Despatch on Operations in Burma, Dec. 1941–May 1942, par. 5. By General Sir Archibald Wavell.

barked just before the fall of Rangoon. Three British battalions—the 2nd Duke of Wellington's, the 1st West Yorkshire Regt, the 1st Cameronians—were sent from India by sea, and the 1st Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers were flown in after sea communications were cut.

This almost exhausted India's capacity for reinforcement. The requirements of Middle East, Iraq and Persia had taken all her trained troops, and those nearest to the completion of their training had been sent to reinforce Malaya. The garrisons of the North-West Frontier and internal security troops had been seriously depleted. Yet a battalion of Gurkhas was sent to reinforce the company of the 1st West Yorkshire Regt garrisoning the Andaman Islands. These had to be withdrawn in March after the fall of Rangoon. Finally the small garrison of the island of Akyab was reinforced by an Indian Brigade with anti-aircraft guns.

> I trust that importance of defences Burma and its many deficiencies will be realised and that every endeavour will be made to meet them especially in aircraft which are really urgent.

Thus ended a personal telegram from General Wavell to the C.I.G.S. on December 22nd 1941. The answer was the diversion of nearly two divisions to Singapore. Another paragraph in that telegram was:

> I am sending Burma seven Bofors which are only mobile A.A. guns available in India. A.A. artillery on which I was counting have been sent to Singapore. When can I expect replacement?

In his Despatch of July 1st 1942 Wavell would write:

> The air defences of Burma, especially of the vital port of Rangoon, would have been overwhelmed at once but for the presence in Burma of the American Volunteer Group, an air force manned by American pilots for the defence of China. It was equipped with P-40 fighters and led by Colonel G. Chennault. One of its two squadrons was alternately made available by the Generalissimo for the defence of Rangoon, and the pilots together with the R.A.F. Buffalo fighter squadrons saved the situation by their dash and skill.

Instead of the troops and material and aircraft he wanted Wavell received assurances from Far East Command and the War Office that 'an attack in force against Burma was unlikely until the Japanese had completed their campaigns in Malaya and the Philippines.'

From Rangoon that December Wavell flew to Chungking to

discuss the Japanese with Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek. In view of the fact that Wavell has been criticised for his alleged refusal of Chinese military help it will be of advantage to give his own account of what happened:

> I wished to secure that at least one of the A.V.G. squadrons, which Chennault wished to remove to China, remained in Burma for the defence of Rangoon; also to obtain the temporary use of some of the Lease-Lend material for China, which was stacked in large quantities in the Rangoon docks and could not quickly be removed, to make good the most serious deficiencies in the Burma Army. To neither of these requests did I get a definite reply, though in the end one squadron of the A.V.G. always did remain for the defence of Rangoon, and some of the Lease-Lend equipment was placed at the disposal of the Burma Army. On the other hand, the Generalissimo offered to send to Burma the Fifth and Sixth Chinese Armies. Since it has been alleged that my refusal of this offer was a main contributing factor to the loss of Burma, I will state the facts of the matter from my point of view. I accepted at once the 93rd Division, part of which was already approaching the Burmese border from Puerh, and the 49th Division as a reserve on the northern frontier of Burma at Wanting. These two divisions constituted the Sixth Army, with a third division, the 55th, which General Dennys, head of 204 Mission in China, informed me was very scattered and would take some time to collect and was of poor quality. The Fifth Army, of good quality, was collecting round Kunming. I asked that it should not at present be moved into Burma but should be held in reserve in the Kunming area. I considered that it would be well placed here either to move into Burma if required; or for the defence of Yunnan if the Japanese made an advance north from Indo-China against the Burmese road, a contingency which the Chinese had not long before represented as the enemy's most probable move; or for offensive operations into Indo-China in co-operation with an advance from Burma if all went well.
>
> The Generalissimo made it perfectly clear that it was a condition of the acceptance of his offer that a separate line of communications should be available for his troops and that they should not in any way be mixed up with British troops. It was impossible at the time to provide a separate line of communication for the Fifth Army, though it was possible to keep the communications of the 93rd Division from Puerh separate from that of the British troops in Burma. I had at the time every reason to suppose that should have ample British, Indian or African troops available defend Burma, which did not seem immediately threaten obviously it was desirable that a country of the British Emp

should be defended by Imperial troops rather than by foreign. The Chinese who had no administrative services of their own would have complicated the already difficult administrative problem in Burma. These were the reasons that were the motive of my qualified acceptance of the Generalissimo's offer. It should be noted that a Chinese 'Army' was approximately the equivalent in numbers of a British division but with a much lower scale of equipment.

I am quite satisfied that my decision was justified by the military situation as it appeared to me at the time. Nor had I any reason to know that the Chinese attached great political importance to the acceptance of the offer. The Generalissimo himself showed comparatively little interest in the matter and made no attempt to press me; three-quarters of the lengthy discussions I had with him were devoted to the question of the establishment of an Allied Council at Chungking and to the consideration of an ambitious but somewhat unpractical plan for defeat of the Japanese in 1942.

From subsequent experience of the slowness of Chinese troop moves, I think that even if I had accepted the whole of the Fifth and Sixth Armies at once they would actually have reached Burma very little, if any, sooner than they eventually did.

As things turned out, I admit that it would have saved much criticism in China and in the U.S.A. had I accepted the Generalissimo's generous offer whole-heartedly and at once. I do not, however, think that it would have made any difference in the end to the defence of Burma.[1]

On December 30th Wavell was appointed to command South-West Pacific and we have already heard of his fruitless efforts to keep Burma under India when General Sir Alan Hartley had succeeded him as Commander-in-Chief. Wavell's own comment on Abdacom was:

I have heard of having to hold the baby, but this is twins.

[1] Despatch on Operations in Burma, par. 11. By General Sir Archibald Wavell.

Chapter 33

December, 1941–February, 1942. Japanese intentions—bombing of Rangoon—loss of Tavoy—gallantry at Moulmein—withdrawal across Salween—Bilin line untenable.

NO other division will grudge to the Black Cats of the 17th Indian Infantry Division the right to believe itself *primus inter pares* in Burma during the Second World War. It was the first to arrive in December 1941 and the last to leave when Burma's independence was recognised in 1947. It suffered heavy disaster in its earliest days to win an immortal renown in victory.

The 17th Indian Division was raised in the summer of 1941 by Major-General H. V. Lewis and it was trained and equipped for the Middle East, being due to sail for Iraq in December 1941. Every battalion was Indian and every one was raised from new units. Of the artillery regiments one was British, the other Indian. All the transport was mechanised, and what wireless equipment there was was in lorries. The troops had done no training with the air, there being no aircraft in India for such luxuries.

At the beginning of December while it was training at Poona the division was taken over by Major-General J. G. Smyth V.C.,[1] who had raised the 19th Indian Division at Secunderabad in October 1941, from old battalions of the Indian Army most of which had been on the North-West Frontier since the beginning of the war. The 19th Dagger Division was one day to win much glory in Burma.

The 45th was the first brigade of the 17th Division to embark at Bombay, and as we know after sailing for Basra it was diverted to Malaya to be shattered in the Muar fighting. The 44th Brigade which followed it to Malaya fought in Singapore and became prisoners of war.

So all that was left of the original 17th Indian Infantry Division was the 46th Brigade commanded by Brigadier R. G. Ekin which

[1] Brigadier J. G. Smyth, V.C., M.C., M.P. Lieut. J. G. Smyth of the 2nd Sikh Regt, then the 15th Ludhiana Sikhs, had won the Victoria Cross at Festubert in May 1915, for leading a bombing party over dangerous ground in the course of which he had to swim a stream swept by the enemy's fire. He had returned to India after Dunkirk, having commanded the 127th Brigade of the 42nd East Lancashire Division in France.

followed divisional headquarters in January 1942 soon after the division was in action in Southern Burma.

It may be wondered how the division was in action before its only remaining brigade reached Burma. The answer is that Jones' 16th Indian Brigade was allotted to the 17th Division, together with the 2nd Burma Brigade, with which Smyth was expected to hold up the Japanese advance into Southern Burma.

Burma is the shape of a sting-ray—a great squat lozenge with a long tail. The north-west facet looks to Assam, the northerly apex touches Tibet, the north-east facet abuts on China; the easterly front and south-east facets look to Siam; the south-west and westerly facets look out into the Bay of Bengal. The tail province of Tenasserim shared the isthmus between Burma and Malaya until Siam took all the southern half and thereby prevented Burma from having any common frontier with Malaya. The mighty Salween flowing southward from beyond Lhasa with jungle-clad mountains west of it seemed to offer an impassable barrier to invasion from the east. The dark gorges of this rapid and mysterious stream have never been navigated to its source; it had only one bridge where the single motorable road from Siam crossed the frontier at Tachilek in the province of Kengtung and, traversing the Southern Shan States, joined the main Rangoon-Mandalay road at Meiktila. Strategic opinion had always supposed that in the event of a most improbable invasion of Burma by the Japanese in force such an invasion would have to follow this long road rather than the shorter but difficult tracks farther south. Therefore until such time as the Chinese armies, of which more in due course, could assume responsibility for the Shan States the 1st Burma Division commanded by Major-General Bruce Scott[1] and made up of two Burma Brigades and Curtis's 13th Indian Brigade were on guard over this part of the front.

Almost immediately after December 8th 1941 the Japanese occupied Victoria Point and its airfield at the tip of the Burmese tail, from which presently the airfields at Mergui and Tavoy were bombed. Rangoon was raided on December 23rd and 25th. The material damage was insignificant, but in the first raid over 2,000 people were killed, and the moral damage done was tremendous. There was a large and hasty exodus from Rangoon, and work in the port for some time almost completely stopped, so much of the Indian labour having fled. The Japanese lost many aircraft thanks to the American Tomahawks to whose dauntless pilots Wavell paid such a warm tribute.

[1] Major-General J. Bruce Scott, C.B., D.S.O., M.C. (6th and 8th Gurkha Rifles).

By the time Lieut.-General Hutton assumed command on December 27th it had become clear that the Japanese were preparing to invade Tenasserim in some strength and all reinforcements reaching Burma were sent to that area so vital to the security of Rangoon.

Early in January Hutton wrote an appreciation of the general situation in Burma which forecast the manner of the Japanese attack with remarkable accuracy. It pointed out the advantages to the enemy of an advance through Tenasserim with a clear grasp of his possible strength, mobility and tactical methods. Hutton seemed as early as this to have understood all the implications of the Japanese success in Malaya during that December. He was also sharply aware of the advantage of promptly using the Chinese Fifth and Sixth Armies, whose help had been offered to us, because it would allow the British forces to be concentrated in Tenasserim. Hutton was not informed of the proposed diversion of the 18th Division and the 44th and 45th Indian Brigades to Malaya; but he never considered it practicable to hold Tenasserim as far south as Mergui.

> We should use up troops in small packets of supporting distance of one another. With our present weakness in troops we must endeavour to concentrate as great a strength as possible at the really vital areas.[1]

Unfortunately Far East Command was still obsessed by the need to maintain the aerodromes of the reinforcement route, and to this mirage military advantage had to be sacrificed. Moreover, the effectiveness of the fighter aircraft available in Burma was dependent on the warning system in Tenasserim. Finally, enemy aircraft in the Tenasserim aerodromes might paralyse the port of Rangoon.

So in the end there was no concentration behind the Salween in the Martaban-Bilin area, and troops *were* used up in small packets.

When Major-General Smyth arrived early in January 1942 he found himself with the responsibility of about 800 miles of country with the 16th Indian Brigade in the dense jungle of the Dawna Hills some 80 miles east of Moulmein and the 2nd Burma Brigade scattered about a large and unmanageable extent of country. To be more precise, the 16th Brigade consisted actually of the 1/7th Gurkha Rifles and the 4th Burma Rifles, the 4th Frontier Force Regt being with the 2nd Burma Brigade to stiffen it and the 1st Jat Regt being still in Moulmein, in which Smyth set up his divisional headquarters. The 2nd Burma Rifles and two companies of the 3rd were holding

[1] Lieut.-General Hutton's Report of June 30th 1942.

Mergui and 200 miles north of them the 6th Burma Rifles were holding Tavoy. Another 250 miles farther north brigade H.Q. and the 8th Burma Rifles were at Moulmein. The last had been recruited from Sikhs and Punjabi Mussalmans in Burma.

Smyth's line of communication from Moulmein ran back by river steamer across the Gulf of Martaban, here four miles wide, to the rail and road head at Martaban through Thaton to Bilin and Kyaikto to the railway bridge over the Sittang River where the Burma Army took over.

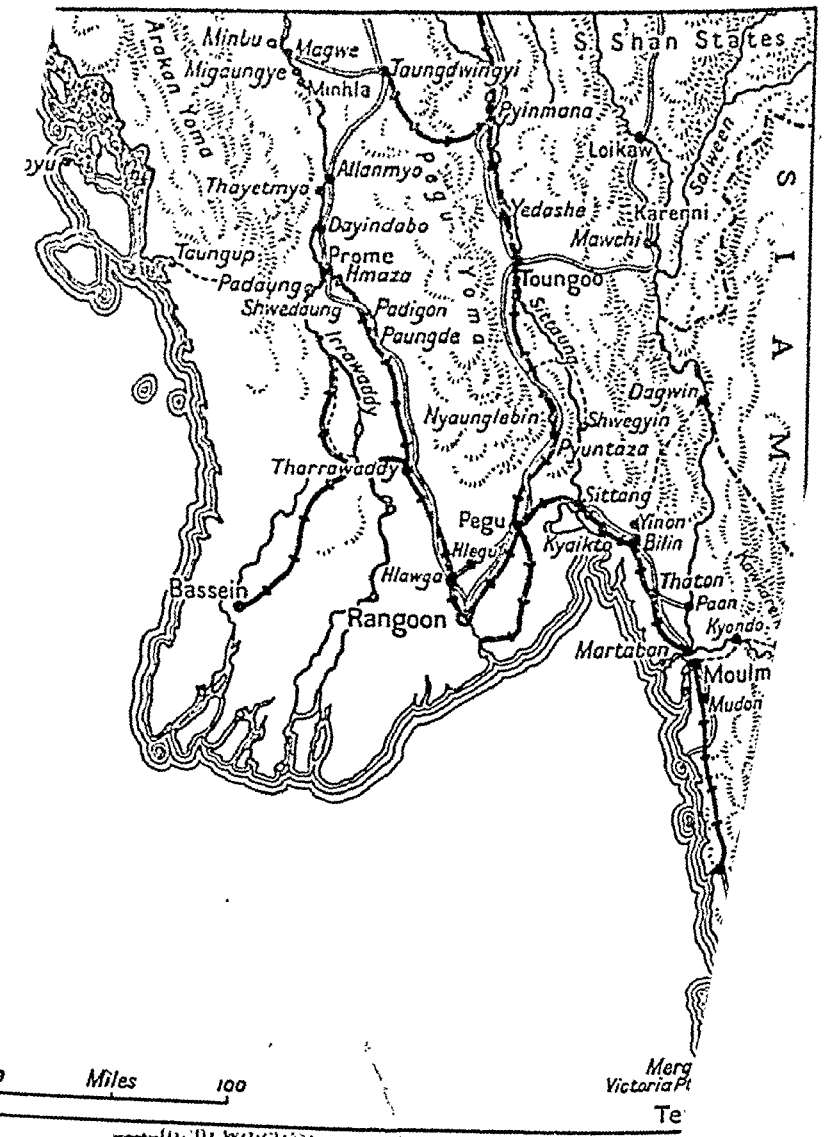
On January 17th the Mergui garrison was reduced by moving the two companies of the 3rd Burma Rifles to Tavoy where the situation was menacing. Mergui would be isolated if Tavoy fell. Finally the garrison was evacuated by sea to Rangoon after the aerodrome had been knocked about as much as possible and the stores destroyed.

The Japanese invasion of Burma was led by the 55th Division less one regiment and it was closely followed by the 33rd Division less one regiment. The former may have been a less seasoned division than the 33rd, which was a crack division of Chrysanthemum quality, but it was extremely well led. A Japanese regiment was the equivalent of one of our brigades and the fire and bayonet power of a Japanese rifle company was at least half as powerful again as one of ours. Every regiment of three battalions had a field or mountain artillery regiment of three batteries, each of three troops. Every troop had four 75 mm. guns. In addition to this every battalion had two 70 mm. infantry guns and a machine-gun company. Rifle companies were armed with light machine-guns and 2-inch mortars.

The 18th Chrysanthemum Division and the 56th Division with the remaining two regiments of the other divisions reached Rangoon in April.

The Japanese received much help from the Siamese Army, although it did not take part in any serious fighting, being used for routine duties and thus allowing the Japanese to make the utmost aggressive use of their troops. There was also the Burma Independent Army which did not fight in any battles but played the part of what in Eastern Europe were known as Partisans.

The Japanese struck at Tavoy on January 15th. A forward position held by three companies of the newly raised 6th Burma Rifles disintegrated and by midday of January 19th in spite of a stout resistance by the remnants of the 6th Burma Rifles and a detachment of the 5th Field Regt R.A. before they were overrun the town was in the hands of the enemy; his aircraft were landing on the aerodrome an hour later.



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[1] Lieut.-General Hutton's Repo

The Japanese did not continue due north. They crossed the frontier early on January 20th to advance against Moulmein by way of the Kawkareik Pass and the Three Pagodas Pass through which ran a track afterwards to become infamous for ever as the track of the railway of death.

Jones, the commander of the 16th Brigade, had been ordered not to become involved in the risk of being cut off. Most of his troops were young and already shaken by enemy air-attacks. He was fighting in dense jungle which helped the Japanese to exploit their favourite tactics of by-passing on a wide front in superior numbers any position he held. So on the night of January 21/22nd Jones ordered an immediate withdrawal to a defensive position west of Kawkareik covered by the 1st Royal Jat Regt. The mechanised transport with as many stores as could be carried was to make for Moulmein by the fair-weather track across the primitive Kyain ferry. The trucks were to be taken over one at a time, and the first of them slipped into the water when the moorings of the ferry boat gave way. That put the ferry out of action which meant that the whole of the mechanised transport of the 16th Indian Brigade had to be destroyed. The next disaster was that the destruction of surplus ammunition by the Jats persuaded some riflemen of a company of the 1/7th Gurkha Rifles that this noise was the enemy advancing in strength and the Gurkhas withdrew. In Kawkareik itself after the 1st Jats had passed through in rather too much of a hurry the mule transport following was fired on; the animals carrying with them mortars, Bren guns and other equipment bolted into the jungle. The Jats were to establish a bridgehead at Kyondo, but the company detailed to cover the crossing of the river hearing some shots in the village withdrew, and the remaining motor transport and stores had to be destroyed. The force finally crossed the river in small boats to Thayattaw. The Kawkareik operations are a sad story; but a company of the 4th Burma Rifles put up a splendid fight with Japanese and Burman guerillas, crossed two unbridged rivers, and finally rejoined the 16th Brigade with its mules, equipment and reserve ammunition intact, having killed 30 of the enemy without a casualty. A company of the 1/7th Gurkha Rifles also put up a fine fight. However, the 16th Brigade in a rest camp 12 miles from Martaban was badly disorganised, having lost all its transport and most of its equipment.

The strategic intention of the Japanese was now clear. Their main forces were moving directly west on Moulmein by way of Kawkareik. One regiment, the equivalent of a brigade, was advancing

toward Paan on the Salween to cut the communications of Smyth's forces from the north. Simultaneously a small force was coming up along the coast from the south and another smaller force was moving through the Three Pagodas Pass on Moulmein from the south-east.

Was Moulmein to be defended? Was it indeed defensible? The decision finally taken was to hold it for as long as possible with a mixed brigade group. This was after a visit to Burma from Wavell who had had to fly 2,000 miles to make it and whose mind was already crowded with imminent decisions raised by the menace to the Netherlands East Indies and the disastrous state of affairs in Malaya. Nevertheless, with a general's eye he was able to note the opportunity afforded to tanks by the country between Rangoon and the Sittang River, and he diverted the 7th British Armoured Brigade from Java to Burma. One asks how the Burma Army would have got out of Burma without that armoured brigade.

If Moulmein had been laid out with the intention of puzzling the defence it would have been a triumph of planning. Vital points like the aerodrome, the supply depot, the ammunition depot, and the quays of the Salween estuary on which communications with Martaban and the road and railway depended were all widely separated from one another and it required a great oblong perimeter of nearly 10 miles to make them secure. This would have taxed the resources of a division: Smyth had a weak brigade which consisted of the 4th Frontier Force Regt, half the 3rd Burma Rifles, the 7th and 8th Burma Rifles, a troop of the 12th Indian Mountain Battery, the 3rd Indian Light Anti-aircraft Battery and a section of the 60th Field Company Indian Sappers and Miners. There was also a detachment of the Burma Frontier Force to defend the aerodrome. These were Sikhs enlisted in Burma and commanded by a former V.C.O. of Smyth's old battalion, the 15th Sikhs, who had been severely wounded in the First World War. This gallant Indian officer, being past the age for military service, had managed to rejoin, and he and his men fought magnificently, holding the aerodrome for 24 hours after it had been isolated. The commander refused to surrender and fought his way out with many of his men—a heart-stirring performance.

On January 24th divisional headquarters moved from Moulmein to Kyaikto. By now the 46th Brigade commanded by Brigadier R. G. Ekin (Frontier Force Rifles) had reached the 17th Indian Division. It consisted of the 5th Dogra Regt, the 7th Baluch Regt and the 3/7th Gurkha Rifles. Ekin was given the hard job of com-

manding the weak brigade defending Moulmein. About 7.30 a.m. on January 30th the Japanese assault began with an attempt at a surprise when four British lorries packed with Japanese infantry rapidly approached Zegyo on the road from Mudon. However, the company of 8th Burma Rifles moving down the road to reinforce the defenders of the aerodrome against a reported enemy attack halted the lorries and the attackers were held for a time. Then the Japanese from the lorries linked up with others on the road to the aerodrome and a heavy attack on the 8th Burma Rifles and the left flank of the 7th Burma Rifles developed. One forward platoon suffered heavily from grenades and small arms fire but with stalwart help from a section of the Indian mountain battery it did not give way and the enemy attack died down.

Eastward during that morning the Japanese crossed the Ataran and penetrating the positions of the 3rd Burma Rifles occupied Hmyawlin and Ngante in spite of more good work by the Indian mountain battery. At 1 p.m. Ekin ordered the 3rd Burma Rifles to withdraw to a shortened line covering the Ridge, which was occupied by the 4th Frontier Force Regt.

The old Moulmein Pagoda with its white glazed earthenware Buddhas stands on the Ridge, its little bells tinkling ceaselessly day and night. Eastward it looks across a great sea of jungle, westward across the silvery-blue Gulf of Martaban, and northward across the swirling estuary of the Salween to the range of heavily wooded hills below which run the road and railway to the Sittang. It is as tranquil and lovely a view as the world may show when the golden edge of dusk on a winter's day enriches the gilding of the pagoda and a light breeze sets the bells tinkling as fast as birdsong. At 5.30 p.m. that winter's day in 1942 the Ridge resounded to the noise of battle when the posts were heavily engaged by the enemy at close quarters and the Piffers holding out desperately wondered what had become of the 3rd Burma Rifles.

At 11 p.m. Ekin withdrew the troops on the southern face of the perimeter to counter a possible penetration of the town by the enemy under cover of darkness. The enemy followed up, and the fighting continued all night. On the Ridge frequent assaults were repulsed by the Piffers of the 4th Frontier Force Regt who maintained all their positions. That evening brigade H.Q. had moved from the Ridge to the P.W.D. bungalow in Salween Park which drew constant fire from the enemy all night and was attacked in the morning by a small party of Japanese who had infiltrated through the defences. Headquarters was therefore moved to the Telephone Exchange near

the Mission Street jetty, and it had hardly been established there when great fires broke out in buildings along the river front close by. The enemy was immediately aware of every move made by the defenders. In the small hours of January 31st the Bofors guns of the anti-aircraft battery in the northern area of the town were overrun by enemy parties who had landed from the river near the Timber yard and given the correct password when challenged. Dressed up as Burmans and mingling with retiring Burma Rifles they had surprised and bayoneted many of the gunners. After fierce hand to hand fighting the survivors had to abandon their guns.

Early on January 31st Ekin got in touch with D.H.Q. at Kyaikto and told Smyth that he doubted if the town could be held much longer. He was given discretion to withdraw across the river. Ekin asked for air support; there was none available, for there were no bombs at that moment in Burma.

At 8 a.m. the withdrawal began. The perimeter was gradually to shrink, units maintaining touch as they fell back on the jetties. The 4th Frontier Force Regt and the 12th Indian Mountain Battery were to form a bridgehead covering the Post Office, Maingay Street and Mission Street jetties at each of which five river steamers were berthed to embark the troops.

As the troops fell back rear parties were followed up by the enemy and there was a good deal of street fighting in which the Japanese suffered heavy casualties. The enemy managed to close in on the Post Office jetty and here the embarkation was held up while counter-attacks to clear the approaches were made by parties of the Indian Sappers and Miners and the 7th Burma Rifles.

Many deeds of high valour were done that morning. Major Hume R.A. who commanded the 12th Indian Mountain Battery reached the embarkation jetty to find one section missing. With a small party of his own gunners and some of the Piffers he forced his way through the enemy to the gun position and brought both the missing guns safely back. So not a gun was lost by the 12th Mountain Battery.

2nd Lieut. Mahar Dass of the anti-aircraft battery heard that the enemy had left no sentries on the Bofors guns he had captured. Mahar Dass mustered a party from troop H.Q. and managed to bring to the Post Office jetty the gun which its crew had failed to disable. He tried his best to load the gun on a steamer without success. Then under heavy fire he went ashore from the last vessel at the jetty to disable his gun and help survivors. 2nd Lieut. Mahar Dass was not seen again, but long after the First Burma Campaign — a sad memory he was reported to be a prisoner of war.

By 10 a.m. the 4th Frontier Force Regt had reached the Maingay Street and Mission Street jetties; the Post Office and the Telephone Exchange had been destroyed; Brigadier Ekin ordered the final evacuation, brigade H.Q. and the rearguard embarking on the last steamer from the Mission Street jetty which was reached by the enemy as the steamer cast off. Fighting round the Post Office jetty was still fierce and many who could not get aboard the steamers escaped on improvised rafts and by swimming. As the steamers went up the river the enemy now in position on the Ridge shelled and machine-gunned them, and one of the smaller steamers was sunk. Large formations of enemy bombers were overhead during the evacuation, but mercifully they bombed Martaban instead of Moulmein.

When the steamers reached Martaban all persuasion of their civilian crews to return and take off men left at the Post Office jetty and a party of troops isolated at the Kaladin jetty north of the embarkation area was in vain. Indeed, without the cool help of the Indian Sappers and Miners, it is questionable whether the river steamers would ever have got away at all. There was a stone effigy of Queen Victoria in Moulmein erected in 1897 to commemorate her Diamond Jubilee. Sitting under a Gothic canopy on a sidewalk near the quay the Queen would have seemed to survey with added pride the Indian sepoys and gunners and sappers of whom she was always so proud. The Piffers and the 12th Mountain Battery and the 60th Field Company had not failed.

Before the withdrawal from Moulmein the line of the Salween River was held by the 16th Indian Brigade reinforced by the addition of the 2nd King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry at half strength from the Shan States, and the 7th Baluch Regt and 3/7th Gurkha Rifles from the 46th Indian Brigade. Brigade headquarters was at Thaton, and the area for which it was responsible was laid down as Kamamaung-Paan-Martaban-Thaton-Duyinzeik.

As the crow flies Kamamaung is 55 miles from Martaban, the country hilly and jungle-clad except for a flat narrow belt of paddy country between the coast and the road running along below the hills, the foot of which was extensively planted with rubber. There were several ferries on the Salween between Martaban and Dagwin, east of Papun, with tracks leading eastward and therefore requiring to be watched. Along the coast there were many creeks up which the enemy might land behind our lines. The 46th Indian Brigade with headquarters at Bilin was responsible for the area behind the 16th Brigade, having to watch the coastal approaches south-west of Thaton and the Salween from Kamamaung to the Siamese frontier

above Dagwin. The 2nd Burma Rifles from Mergui were given this northern flank.

During the first days of February the enemy was active east and north-east of Martaban. On February 6th General Wavell flew from Java when he and General Hutton spent a day with the 17th Division. It was after this visit that Wavell diverted the 7th Armoured Brigade on its way to Java from the Middle East to Rangoon. Three days later the 48th Gurkha Brigade commanded by Brigadier N. Hugh-Jones (Frontier Force Regt) reached the 17th Division. The 48th Brigade had been in the 19th Division and had been specially asked for by Major-General Smyth when he arrived in Burma. It consisted of three famous old battalions—the 1/3rd Queen Alexandra's Own Gurkha Rifles, the 1/4th Prince of Wales's Own Gurkha Rifles, and the 2/5th Royal Gurkha Rifles (Frontier Force).[1] Of course, all these battalions had been heavily milked to supply officers, N.C.O.'s and riflemen for new battalions, but they had enough of their original personnel left to respond to a great regimental tradition.

Unfortunately the 48th Brigade which had been operating on the North-West Frontier had had to leave all its pack transport at its stations up there when it came down to Secunderabad for training in mechanisation with the 19th Division. Therefore like the 46th Brigade it was tied to the roads in Burma with disastrous results. Smyth tried to get mules from India, but the animals arrived without pack saddles for loading rifles and were almost useless.

The 48th Brigade was put in screen bivouacs near Kyaikto. Hutton's intention was to keep it for an emergency of defence or offence because it was practically the last reserve he had.

[1] This was not the first time the 1/3rd Gurkha Rifles had served in Burma. It was fighting in the Shan States in 1885–7.

The 1/4th was in the severe Ambeyla Campaign of 1863; it was with Sam Browne at Ali Masjid; it was with Roberts in the march to Kandahar; it was with the Wana column of the Mahsud punitive force in 1895; it was in the Boxer operations in China in 1900; it fought at Givenchy and at Neuve Chapelle; when the Germans broke through the French troops with gas at the second battle of Ypres the 1/4th Gurkha Rifles held the line. The battalion was sent to Gallipoli in September 1917 too late to do anything about it. In 1919 it fought splendidly in the Third Afghan War.

The 2/5th Royal Gurkha Rifles was raised in 1886 and first saw active service in the Hazara Black Mountain Expedition of 1891. It served in Mesopotamia. Its latest renowned exploit of war had been in 1937 in Waziristan. A lance-naik and eight riflemen defended a piquet at Damdil against 40 fanatical tribesmen. The four surviving riflemen were all wounded and the lance-naik himself was too seriously wounded to stand.

The remnants of the 2nd Burma Brigade commanded by Brigadier D. O'Callaghan were sent 100 miles north to hold Papun and establish bridgeheads to guard the communications of the 17th Division across the Sittang River.

About this time Brigadier D. T. Cowan (6th Gurkha Rifles)[1] arrived in Burma from India, and as Major-General Smyth now had four infantry brigades and the prospect soon of an armoured brigade under his command he was allowed by the Army Commander to keep him on his staff as brigadier general staff which is usually a corps appointment. 'Punch' Cowan was soon to command the 17th Indian Division for over three years, during which under his tough tight-lipped determined leadership it would win more Victoria Crosses than any division in the Indian Army and arrogate to itself the title of God's Own Division.

On February 9th the telephone line between Thaton and Martaban was cut and wireless communication between brigade H.Q. and the 3/7th Gurkha Rifles which with a company of the K.O.Y.L.I. was holding Martaban could not be established. A strong patrol commanded by Captain Stourton was sent out to investigate; it encountered an enemy road block at Milestone 8 on the road to Thaton and only one member of the patrol managed to get back. Captain Stourton himself was killed. Just before sunset Lieut.-Colonel Stevenson commanding the 3/7th Gurkha Rifles and Major Haughton commanding the K.O.Y.L.I. company saw from a point in the hills about four miles out of Martaban at least 1,000 of the enemy moving north across the flat coastal land west and making for Milestone 8 and the hills east of it on the Thaton road with almost nothing between them and Thaton itself 37 miles away. Stevenson recognised that any attempt to hold Martaban longer would end in his being completely cut off; he decided to withdraw. Having destroyed his motor transport he set out after nightfall and leaving the road at Thebyugon he led his troops for an exhausting march of 50 miles through villainous country to reach Thaton on February 11th.

On February 8th the 1/7th Gurkha Rifles at Kuzeik which had been watching the Paan area in order to oppose any attempted crossings of the Salween by the enemy was relieved by the 7th Baluch Regt commanded by Lieut.-Colonel Dyer. Relief was hardly the word for what was a most unpleasant operation interfered with by enemy bombing attacks and heavy mortar and infantry gun-fire from Paan, in the course of which both battalions suffered casualties, the Gurkhas' being heavy.

[1] Major-General D. T. Cowan, C.B., C.B.E., D.S.O., M.C.

The position occupied by the 7th Baluch Regt was a saucer of open paddy land just north of Kuzeik village—about 600 yards across, adjoining the river eastward, and on its southern side skirted by the road to Duyinzeik, 15 miles north-west. The edges of the saucer were on higher ground surrounded by dense jungle, and the field of fire was much restricted. In the case of a powerful attack by the enemy the battalion was to receive support from the 5th Dogra Regt at Duyinzeik which was keeping contact with a road patrol.

On February 9th Lieut.-Colonel Dyer was given a section of the 12th Mountain Battery. The companies in the battalion positions were considerably weakened by having to maintain strong patrols along the bank of the river as far as Pagat in the north and Mikayin in the south. Later on the night of February 10th B Company sent a patrol to Pagat to relieve A Company. The Japanese were crossing the Salween in force and near Pagat a platoon of each company was overrun. The rest of the B Company patrol advancing on the village was trailed along its route, its position being signalled by the tapping of bamboos. At about 2 a.m. of the 11th the enemy tried to surround the patrol; he was driven off by light machine-gun and rapid rifle fire and the patrol managed to get back to the position at Kuzeik. That morning 27 enemy machines dive-bombed the battalion for 10 hours, but thanks to the well dug slit trenches caused not a single casualty.

That evening patrols reported that the enemy, about a battalion strong, was advancing on Kuzeik from Pagat. Dyer had sent a patrol back to warn the 5th Dogra Regt he expected to be attacked by the enemy in strength that night and added that brigade headquarters should be informed of the situation because it would be wise to reinforce him as soon as possible. Five platoons of his battalion were out on patrol and cut off. The strength of A and B Companies was much reduced by casualties.

A section of C Company was posted a mile along the Duyinzeik road to make contact with the 5th Dogra Regt whose arrival was expected that afternoon. It has not been found possible to establish whether Dyer's report was received by the Dogras: what is grievously certain is that no reinforcements reached Kuzeik.

At 12.45 a.m. on February 12th the section of C Company on the road saw a large body of troops advancing from the west. The lance-naik commanding the section presumed that these were the Dogras and halted the leading troops who at once opened fire. The section replied with light machine-gun fire and the Japanese battalion was compelled to deploy. A quarter of an hour later

the Baluchis' main positions were attacked from the west and south-west, C Company receiving the full force of the first attack. Presently B and D Company positions were attacked from the north-west.

The enemy indulged in shouts and catcalls and gibbering which boosted their morale and correspondingly depressed that of the young defenders who like the rest of the original 17th Division were only half-trained for fighting of any kind, let alone this kind of fighting. However, the temporary depression passed when they responded to the catcalls with Mianwali and Dogra warcries to the manifest distaste of the enemy, who began to use tracer and Chinese crackers to locate the position of the Baluchis' automatics. Then he attacked in waves with swords, bayonets and grenades supported by his automatics. As he approached the battalion positions he was counter-attacked with bayonets. Between 2 a.m. and 7 a.m. C Company counter-attacked every half-hour, Captain Siri Kanth Korla leading every one in person.

By 4.30 a.m. a whole Japanese regiment was engaged, outnumbering the defenders by at least five to one. Such superiority began to tell and the enemy penetrated the position between B and D Companies to surround B Company which numbered but 35 men. They fought dauntlessly, but the enemy was now able to attack battalion headquarters in the middle of the position. The Pioneer platoon counter-attacked and managed to fill the gap between B and D Companies; but again the enemy broke through on the left flank of D Company to attack battalion H.Q. In hand to hand fighting he was driven back by officers, signallers and mess servants.

The mortars and guns of the mountain battery were in position near H.Q. on the north side where A Company with the machine-guns kept the enemy at bay along the river bank.

It was now 5 a.m. The situation was grave, but the battalion felt it could hold out until help came from Duyinzeik probably with the dawn. Efforts made to get into wireless communication with brigade headquarters or the 5th Dogra Regt were fruitless. The situation worsened fast. The Japanese were able to capture most of the reserve ammunition of A Company. They swarmed into the position of little B Company where the survivors were overcome only after savage hand to hand fighting. C Company was surrounded and running out of ammunition fast. Captain Korla and Jemadar Anant Ram fought their way through to A Company, collected two boxes of ammunition and fought their way back with it.

The story of the young 7th Baluchis is one of the immortal tales of the old Indian Army. The eyelids prick and the pen stumbles to record it in words.

When the sun rose the sound of battle had almost ceased except in C Company's sector. Battalion H.Q. and part of A Company were still a fighting force, but D Company had by now been overrun. A Japanese officer standing on the slight ridge which had been B Company's position called on the survivors of the 7th Baluch Regt to surrender. He was answered with machine-gun fire; the fighting went on. Enemy mortars were now firing with deadly effect and from Paan the enemy infantry guns were shelling the river-front positions. All that was left of battalion H.Q. and A Company formed up for a counter-attack across the paddy fields to reach the C Company position. Major Dunn and Captain Holden led about 30 other ranks through mortar and small arms fire. Many fell but the objective was reached, though by now there was hardly a man in C Company to greet his comrades. Then the enemy brought heavy automatic fire to bear on these gallant remnants and by 8 a.m. organised resistance had ceased. The guns of the mountain battery section were lost. Five officers, three V.C.O.'s and 65 other ranks of the 7th Baluch Regt succeeded in rejoining the 46th Brigade at Thaton. Lieut.-Colonel Dyer and six other officers were killed. Major Dunn and Captain Korla were taken prisoner, but both escaped and reached Brigade. Captain Korla was awarded an immediate D.S.O.

Duyinzeik was now threatened, and the 1/7th Gurkha Rifles was sent forward from Bilin to help the 5th Dogra Regt. The 3/7th Gurkha Rifles with the K.O.Y.L.I. less one company defended Thaton. Burman sympathisers with the enemy, usually wearing the saffron robes of Buddhist priests, were disagreeably ubiquitous, particularly in the hills above Thaton whence they signalled information to the enemy bombers and descended to light fires in various parts of the town. Duyinzeik and Thaton were frequently attacked from the air; on February 13th Duyinzeik and the ferry were bombarded with exceptional severity, much affecting the morale of the 5th Dogra Regt. Next day Ekin reported his belief that the Japanese had by-passed Thaton and were moving round the left flank of the 16th Brigade. He was right. The 33rd Division, one of the crack formations of the Japanese Army, had crossed the Salween near Paan and was advancing by tracks east of the line Martaban-Thaton-Kyaikto with what were to be dire consequences for the 17th Indian Division. The presence of the Japanese 33rd Division in the area of operations was

not established for some time, but by now Smyth was beginning to think that his brigades would be chewed up piecemeal by the enemy unless an effort were made to concentrate the division behind the Bilin River. The 46th Brigade was ordered to be clear of Thaton by dawn of February 15th and on the way to Kyaikto, demolishing as many of the wooden bridges as possible along the road south of the Bilin River. At the same time the 16th Brigade was ordered to hold a defensive position behind the river from Leikkon to Paya which Smyth, not yet knowing about the Japanese 33rd Division, supposed would be tenable for a long time.

The withdrawal from Thaton was carried out in accordance with the plan, though the young troops of the 46th Brigade were upset by hearing firing round the town, the work of insurgent Burmans supported by parties of Japanese troops. A rumour that the line of withdrawal had been cut caused many of the drivers to desert their vehicles for a time.

During daylight of February 15th the Thaton force halted under cover protected by the 1/3rd Gurkha Rifles sent forward to the area for that duty. The 5th Dogras and the 1/7th Gurkha Rifles which had been withdrawing by jungle paths from Duyinzeik to the main road also halted. In the evening the 46th Brigade continued its march, dropping the 5th Dogras at Milestone 58 to provide forward outposts to cover the main Bilin position of the 16th Brigade which was joined by the K.O.Y.L.I. and the 1/7th Gurkha Rifles. The rest of the 46th Brigade went on to Kyaikto.

Communications by wireless or telephone were very bad, and some of the young signallers were liable to make them worse by their own mistakes. An instance of a certain vagueness about what was happening on the other side of the Sittang from Rangoon was when 24 hours after the Japanese had entered Thaton a conference of brigadiers at Bilin presided over by the divisional commander saw the afternoon train from Rangoon go puffing along past the forward troops toward Thaton. The engine was driven by British soldiers. There was an Indian military guard. The passengers, British, Burmese and Indian, were sitting quietly in their seats. The conference was horror-struck, but the train could not be stopped. Some of the staff suggested that the train would probably return loaded with Japanese sappers to give their lives in blowing up the bridge over the Sittang, but it was decided not to risk blowing up our own people by laying demolitions in case the train did get back with them. And get back it did a few hours later, looking just the same as when it passed.

Apparently the Japanese had been so staggered by the arrival of the train at Thaton station that they did nothing about it and the train retired after loading up everything of value about the platform.

The enemy followed up the withdrawal from Thaton closely, advancing in two columns—the 55th Division by the main road and the 33rd Division by the jungle-tracks north-east of it, apparently with the intention of going round our position to move directly on the Sittang Bridge while the 55th Division made a frontal attack.

The 16th Brigade now held a seven-mile front from Leikkon beyond Paya as far as Yinon north of Danyingon on the southern flank. The 1st Royal Jat Regt manned the sector from Shwele to a little south of Bilin where the 8th Burma Rifles, less one company, were stationed. The line was continued by the K.O.Y.L.I. to Yinon. South of Shwele the line was held by patrols, and east of the river the main road from Thaton was covered by the 5th Dogra Regt with an 8th Burma Rifles company on the high ground astride the main road, where a block was made. The 1/7th Gurkha Rifles was in brigade reserve.

Behind the main position the 48th Brigade was in divisional reserve ready to hold a defensive line from Taungzun behind the Thebyu Chaung astride the main road.

Divisional headquarters was in Kyaikto, which the 46th Brigade was to protect; only the 4th Frontier Force Regt was in a condition for active fighting; what was left of the 7th Baluch Regt, the 3/7th Gurkha Rifles and the 4th Burma Rifles required rest and reorganisation.

By the morning of February 16th the enemy was already in contact with the K.O.Y.L.I. in Danyingon, and in spite of repeated attacks the village could not be cleared. Next morning it was almost entirely carried by the 1/7th Gurkhas, a remarkable feat considering that the battalion was still very tired after the exhausting jungle march from Duyinzeik. However, pockets of resistance remained, and the enemy held a jungle-clad height to the north-west surrounded by paddy, known as Point 313.

That afternoon the 1/4th Gurkha Rifles commanded by Lieut.-Colonel Lentaigne[1] were brought forward in motor transport and with the support of artillery and mortars Point 313 fell and was used as a forward observation post by us with much effect. This was the first time the Prince of Wales's Gurkhas had been in action since their arrival, and their performance was significant of what fresh and

[1] Major-General W. D. A. Lentaigne, C.B., C.B.E., D.S.O.

fairly seasoned Indian troops could do under a first-class commanding officer. The heavy fighting at Danyingon had left Jones' 16th Brigade without a reserve battalion, and that evening the 5th Dogra Regt was pulled back over the Bilin for this rôle under heavy and accurate mortar fire; this upset the young troops who disintegrated and crossed the river in complete disorder, leaving their commanding officer with only 35 men and the company of 8th Burma Rifles to be overrun. The road bridge was then blown, but after nightfall parties of Japanese troops crossed the river and entered Bilin.

It had become clear by now that a single brigade headquarters could not control this extended front broken up by jungle and therefore favouring the attack. So Brigadier Hugh-Jones was ordered to move his headquarters to Bilin with the 2/5th Royal Gurkha Rifles commanded by Lieut.-Colonel Cameron who quickly restored the situation in Bilin.

On February 18th the situation was looking none too bright. Carriers going to Yinon ran into a block half a mile south of Paya and it was found impossible to clear the road in spite of determined attacks. From Point 313 bodies of enemy troops were observed moving through the jungle. More ominous still, behind the southern flank the enemy was landing west of the estuary. The whole front was closely engaged and it was now certain that the enemy's plan was to pin our forces to the Bilin line with his 55th Division and with his 33rd Division to strike for the Sittang Bridge through the gap between Point 313 and Yinon.

To counter this outflanking move on the north the 4th Frontier Force Regt was brought up on the morning of February 19th from Kyaikto to sweep the hills from Paingdawe toward Paya. The battalion fought with resolution and against heavy opposition succeeded in occupying a jungle-covered ridge overlooking Paya. It repulsed many counter-attacks and was under continuous mortar fire until it was ordered to withdraw to a position about Chaungbya and became the reserve of its own 16th Brigade.

In the coastal area the 2/5th Royal Gurkha Rifles was engaged with the enemy at Taungzun and near Taungale, two villages on the railway some miles behind our line. South of Bilin the 1st Royal Jat Regt found the enemy in possession of Point 302 west of Hninpale and behind them. In all their operations the Japanese were receiving the cordial help of the local population. It should be added that both on February 18th and 19th the R.A.F. provided some more air support by bombing villages on the far side of the Bilin two or three times a day with a few aircraft. The moral encouragement to our

men was probably more valuable than the amount of damage done to the enemy.

It might have been wiser to recognise the necessity to withdraw from the Bilin line at least by February 18th, but the criticism of commanders on the spot by the High Command was apt to be a little unimaginative in those bitter days that marked the opening of the Japanese war. Percival had felt it in Malaya; Hutton could not help being sharply aware of it in Burma. The impulse was to deflect such criticism even at the risk of rashness. Hutton, and Wavell above him, both counted on far more than they received when the plan of campaign was decided upon in Burma. One cannot but feel that the news of the capitulation of Singapore cast a shadow over Rangoon and may have influenced the Army Commander to hold on at Bilin beyond the margin of safety. He could not be blamed for it, and indeed no blame rests upon any commander in the East for the series of disasters there; the blame rests entirely upon Whitehall. That Whitehall had no alternative to a gamble on Japan's keeping out of the war may be true; but there is an inclination to suggest that prescience, even profound prescience, animated its mundane strategy. That is simply not true; the strategic policy was in fact a continuous improvisation exactly on a level with the improvisation of the men and material by which it was sustained.

Hutton's visit to the 17th Division on February 19th convinced him that withdrawal from the Bilin line was imperative and urgent; that night orders were issued for a general withdrawal before dawn next day.

The 48th Brigade was to cover the withdrawal and be reconstituted at the Thebyu Chaung with its original units; all the remaining troops of the division were to take up a position behind the Kadat Chaung a little west of Kyaikto. Nothing was done about strengthening the Sittang bridgehead as yet.

A heavy mist was rising from the Bilin River that night; in the darkness the 16th Brigade broke contact with the enemy, being clear of its positions by dawn. It concentrated in the Bilin rubber estate before setting out on the march back to Kyaikto.

The 8th Burma Rifles were successfully withdrawn, but in the early hours of February 20th the right and centre of the 1st Jats were penetrated and battalion headquarters was surrounded. Brigade decided that the battalion must wait till noon to break out with artillery and the air support which had been arranged for against Hill 302 and not cancelled. The wireless failed; therefore these orders did not reach the Jats who had been withdrawn by their C.O. into a

defensible position in scrub, with fair fields of fire. At 11.30 a.m. wireless communication was re-established. The R.A.F. arrived at noon to bomb the area round Hill 302 and the 1st Royal Jat Regt successfully rejoined its brigade. The company of the K.O.Y.L.I. at Yinon was given orders to withdraw by a message dropped from the air, and it had some lively fighting as it marched across country to Kyaikto. There were disquieting signs on the jungle paths that a considerable body of enemy troops had already passed ahead of it toward the Sittang.

Chapter 34

February, 1942. Withdrawal to the Sittang River—the battle for the bridgehead—decision to blow the vital bridge—the bulk of 17th Indian Division cut off.

BY 4 p.m. on February 20th a powerful enemy column with elephants moving along the coast had reached Keinphan, a village less than eight miles from Kyaikto, welcomed by the villagers of Taungzun and Kawkadat more enthusiastically than a travelling circus. Large enemy parties of the 33rd Division were south of Kyaikto moving down tracks to the great railway bridge over the Sittang. The full strength of the 55th Division was pressing on from Bilin. The east bank of the Sittang offered no tenable positions and the only way of withdrawal would be over the river.

The main road from Martaban stopped at Kyaikto, 16 miles from the bridge. After that the road had been traced through virgin scrub jungle and the cut brushwood had been pushed back on either side of the track, a foot deep in red dust, from which the tree stumps had not been cleared. The railway ran south of this track until track and railway met at Mokpalin Station. Then for a short way they continued north close together until the railway turned westward to the bridge and the road made a wide sweep to approach the river from the north-east. Here a ridge of high ground extended between the road and the river. A pagoda crowned the part of the ridge nearer to the river and a huge stone image of Buddha presided over the easterly side. The railway emerged on the bridge from a cutting through the bluff above the river. The bridge painted the colour of stale blood was 500 yards long and had been decked over with planks to take road traffic. Immediately north of it was a ferry service of three power-driven vessels. The river rapidly widened south of the bridge; the current was swift; there was a 16-feet tidal bore. Between the bridge and the quarries east of Mokpalin the country was hilly, covered with jungle and dense scrub. South of Mokpalin the land by the river was flat with stretches of paddy, and on the west side this paddy land spread for miles in a monotonous plain through which ran the railway and the tracks, the latter inches deep in dust at this time of the year.

At a divisional conference held at Kyaikto on February 20th the

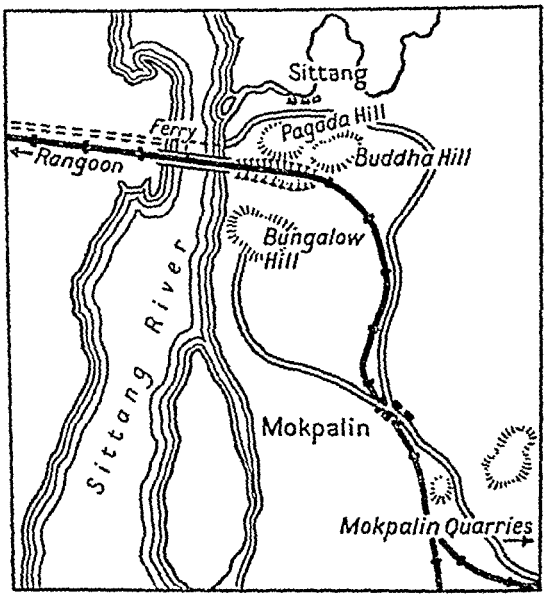
brigadiers present strongly urged that the hundreds of unwanted vehicles should be sent over the river at the earliest possible moment and that brigades should keep only a minimum of transport for first line requirements. For some reason Division did not agree to this, although Army Headquarters had already ordered all transport across the river as early as possible.

The divisional plan of withdrawal was for the 48th Brigade to pass through the 46th Brigade already at Kyaikto and after crossing the bridge to act as divisional reserve about Abaya. Yet the 46th Brigade could have reached the river first more easily and secured a strong bridgehead for the whole division. As it was, the 46th Brigade was ordered to act as rearguard to the other two brigades and hold a defensive position on the line of the Kadat Chaung. The 2nd Duke of Wellington's Regt, less one company detached for duty at the Sittang Bridge by orders of Army Headquarters, joined the 46th Brigade at Kyaikto on February 20th to strengthen the rearguard.

Some time before dawn on February 21st the perimeter defences of divisional H.Q. at Kyaikto seemed threatened with an attack by the enemy who fired coloured tracer and screamed like maniacs. Our troops suffered casualties from their own uncontrolled fire but none from the enemy, who disappeared at dawn.

Later that morning the divisional commander and his advanced H.Q. left Kyaikto for the Mokpalin Quarries, where the remnants of the 7th Baluch Regt had been sent on the previous day to protect dumps and rear H.Q. That evening 48th Brigade H.Q. and the 1/4th Gurkha Rifles reached the quarries. The Gurkhas after marching 30-odd miles from the Bilin position had reached Kyaikto in the early hours of February 21st and bivouacked in a rubbish dump, very tired. Just before dawn, Lentaigne, the commanding officer, was woken by the firing at the Japanese noises and a stampede of unidentified troops. The Gurkhas stood to, but all was quiet. Presently, feeling hungry, Lentaigne told the battalion cooks to drum up a meal, after which officers and men were in much better fettle. At 9 a.m. Lentaigne was called to brigade H.Q. where Hugh-Jones told the three Gurkha C.O.'s that the brigade was to march at once along the track of the new road to the railway bridge. The 1/3rd Gurkha Rifles with brigade H.Q. would march to Mokpalin Quarries, the 2/5th Royal Gurkha Rifles to a place three miles short of them, the 1/4th Gurkha Rifles to another place six miles short of them. Cameron of the 2/5th and Ballinger of the 1/3rd protested that their men were dog-tired and had not yet fed. So Lentaigne whose men had had a meal was told to move at once instead of the

1/3rd and reach the quarries. The first mile was over a wide paddy plain across which the 1/4th Gurkha Rifles moved in dispersed formation. They had hardly started when four Blenheims with R.A.F. markings came over them low and continued to machine-gun the battalion the whole way across the paddy without inflicting a single casualty. When the battalion reached that red dusty track through the jungle more Blenheims, now reinforced by Hurricanes and Tomahawks, bombed and machine-gunned the road crowded with administrative units on foot and utterly disorganised motor



transport. Two Blenheims were brought down by small arms fire and crashed in the jungle. The 1/4th Gurkha Rifles reached the quarries about 5.30 p.m. and were ordered to take up defensive positions round divisional headquarters which was placed in a natural amphitheatre. Lentaigne reported the air attacks and produced a ·5 Remington cannon shell ejected from a fighter as it passed overhead. The air liaison officer declared they could not be R.A.F. machines. Lentaigne wondered if they might be British machines captured in Malaya; another theory was that the Siamese had machines which much resembled Blenheims.

The fact is that the unfortunate troops of the 17th Division were

attacked throughout that hot dusty withdrawal, to which shortage of water added one last misery, not only by enemy aircraft but also by the total available strength of the R.A.F. and the American Volunteer Group on the Rangoon aerodromes. Reconnaissance machines had reported a long column of enemy transport moving through Kyaikto to Kinmun Sakan. By some mistake which has never been explained the wrong column was attacked. Many vehicles including ambulances with wounded were destroyed; mules got out of control and vanished with their loads in the jungle; much useful equipment was lost or damaged; numerous casualties were caused; morale throughout the division was gravely impaired, and that had an effect on events next day.

An officer in the 8th Burma Rifles wrote:

> The one time we had the R.A.F. in close support they were circling over the Japanese 55th Division at 100 feet and waving to them and then roaring down over us at anything from 150 to 15 feet.

It is fair to add that the weight of the evidence acquits the R.A.F. and the A.V.G. of blame for this lamentable business.

At midnight Smyth sent for Lentaigne to tell him he had received word from Army H.Q. that the enemy intended to land paratroops on the west bank of the Sittang and that he must get his Gurkhas over the bridge by dawn at all costs to deal with them. Lentaigne was not to concern himself with the east bank where the bridge would be defended by a company of the 2nd Duke of Wellington's Regt. Divisional Headquarters would leave Mokpalin at 4 a.m. and the 1/4th Gurkha Rifles would follow a quarter of an hour later. The night was black. Lentaigne had no maps. He had to make his way by following the wheel marks of the D.H.Q. motor transport, and he had only an hour and three-quarters to cover the six miles to the bridge. In the first grey of dawn the 1/4th Gurkha Rifles reached Mokpalin the street of which was solidly congested with motor transport, engines racing, horns blowing. Lentaigne was working forward through the jam to find a way for his battalion when a figure demanded to know who he was. It was 'Punch' Cowan.

'Thank God you've arrived,' said the B.G.S. 'Get over the bridge as quickly as possible.'

A heavy lorry had driven off the decked roadway over the railway bridge and jammed its wheels in the lattice work of the girders. Sappers were working hard to get it out of the way and relieve the traffic block in Mokpalin. There was a narrow catwalk for permanent way gangers which ran along the bridge outside the upstream

main girders; Lentaigne was told to take his battalion across on this. At the bridgehead instead of the Duke's he found Lieut.-Colonel Edwards of the 4th Frontier Force Regt who told him that his battalion was holding the bridgehead with the 3rd Burma Rifles and that the company of the Duke's in reserve was bivouacking in a small coppice on the other side.

The 1/4th Gurkha Rifles crossed the bridge in the glimmering twilight of dawn by the metal catwalk slippery with dew. Having established his H.Q. and set his men to digging a position Lentaigne visited the Duke's asleep in the coppice 600 yards away; he found them extremely sceptical about that paratroop attack. By now it was 6.30 a.m. The sappers had disposed of the lorry; the motor transport and D.H.Q. were streaming over the bridge. The block by that time had stretched well beyond Mokpalin and the confusion had been frightful.

Lentaigne took a nap and was woken a couple of hours later by the sound of heavy firing on the other side of the river.

It was about 8.30 a.m. when the 7th Baluch Regt was marching through the railway cutting immediately east of the bridge that the enemy from the jungle north-east put in a heavy attack. The company and a half of the 3rd Burma Rifles holding that sector of the perimeter gave way and the attack went on almost to the bridge itself. An advanced dressing station with which Colonel Mackenzie, the A.D.M.S., had been spending the night was overrun; he and the D.A.D.M.S. and all the medical personnel were taken prisoner. Some of the bridgehead troops and transport drivers panicked and made a rush for the bridge.

Two companies of the 4th F.F. Regt immediately counter-attacked under the gallant leadership of Captain Manekshaw and at the cost of some 50 casualties retook the original positions on the north and north-east of the perimeter.

At 10 a.m. Brigadier Hugh-Jones of the 48th Brigade assumed command of all troops holding the bridgehead. The company of the Duke's on the west bank was ordered across to take up a position on Bungalow Hill on the south-east of the perimeter. In view of the state of affairs round the bridgehead the C.R.E. of the 17th Division ordered the destruction of 300 sampans along the west bank and also of the power-driven ferry vessels.

Meanwhile, the Japanese were attacking the transport still jammed along the road to Mokpalin. Lieut.-Colonel Cameron deployed the 2/5th Royal Gurkha Rifles to protect the transport. He had no knowledge of what was happening at the bridgehead.

The battalion came under fire at close quarters from a temple at the eastern end of the village. After that attack the precincts were cleared of Japanese and the battalion continued to the railway station. Two companies with only a single sightless mortar advanced through thick scrub jungle against Buddha Hill, the left company coming under violent mortar fire and suffering heavy casualties, the right company losing contact with the battalion. When its left flank was found empty of troops a third company was moved forward to lengthen the line outside of and west of the road. All this had involved three hours of hard fighting against superior enemy forces without any support, but the 2/5th Royal Gurkha Rifles had driven the Japanese out of Mokpalin. Now the 1/3rd Gurkha Rifles reached the railway station and our artillery began to arrive in the village. The two Gurkha C.O.'s conferred, and it was decided that the 1/3rd should attack Buddha and Pagoda Hills supported by our guns in the village and that the 2/5th should hold the eastern outskirts of Mokpalin. This plan was made without knowledge of what was happening at the bridgehead which was out of communication, and it was presumed that the Japanese who were certainly on Buddha Hill were also holding Pagoda Hill. Furthermore there was a report that they had secured the bridge. If only the true situation at this time had been known the Gurkha battalions could easily have established contact with our troops on Bungalow Hill and a well co-ordinated attack would have cleared the way to the river and enabled the whole of the 17th Division to cross the bridge at the cost of abandoning the transport.

When Lieut.-Colonel Lentaigne was woken from his brief sleep by the sound of heavy firing his first fancy was that the foretold paratroop attack had begun. However, the sky was clear and he crossed the bridge to find out what was happening. He found Lieut.-Colonel Edwards of the 4th F.F. Regt much bucked by the way his two companies of Piffers under Captain Manekshaw had dealt with the Japanese. There was still the sound of heavy firing in the direction of Mokpalin, and this spread to the south-east which suggested that the Japanese were coming in on a wide front against the rest of the division withdrawing down the traced road from Kyaikto.

The fog of war has often been thick, but it never lay more thickly than it lay over the 17th Indian Division during those two February days in 1942.

Here is an impression by that officer of the 8th Burma Rifles:

> We arrived at Mokpalin, from the south at about noon on 22nd February and in all 3 brigades from all directions were

pouring in—or had poured in to Sittang and Mokpalin. were masses of troops but no staffs—brigade staffs that is, and a few hours were spent in trying to find anyone to give orders. More enterprising C.O.'s were taking action on their own, and it is now known that it was in this confusion that two battalions fought each other. We were at the south of the railway station but west of the line, and throughout the day the Japs were attacking on the other side of the line, but got no change out of the 8th Burma Rifles. After a bit the Kaukareik Brigadier[1] turned up, though he was not our Brigadier, and really did get things organized. We were very glad to see him. We were to form a box round Mokpalin, we being in the S.W. corner.

Lentaigne went back to the west bank, thinking that the Japanese attack might be intended to coincide with that paratroop landing. Later that morning Brigadier Hugh-Jones came to his battalion H.Q. to suggest a reconnaissance of the east bank. By now the paratroop landing was fading out of likelihood. When Hugh-Jones and Lentaigne were about three-quarters of the way over a salvo of shells fell on a small sand-bagged redoubt above the railway cutting about 30 yards from the end of the bridge. A sharp artillery concentration followed and there was a panicky rush for the bridge by the troops of the bridgehead.

Hugh-Jones, naturally supposing that this was an enemy concentration, sent Lentaigne back to get his Gurkhas. He ran across the bridge and whistled up two of his companies which went over the bridge at the double and straight at the Pagoda. Ten seconds later Japanese infantry appeared and were easily repulsed. Everybody was puzzled why they had been so slow in following up their artillery concentration, but it was not theirs at all; it came from the guns of the 48th Brigade preparing the ground for the 1/3rd to attack Buddha Hill. The fog was thickening all the while. This fog has spread over all the accounts available of those days by the Sittang. Not merely do the times at which this or that incident occurred contradict one another by hours, but the very days are frequently telescoped, and this confusion in the minds later of those trying to recollect the sequence of events reflects their confusion at the time.

Back now to the 1/3rd Gurkha Rifles dauntlessly attacking Pagoda and Buddha Hills. Crossing the low ground under the contemplative gaze of that enormous stone Buddha they were soon at grips with the enemy on the forward slopes and after much bitter fighting one

[1] Brigadier J. K. Jones of the 16th Brigade.

company established itself on Buddha Hill. Two platoons on the left even broke through to the bridgehead and reoccupied posts on Pagoda Hill. Then the Japanese threw in reinforcements, sealed off the bridgehead and isolated Buddha Hill from Mokpalin. Nevertheless, the forward companies of the 1/3rd Gurkha Rifles, Lieut.-Colonel Ballinger killed by a treacherous ruse of the enemy and every British officer a casualty, held on to their positions under the command of their Gurkha officers.

Later in the afternoon the bridgehead was completely reestablished just after the two platoons of the 1/3rd Gurkha Rifles gained Pagoda Hill. The northerly sector was held by the 4th Frontier Force Regt, the centre by the 1/9th Gurkha Rifles, and the right with Bungalow Hill by the company of the Duke of Wellington's with what was left of the 3rd Burma Rifles. The platoons of the 1/3rd Gurkha Rifles remained on Pagoda Hill.

Later that afternoon Lieut.-Colonel Simpson, the G.S.O.I., came across from divisional headquarters to the bridgehead to tell Hugh-Jones that the divisional commander left the fate of the bridge entirely in his hands. He was the man on the spot and on him rested the responsibility of ensuring that, whatever the cost, the bridge did not fall intact into the hands of the enemy. Brigade H.Q. consisted of Brigadier Hugh-Jones himself, Lieut.-Colonel Edwards of the 4th F.F. Regt and Lieut.-Colonel Lentaigne of the 1/4th Gurkha Rifles with a few runners. Major Tharpar, the brigade major, was busy driving a truck across from the west bank with food and ammunition.

Soon after dark a small party of the 7th Baluch Regt under the staff captain of the 46th Brigade suddenly appeared from along the river bank to the south to say that Ekin's brigade was completely dispersed, that the mountain guns without ammunition had been destroyed, and that Jones of the 16th Brigade had only about 300 men left.

The 46th Brigade had been the last to leave Kyaikto immediately after the 16th Brigade. The order of march was 3/7th Gurkha Rifles, brigade H.Q., 5th Dogra Regt, and 2nd Duke of Wellington's Regt. The 4th Burma Rifles, acting as flank guard, marched to Mokpalin by the railway.

At about 9.30 a.m. the brigade halted for the Duke's to catch up. The latter had been delayed in starting owing to the non-appearance of B Company which had been attached to the 4th Burma Rifles. Unfortunately the 16th Brigade did not conform with this halt and a gap of a mile was created between the two brigades. The Japanese

took advantage of this gap to erect a block with the brushwood thrown back against the side of the track when it was cleared. Soon after the 46th Brigade resumed its march the 3/7th Gurkha Rifles came under heavy mortar and small arms fire from this block. Presently every unit in the brigade was under short range heavy fire. The fighting was close and confused, both sides suffering severe casualties.

The brigade managed to keep its hold on the road, but little progress was made toward Mokpalin; after about an hour of this fighting in the course of which the men of all these battalions became mixed up, Ekin collected a column of 500 rifles and advanced through the jungle to clear it of the enemy. The remnants of the brigade followed along the road, a carrier covering their right flank. After two miles of progress Ekin's column became broken up and contact was lost between the various parties. Ekin himself with about 300 men at last reached the railway at Tawgon south of Mokpalin after dark. The main body managed to overtake the 16th Brigade which had halted near the quarries and close piqueted the road. Maintaining this order and followed at close range all the way by the enemy the 16th Brigade and what was left of the 46th Brigade entered Mokpalin during the late afternoon and evening.

The 4th Burma Rifles had an undisturbed march along the railway, though a body of some 1,200 Japanese was close behind them all the way. Behind the Japanese again was B Company of the Duke of Wellington's which after failing to make contact with the rest of the battalion had marched by way of the railway. Seeing the Japanese ahead of it the company turned east into the jungle and after a wide detour out of the battle area crossed the Sittang at a ferry several miles above the bridge late on the night of February 24th—a very lucky company.

We have heard how Brigadier Jones pulled things together that afternoon in Mokpalin and formed a perimeter. Astride the main road and railway 400 yards south of the station were the 8th Burma Rifles. On their right the 2nd K.O.Y.L.I. continued the defensive line along the Bund toward the river. Along the river face were the 4th Burma Rifles. The 1st Jats held the high ground south-east of Bungalow Hill, and the scanty few left of the gallant 1/3rd Gurkha Rifles were across the main road and railway north of the station. East of the main road were the 2/5th Royal Gurkha Rifles. Along the railway near the station the 1/7th Gurkha Rifles were in local reserve, and in brigade reserve were two companies of the Duke's. There was no communication with Buddha Hill: there was no communication

with the bridgehead. A few stragglers made their way into the latter along the river bank, and their tales did not help to clarify that fog.

The enemy did not press hard against the bridgehead that night, but there were almost continuous disquieting incidents. A Japanese light machine-gunner established himself on the railway cutting and fired bursts down the length of the bridge, the bullets striking sparks as they ricochetted off the girders. Beyond the bridgehead the 'laboured stammering of a Japanese medium machine-gun' could be heard from time to time until it was lost in the noise of innumerable Bren guns; ominously as the night wore on the noise of the Bren guns steadily diminished which suggested that ammunition was diminishing too, and this seemed confirmed by those stragglers who kept coming in with horrific tales of surrender, disintegration and ammunition running low.

By 4 a.m. the 3rd Burma Rifles on the south-east sector of the bridgehead had almost all disappeared and the Japanese light machine-gun was firing at any noise audible on the bridge. A sapper officer reported to Hugh-Jones that the demolition of the bridge could only be guaranteed if our men were able to touch off fuses at two or three points along its length, running back toward the west bank after firing each in succession. It was obvious that unless the Japanese light machine-gun could be silenced, it would be difficult if not impossible to do this by daylight and even if the machine-gun were silenced the bridge would still be under mortar and automatic fire for the whole of its length. So the small sandbag redoubt above the entrance to the railway cutting was called on to supply knee-high breastworks round each fuse to give the sapper firing it a chance to survive.

At 4.30 a.m. Hugh-Jones called a conference at the bridgehead. He asked the opinions of the commanding officers and the staff officers from divisional H.Q. who were there, after telling them that his orders were to prevent the Japanese from capturing the bridge intact. Therefore if it was decided to blow it it must be blown before daylight for the sappers to be able to guarantee the success of the demolition. The reports of disaster which had been coming in all night offered no hope that the remainder of the division would be able to deflect the enemy's aim for the vital bridge. Once across the Sittang nothing stood between him and Rangoon. The Army Commander had just returned from a fruitless attempt to get into personal contact with Chiang Kai-Shek at Lashio, and all the previous day he had been anxiously impressing on Smyth the paramount necessity of keeping the Japanese on the other side of the Sittang

long enough to let him get the 7th Armoured Brigade, which had just arrived and had had to unload its own vehicles owing to the flight of labour from Rangoon, into action. Moreover, he was still hoping for an Australian Division, unaware that it had been diverted from Burma to Australia by direct order of the Australian Government. The divisional commander's presence at a conference back on the Rangoon-Pegu road on the morning of February 23rd had been requested.

Immediately after Hugh-Jones and his C.O.'s down at the bridgehead had decided in that dark hour before the dawn what was the right course of action, the B.G.S. was informed that Hugh-Jones could not guarantee to hold the bridge for more than another hour, Cowan woke up Smyth. To quote the divisional commander:

> He wanted a definite order from me as to whether he should blow the bridge or not. What a horrible decision to have to make! If we blew, it was in the knowledge that two-thirds of the division was left on the far bank. If we did not blow a complete Japanese division could march straight on Rangoon. The decision was one that had to be mine and mine alone, and having made it I should, of course, take complete responsibility for it. It took me less than 5 minutes to make up my mind. . . . Hard though it was there was very little doubt as to what was the correct course: I gave the order that the bridge should be blown immediately.

The last troops on the east side to close on the bridge were the 1/4th Gurkha Rifles on whose north-east sector the enemy's pressure was greatest. The absolute rearguard was formed by a bunch of staff officers with Tommy guns. One of them wrote:

> At the western end we collected in the sandbagged redoubt. A series of terrific explosions, a blinding flash, a blast of hot air and a shower of fragments brought down the curtain on that act. Complete silence followed and the noise of all firing ceased. The clang of nailed boots on the steel-work as a few of us went forward to the gap to see if it was well and truly blown sounded as if all the world could hear. As far as we could see, two spans were down but tops of the girders showed above the swirling tide.

And to that may be added the testimony of another actor in that tragedy:

> The sound of the tremendous explosions had a remarkable effect. All firing ceased, and for a brief period complete silence reigned over the battlefield. Then the Japanese broke into excited shouts and chatter.

Jones of the 16th Brigade decided to maintain his perimeter round Mokpalin during the day, build rafts with the men who could be spared, and achieve complete withdrawal before dawn on February 24th. A V.C.O. of the 1st Jat Regt volunteered to swim the river and apprise divisional headquarters of this plan. In the end a small boat was discovered and the V.C.O. safely delivered his message.

This seems to have been misunderstood at D.H.Q. About 9.30 a.m Brigadier Cowan and Brigadier Hugh-Jones were on the new road embankment looking across the river through field-glasses, when a signals orderly handed a signal to Hugh-Jones who read it and suddenly rolled down the embankment into the arms of Lieut.-Colonel Lentaigne.

'My God, I've lost the whole division,' he groaned.

Cowan then asked for the message, which was from Jones of the 16th Brigade timed 8 a.m. to say that he hoped to fight his way to the river bank three miles south of the bridge and then work his way up to it and arrive there about 4 p.m.

It seems impossible that Jones should have still supposed at 8 a.m. that the bridge was intact, and nothing in his handling of the situation on the east bank suggests that he was counting on anything except to get as many of his men as he could back by improvised rafts. Without doubt Hugh-Jones was right to obey the order to blow the bridge; the fact that the Japanese did not make an all out attack on the troops left behind is clear evidence that the enemy's objective was the Sittang Bridge not the destruction of the 17th Indian Division.

Let the epitaph on this tragic occurrence be written by an officer in those 8th Burma Rifles who side by side with the K.O.Y.L.I. fought magnificently to the last and in the words of the commander of the 16th Brigade 'enabled many of their comrades to cross the river successfully.'

That officer in the 8th Burma Rifles says:

> Controversy at the time was very bitter, but I'd like to meet the man who blew the bridge. He had a ghastly decision to make, and I'd like to tell him that I think he was right, and that by his courage he probably saved us from being in far worse plight. . . . I was almost the last man across, and so can't be accused of being an armchair critic, but I salute the man who made that courageous and ghastly decision.

All those who could be spared from the defence were set to work building rafts from the bamboos and timbers of huts and in collecting petrol tins and water bottles for buoyancy. Many of the wounded

were safely taken across, but alas, the great majority had to be left on the battlefield.

At 11.15 a.m. 27 Japanese bombers did considerable damage on the positions and on the congested transport along the road; there were heavy casualties, and the surrounding jungle was set alight. Jones after a visit to various units realised that any attempt to maintain the positions until darkness might lead to disintegration and he ordered a general withdrawal for 2 p.m.

What was left of Mokpalin village and the vehicles was fired, and the flames with the burning ammunition dumps shielded the troops as they retired. Here is a senior officer's description of the scene on the banks of the river which were sheltered by a bluff about 30 feet high:

> There was chaos and confusion, hundreds of men throwing down their arms, equipment and clothing and taking to the water . . . as we crossed, the river was a mass of bobbing heads. We were attacked from the air and sniped at from the opposite bank.

Many were drowned, but acts of devotion were innumerable, some men swimming the swirling river two or three times to bring in the wounded. Our guns on the west bank were able to keep down the Japanese machine-gun fire, but there were many enemies on that west bank also—Burmese snipers and, worse, ghoulish priests in saffron with murderous dahs to cut the throats of exhausted swimmers.

When the few left of the 1/3rd Gurkha Rifles reached the river with C Company of the Duke of Wellington's Regt it was found that the enemy had left the bridgehead and that the gap made by the broken span was about 30 yards wide. Major Robinson, Corporal Fox and Lance-Corporal Roebuck of the Duke's swam the river and brought back ropes to make a life-line. They then encouraged non-swimmers of their own company and some 300 Gurkhas and sepoys to cross by this life-line. Throughout daylight the bridge was under fire, but those three heroes stayed in the river on their work of mercy all day.

Comedy of Shakespearian broadness relieved the tragic gloom. When at 11 p.m. Lentaigne reached the railway station at Nyaungashe whence he and his 1/4th Gurkha Rifles and the 4th Frontier Force Regt were to go by train to Pegu, he found a multitude of stark naked troops, the British ones all singing, but no trains. He found two empty water-tank trucks in a siding, and these were loaded with wounded men who had just been brought over from the other side. Lentaigne then told the naked troops to push these two

trucks along the permanent way toward Pegu. The Gurkhas acted as rearguard, the Piffers as main body and advanced guard. 'It reminded me of nothing so much as a funeral with two files of mourners,' Lentaigne recalled, 'but the language of the naked British troops pushing the trucks in their bare feet on the metalling and adjuring each other to put on the brakes and take them off was akin to that of a party returning from an old-fashioned Irish wake.'

At about 2.30 a.m. the headlights of an approaching train were sighted; this was successfully halted and the two trucks were coupled to the front of the engine. The train itself was packed with administrative personnel, all fast asleep and unaware that they were travelling in the wrong direction. The doors, opening inwards, were jammed with baggage which had been loaded through the windows. Lentaigne with his Gurkhas and Edwards with his Piffers climbed into the train through those windows, overawed the administrative personnel and threw out all their baggage, after which the train, having been loaded up with naked troops, steamed off in reverse to Pegu.

> My next recollection [says Lentaigne], is a crowded platform at Waw where someone handed me a tin of bully and a bottle of beer through the window and told me that the Tank Brigade had arrived and had taken up a rearguard position in the neighbourhood. Our train went on to Pegu where I was sent by the Quartermaster. We off loaded the battalion and removed ourselves half a mile away to a wood where food was ready cooked, and while eating we watched the Japs bomb hell out of Pegu town and station.

By the evening of that 24th of February the 17th Indian Division was not in the best of shapes. Of 12 battalions there were left 80 British officers, 69 V.C.O.'s, 3,335 other ranks with 1,420 rifles, 56 Bren guns and 62 Thompson sub-machine carbines of which 600 rifles, 30 Bren guns and 30 tommy-guns belonged to the 1/4th Prince of Wales's Own Gurkha Rifles. That was a lucky meal which 'Joe' Lentaigne drummed up in the early morning at Kyaikto: it enabled his battalion to march out first. The less fortunate 1/3rd Queen Alexandra's Own Gurkha Rifles and 2/5th Royal Gurkha Rifles (Frontier Force) could muster between them but 60 rifles, seven Bren guns and 10 tommy-guns.

Chapter 35

February–March, 1942. The battle for Pegu—Burmese insurgents—arrival of General Alexander—evacuation of Rangoon—concentration in area of Prome.

As tanks could not cross the canal bridge at Waw Hutton decided to concentrate the 17th Indian Division in the Pegu area. The 46th Brigade was broken up, and many of the battalions in the division were temporarily amalgamated as had been necessary in Malaya. With the 7th Armoured Brigade consisting of the 2nd Royal Tank Regt and the 7th (Queen's Own) Hussars were the 1st Cameronians and 1st West Yorkshire Regt, both recently arrived in Burma from India, as support battalions. The Cameronians and the 2nd R.T.R. covered Pegu on the north-east on the line Payagyi-Waw, and with headquarters at Thanatpin the 7th Hussars and the West Yorkshires were responsible for the area south. For some days after the withdrawal across the Sittang these forward troops had to protect stragglers and the vast number of Indian refugees fleeing from the battle zone. Hostile Burmans, many of them now armed with British weapons, were robbing and murdering the Indian refugees and attacking unarmed stragglers.

By February 27th the Japanese had crossed the Sittang farther north and were penetrating through the 30-mile gap between the 17th Division about Pegu and the 1st Burma Division which after being relieved by the Chinese Sixth Army had moved out of the Shan States to an area south of Nyaunglebin to cover Karenni and the Sittang Valley sector south of Toungoo.

A squadron of the 7th Hussars and a company of the West Yorkshires were sent to Tharrawaddy on the Rangoon-Prome road to counter enemy penetration by way of the dense jungles of the Pegu Yomas, the range which separates the Sittang Valley from the Irrawaddy Valley. Headquarters of the 17th Division was moved to Hlegu, half-way between Pegu and Rangoon, with the 16th Brigade near by.

The Japanese did not enjoy their meetings with the 7th Armoured Brigade, but although their advance on Pegu was delayed strong forces reached the Pegu Yomas and by jungle paths struck south-west in the direction of Rangoon. In the estuary of the Rangoon

River parties of Burmans under Japanese officers had landed; all over the place insurgent Burmans were creating disorder.

Things looked bad, and Hutton began to wonder anxiously whether it was worth hanging on in Rangoon until the 63rd Indian Brigade, a young untrained formation on its way from India, arrived or whether he should go ahead with the blowing of demolitions and evacuation of essential civil personnel and administrative services. Air and Naval opinion was unanimously against the risk of bringing a convoy into Rangoon at this stage. The question was referred to India. Wavell was then on his way from Java and there was no reply for several days. The civil authorities were pressing for a decision, and on February 27th a telegram was sent to say that unless contrary instructions were received next day it was proposed to carry on with the demolitions and evacuation. The answer came to take no action if possible until General Wavell reached Burma. Wavell landed at Magwe on March 1st and ordered that Rangoon should be held at least as long as to let the 63rd Indian Brigade be landed. The 63rd Brigade, commanded by Brigadier A. E. Barlow (Royal Garhwal Rifles), consisted of the 1st (King George's Own) Sikh Regt, the 2nd Frontier Force Rifles, and the 1/10th Gurkha Rifles.[1]

It is time now to consider the state of affairs in Rangoon. Ever since the Japanese air raid of December 23rd the flight of labour had made it increasingly difficult to carry on the normal life of the port, which nevertheless had to be kept working to bring in military reinforcements and stores. There was also a huge accumulation of Lease/Lend material for China which was awaiting transportation. It was of first importance, too, that the Syriam oil refinery near

[1] The 1st Sikh Regt was formerly the 14th King George's Own Ferozepore Sikhs. It fought with superb courage and devotion at Gallipoli on the Battle of the Fourth of June when in the Saghir Deré of two companies only one British officer, one Indian officer and 14 sepoys were alive when they were relieved next morning. That British subaltern was Savory who commanded the 11th Indian Brigade at Sidi Barrani and at Keren.

The 2nd Frontier Force Rifles was originally the 2nd Punjab Infantry, then the 56th Infantry (Frontier Force) and then the 1/56th Punjabi Rifles (Frontier Force). That was its name during the First World War. It had had a long and honourable career of service on the North-West Frontier.

The 10th Gurkha Rifles originated in Burma where as the 10th Regt (1st Burma Gurkha Rifles) Madras Infantry it fought in the tricky campaign against the Chins and Lushais. In 1902 it became the 10th Gurkha Rifles, and was recruited entirely in Eastern Nepal from Limbu and Rai Gurkhas. During the First World War the 1/10th was employed to guard the railway being built from Basra to Nasiriya. Then for nearly five years after the end of the war the 1/10th Gurkha Rifles had an arduous time in dealing with the unsettled remains of the old Ottoman Empire.

Rangoon should be kept going as long as possible. So a plan for the evacuation of Rangoon was made which provided for its accomplishment in three stages. First all non-essential persons would be encouraged to go. Secondly all civilians not required for the final essential services would go. Lastly the remaining military and civilian personnel required for the carrying out of demolitions would depart under special transport arrangements.

Thousands of Indians set out on foot along the Prome road with what belongings they could carry with them, intending to cross the waterless Arakan Yomas to Taungup whence they hoped to reach Chittagong by local boats. Many other thousands chose the way over the Chindwin routes to Manipur. Many other thousands followed the wild trails to Assam from north-east Upper Burma. In due course more shall be told of these ghastly odysseys. The reason why they went on to India was not fear of the Japanese but fear of the Burmans if the British withdrew. They had fled into the countryside to escape the bombs; here many of them were murdered and maltreated and robbed. Therefore all these many thousands of unhappy creatures were inspired by terror to continue that dreadful march which surpasses in horror anything of the kind in recorded history. Nor was it only Indians who suffered in this macabre exodus: British women and children suffered no less.

On February 20th the first stage in the evacuation of civilians from Rangoon was taken by an order that all motor transport not marked with an E label should be removed within 72 hours. The military situation created by the withdrawal to the Sittang was a threat by now to the road and railway to Mandalay. Cholera had broken out among the refugees on the road to Prome. Unrest among the Burmans showed signs of increasing rapidly. At the same time it was decided to close the Syriam and other refineries, prepare them for demolitions and get the skilled staff away to the oilfields in Central Burma. Much work of a varied character over a wide area was undertaken by the Rangoon garrison which included the 1st Gloucestershire Regt and a Royal Marine detachment known as Vipe numbering 107 commanded by Major Johnston R.M. This detachment, recently arrived from Ceylon, was employed on river patrol-work. Every man had volunteered for special service, and every man gave that service with a devotion beyond praise.

Rangoon seemed an abandoned city, but convoys of military transports were still arriving and the port remained open. The R.A.F., when the warning system was upset by the Japanese advance to the Sittang, was withdrawn to Magwe and Akyab leaving only a fighter

force to operate from the newly constructed airstrip north of Rangoon known as Highland Queen.

On February 21st Rear Headquarters of the Burma Army moved to Maymo. Looting in Rangoon was rife, and this did not diminish when the civil authorities opened the doors of the prisons and let loose the inmates of the lunatic asylum, after most of the staff had fled. Rangoon became a bedlam until detachments of the Gloucesters managed to restore a semblance of order after most of the Rangoon police, the Burma Military Police and the Fire Brigade had been evacuated. At noon on March 5th General Alexander[1] arrived in Rangoon to take over command in Burma, with Lieut.-General Hutton as his Chief of Staff. He had conferred at Calcutta with General Wavell on his way and received from him the following directive:

> The retention of Rangoon is a matter of vital importance to our position in the Far East, and every effort must be made to hold it. If, however, that is not possible the British force must not be allowed to be cut off but must be withdrawn from the Rangoon area for the defence of Upper Burma. This must be held as long as possible in order to safeguard the oil fields at Yenangyaung, keep contact with the Chinese, and protect the construction of the road from Assam to Burma.

Alexander was faced with having to decide immediately whether Rangoon could be held any longer. What was left of the 17th Indian Division was fighting the oncoming enemy in the Pegu area with the stout help of the 7th Armoured Brigade, but without the slightest prospect of stemming his advance. The 63rd Indian Brigade was assembling at Hlawga, 16 miles north of Rangoon, its transport still on board ship. Through the 30-mile gap between the 17th Indian Division and the 1st Burma Division the Japanese were penetrating steadily into the Pegu Yomas.

Alexander was disinclined to yield Rangoon and went immediately to headquarters of the 17th Division at Hlegu to confer with Lieut.-General Hutton and Major-General Cowan who had succeeded to the command of the division when Major-General Smyth, V.C. had to give up owing to illness and return to India. He ordered a resumption of offensive operations at Waw, but these were out of the question. The general situation was growing worse every hour. 2,000 of the enemy were reported to have passed through Paunnggye 30

[1] Field-Marshal Viscount Alexander of Tunis, K.G., G.C.B., G.C.M.G., C.S.I., D.S.O., M.C.

miles north of Pegu and to be moving south-west. On March 6th the enemy was only a few miles from the road and railway to Prome. Bassein had been evacuated by the civil authorities. Disorder was acute in the Delta districts. Indians were being murdered and rich Burmans were being robbed by their fellow-countrymen. Heavy fighting had broken out round Pegu. The Gurkha Brigade with the Cameronians and West Yorkshires were holding the town against assaults from the north and west. Hand to hand fighting round the railway station continued all day. Four miles south of the town the enemy established a powerful road block on the main road to Rangoon.

Later on March 6th Alexander decided that it was impossible to hold Rangoon and the order to begin all demolitions next day at 2 p.m. was given one minute before midnight. On the morning of March 7th Alexander with Advanced Army Headquarters and all garrison troops not required to cover the demolitions moved out in motor transport along the Prome road to rejoin Rear A.H.Q. at Maymo. Beyond Taukkyan at Milestone 26 north of Rangoon this force was halted by an enemy road block. It looked as if Alexander had left it too late.

Back in Rangoon the Denial Scheme was being carried out with thoroughness on the whole, sometimes too thoroughly as when a senior U.S. officer without reference to Army Headquarters ordered the destruction of many vehicles and other supplies imported from China under Lease/Lend arrangements. The loss of these vehicles was severely felt later in the campaign. The last train pulled out of Rangoon at 7.30 p.m.; the city lay under an immense pall of smoke and was lighted by huge pillars of fire. The first enemy patrols marched into the empty city just before dawn on March 8th.

Round Pegu the fighting was desperate. A general withdrawal, made imperative by the evacuation of Rangoon, was planned for the early morning of March 7th. The road block south was to be attacked as soon as the ground mist cleared; the road bridges over the river were blown at dawn; the troops and transport moved out. The rearguard was at once attacked, and presently the whole column came under mortar and machine-gun fire from enemy positions west of the road. Japanese snipers were posted in trees and on house tops, and several parties of the enemy broke through to the road. Lentaigne led his 1/4th Gurkhas in a splendid bayonet charge, and that eased matters. The guns of the R.H.A. battery attached to the 7th Armoured Brigade concentrated on the block. Then the 7th Hussars with a company of the West Yorkshires forced

the block, but the enemy closed in behind them and it was afternoon before the block was finally cleared by the Cameronians and West Yorkshires with severe casualties.

When Army Headquarters with the administrative part of the Rangoon garrison was halted at Taukkyan, five miles from the block established by the enemy where the road ran through a stretch of jungle, the outlook was bad. There were few fighting troops available; the 17th Division and most of the 7th Armoured Brigade were at Hlegu, seven miles to the east, or in hot action near Pegu.

That afternoon squadrons from the 7th Armoured Brigade were sent to deal with the situation. By 4 p.m. the attempt to break through the block had failed. The 2nd Frontier Force Rifles of the newly arrived 63rd Brigade was brought from Hlegu to Taukkyan, but two attacks were repelled by the enemy with heavy casualties for the young and untrained troops.

By now it was 5.30 p.m. and already dark owing to the black cloud of smoke from the burning refineries in Rangoon. Army Headquarters and the troops at Taukkyan harboured in a rubber plantation. The imperturbable and debonair Alexander never needed both of these qualities more. Within a perimeter guarded as closely as possible by tanks and infantry were crowded all kinds of administrative and office staffs to which were added civil officials and clerks, and as a final treat some women who had disobeyed the evacuation order and clung to their men folk.

When night came Alexander gave orders to attack the block at dawn. After a concentration of artillery fire the tanks were to charge head on and simultaneously the 63rd Brigade was to attack, the 1/10th Gurkha Rifles on the west flank, the 1st Sikh Regt on the east, and the 2nd Frontier Force Rifles up the road as a reserve behind the tanks of the Hussars. The 1/10th Gurkha Rifles had marched that night from Hlegu, and when at first light on March 8th the battalion advanced through dense jungle toward the main road it lost its way in the mist and became dispersed, many of the men not rejoining the main body for several days, and some of them having been deprived of their arms by Burmans. On the other side of the road the 1st Sikh Regt at its assembly point in open country was heavily bombed and machine-gunned by enemy aircraft; this considerably disorganised the young soldiers whose first experience it was of air attacks.

However, the inability of the untrained 63rd Indian Brigade at this date to deal with the dangerous situation was set off by what may be called the enemy's whimsical abandonment of the block. It would seem that he had had no intention of cutting off our troops:

the road block had been put there to protect the left flank of the Japanese 33rd Division as it crossed the Prome road to approach Rangoon from the north-west. Inasmuch as the enemy must have known that we had evacuated the city on the previous day his hurry is difficult to understand, and no explanation put forward for his astonishing mistake is satisfactory. General Alexander could consider himself a favourite of fortune; his decision to defer the evacuation of Rangoon might easily have involved the destruction or capture of the whole of his forces. That is not to censure his decision, for it may be doubted if any other British general arriving with such a *directive* in such a situation would have had the imagination to realise immediately that he must get his troops out at once if he wanted to save them to fight another day. Alexander may have been influenced by the impression at a distance that the men on the spot in Hong Kong, Singapore and Burma were affected by pessimism and therefore liable to withdraw too soon. Gordon Bennett thought the same until he was in action against the Japanese himself. Presently, we shall find General Stilwell, the American general supposed to be commanding the Chinese Expeditionary Force, firmly convinced that Alexander himself was incapable of aggressive action. The legend persists that the Indian and British soldiers in the Far East were defeated by their inability to cope with Japanese tactics. Japanese tactics were superlative, but even if the British and Indian troops had been properly trained for the task assigned to them the lack of adequate arms and equipment would still have turned the day against them.

The loss of Rangoon decided the whole course of the campaign. The Burma Army was now cut off from its base and could henceforth be supplied only with as much limited equipment, stores and reinforcements as could be flown in by air. Base and lines of communication installations and reserves had already been moved north of Rangoon, and this back-loading which must continue throughout the campaign would place a fearful strain on the administrative machine and the transportation agencies. The destruction of the oil refineries inevitably reduced the output of petrol and lubricating oils, and when the large stocks taken out of Rangoon had been consumed the Allied Armies in Burma would be dependent on the improvised refinery in the oilfields themselves.

Moreover, there was the undertaking to feed the Chinese Expeditionary Force and there was the construction of that road out of Burma to Assam; to the Chinese armies and to the road we shall return.

By March 10th the 17th Indian Division and the 7th Armoured Brigade were reorganising in the Tharrawaddy area, but the Chinese Fifth Army which had relieved the 1st Burma Division was unwilling to move south of Toungoo and Alexander decided that the British concentration must take place in the Prome area to secure alignment. This involved the loss of land 70 miles in depth in which there were large quantities of food, particularly rice which would be wanted for the Chinese, and that added to the already almost intolerable difficulties of the administrative services.

Lieut.-General Slim arrived on March 19th to take over the command of Burcorps which consisted of the 17th Division and the 7th Armoured Brigade; they were joined by the 1st Burma Division commanded by Major-General J. Bruce Scott[1] as soon as the Chinese concentration was accomplished. The division had some fairly heavy fighting in the Sittang Valley before it joined Burcorps on the Irrawaddy front.

Battalions from Curtis's 13th Indian Brigade had been brigaded within the 1st and 2nd Burma Brigades. On March 11th these two latter attacked Pyuntaza on the main Rangoon-Mandalay road, and Madauk and Shwegyin on the Sittang River. The attack on Pyuntaza opened successfully, but after the 2nd Rajputs had carried the town and a road block south of it the enemy counter-attacked in superior numbers and the Rajputs were compelled to fall back, having suffered considerable casualties. A line was eventually established north of Pyuntaza. Madauk was taken by the 7th Burma Rifles without much opposition. Shwegyin gave the 5/1st Punjab Regt some fierce street fighting, the town being occupied by Burmese insurgents. Lieut.-Colonel Marsland handled the action skilfully; the battalion cleared the town, killing 50 of the enemy and taking 90 prisoners, all in civilian clothes but formidably armed.

When the time came for the withdrawal of the 1st Burma Division to Prome, leaving the Chinese Fifth Army to take over the area it had hitherto held, the Japanese followed up and on the evening of March 16th the 1st Burma Brigade was in action at Kyauktaya, and the 5th Burma Rifles smashed up some lorries full of Japanese. The battalion was closely engaged for the next 24 hours before the withdrawal continued. The 2nd Brigade was also involved in fighting before the 1st Burma Division passed through the Chinese outposts along the Pegu River to concentrate near Toungoo before proceeding to the Irrawaddy front. The original order to concentrate in the Prome area was now modified by Burcorps. The concentration was

[1] Major-General J. Bruce Scott, C.B., D.S.O., M.C. (6th and 8th Gurkha Rifles).

to be in the area Dayindabo-Allanmyo-Thayetmyo immediately behind the 17th Indian Division.

This opportunity may be taken to observe that, while certain units of the Burma Rifles showed some lack of martial spirit, others remained steadfast and displayed great gallantry in circumstances which were more depressing for them than for either the British or Indian units because many of these men of the Burma Rifles were abandoning their wives and families and small possessions to the Japanese as they moved northwards. It was the opinion of Major-General Bruce Scott, the commander of the 1st Burma Division, that many of the strictures passed upon the battalions of the Burma Rifles were exaggerated and harsh.

Chapter 36

March–April, 1942. Chinese divisions in Burma—administrative burden—confused command—loss of Prome—withdrawal to the oil-fields—Japanese penetrate the line.

WHEN it became clear that war with Japan was inevitable sooner or later a supply base was established in Burma which was intended to maintain British forces operating in China against the Japanese. This pipe dream of strategy was replaced by the unpleasant nightmare of a possible Japanese invasion of Burma, and arrangements were then made for Chinese help if the nightmare became an actuality. The size of the force was fixed at one regiment (227th Regt of the Chinese 93rd Division) because it was estimated that a larger force could not be rationed by us in the Kengtung area where these troops were to operate. When war with Japan broke out the 227th Regt at once moved into Kengtung to take over the defence of the Mekong River sector, and on January 1st 1942 regimental headquarters was established at Mongyaung.

The reader is reminded that when toward the end of December 1941 General Wavell flew to interview Chiang Kai-Shek in Chungking he was offered the Chinese Fifth and Sixth Armies (the equivalent of two divisions) for the defence of Burma and that Wavell at once accepted the 93rd Division of the Sixth Army and asked for the 49th Division to be moved close to the frontier at Wanting on the Burma road. The Chinese 55th Division, scattered and badly organised, was left where it was. The Fifth Army was concentrating round Kunming and Wavell asked for it to be retained there in reserve. Much ill-informed criticism of Wavell's treatment of Chiang Kai-Shek's offer was made in an attempt to excuse the preliminary mess that Britain, Holland and the United States between them made of Far East strategy; now that Chiang Kai-Shek's inferior qualities have been revealed and the need to flatter him has gone it can be asserted that if Wavell had accepted his offer, so far from helping the situation the Chinese armies would have injured it, that is if they had arrived any sooner than they did, which is unlikely.

On January 19th when the Japanese attack on Tenasserim developed, the rest of the Chinese 93rd Division moved into Kengtung and 10 days later it was decided that the 49th Division should

enter Burma through Lashio and take over the sector east of the Salween about Takaw. At the same time the Chinese 55th Division was to complete its training and equipment at Wanting in reserve.

Chiang Kai-Shek, while insisting that his troops should not mix with the Imperial forces, declared that they were under the command of General Hutton. A few days later it was arranged that the Chinese Sixth Army should take over the Karenni front also and thus free the 1st Burma Division for operations south of Toungoo. This part of the front was now allotted to the Chinese 55th Division.

At the end of February the Chinese Fifth Army began its advance into Burma. It could not move before because the last elements of the Sixth Army had not cleared Lashio, and the only way into Burma from China was along the Burma road, a most limited thoroughfare. The time to concentrate the Fifth Army was reckoned at 20 days. So when Rangoon fell only the 200th Division of the Fifth Army was in Burma.

The fire power of a Chinese division was about equal to that of a British brigade; the men without rifles were used for various fatigues and being trained were available to replace casualties. The Chinese Armies had no supply or administrative services. Their officers knew nothing about railway transport. Consequently the British, notwithstanding their own inadequate resources, had to improvise transport and administrative services for the Chinese; they also had to feed them. The fact that the British liaison officers were chiefly employed on administrative duties was bad for their prestige because the Chinese commanders regarded administration as unworthy of a fighting soldier. Hence the caterwauling by General Joseph Stilwell in his diary about the Chinese contempt for the 'Limeys' who would not fight. The British had to move into Burma and there feed and maintain some 95,000 Chinese who now and then fought. Major-General Dennys, the British Military Attaché at Chungking, was to have been Chief Liaison Officer, but he was unfortunately killed in an air crash and his unenviable post was taken by Brigadier Martin.[1] Very few of the liaison officers could speak Chinese, the Chinese interpreters were young students who caused a great deal of trouble; none of the Chinese could speak the Burmese language and their notion of communicating with the Burmans was to shoot as many as possible. Medical services were miserable, for drugs and doctors were equally scarce. So a number of British medical units who could ill be spared were attached to the Chinese. Invaluable help was given by Dr Seagrave of the Harper Memorial Medical Unit, an

[1] Brigadier J. C. Martin, C.B.E., D.S.O., M.C.

American Baptist organisation with half a dozen doctors and 40 Karen nurses.

It had been laid down that the Chinese Sixth Army was to come under the command of Hutton; but when the Fifth Army arrived its commander, General Tu, was officially described as Acting Commander-in-Chief of the Chinese Expeditionary Force. When Alexander succeeded Hutton he presumed that Tu was subordinate to himself. Then on March 14th General J. W. Stilwell of the United States Army arrived in Burma without any signal communications and with an inadequate staff, all devoid of any local knowledge, to be in independent command of the Chinese Expeditionary Force.

General Alexander noted:[1]

> Nominally I commanded all the Allied forces. General Stilwell commanded the Chinese V and VI Armies but he had to issue all his orders through a Chinese Commander, General Lou. There was, moreover, a system of liaison officers working under the Generalissimo (Chiang Kai-Shek) and it appeared that no orders of a major nature issued by myself, by General Stilwell or by General Lou could be carried out unless they had the sanction of the Generalissimo, which had to be obtained through the latter's Liaison Mission, whose head was General Lin Wei at Lashio, and who in turn had a forward liaison officer in General Hou at Maymo. Such an arrangement was obviously quite unsuitable for modern war since quick decisions for the employment of the Chinese forces were impossible to obtain and this, together with the almost total lack of knowledge of staff duties which existed in the Chinese forces, caused considerable delay in the execution of vital movements.

Elsewhere in this Despatch Alexander referred to the loyal co-operation he had received from General Stilwell. This is less evident after the publication of *The Stilwell Papers*. Here is an extract from Stilwell's diary:[2]

> March 13 . . . Alexander arrived. Very cautious. Long sharp nose. Rather brusque and standoffish. Let me stand around. . . . Astonished to find ME—mere me, a goddam American—in command of Chinese troops. 'Extrawdinery!' Looked me over as if I had just crawled out from under a rock.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> About midnight, Major Miller . . . barged into my *bedroom*, woke me up and said General Alexander wanted to see me at

[1] Despatch of General Alexander, June 16th 1942, par. 22.

[2] *The Stilwell Papers*. Arranged and edited by Theodore H. White (Macdonald) p. 78.

10.00 in the morning at 'Flagstaff House.' Can you beat it? I wonder what those babies would have said if I had sent Dorn on a similar errand to them? It's just the superior race complex, for which they will pay dearly.

When on March 19th the 1st Burma Division passed through the cavalry screen of the Chinese 200th Division about Pegu, the 22nd Division had hardly reached Lashio and the rest of the Fifth Army was still in China. Chinese troops inflicted casualties on the Japanese following hard up on the 1st Burma Division while the main body of the 200th Chinese Division was placing the area round Toungoo in a state of defence; this the Chinese thought could be best effected by burning most of the town, which nearly included rear headquarters of the 1st Burma Division and the supply depot. Tremendous efforts by working parties of the division managed to save them both and the stores were cleared. By March 21st the 55th Japanese Division was in contact with the Chinese forward positions about Oktwin and a day or two later the Chinese 200th Division was cut off in Toungoo. Attempts to reinforce the garrison with regiments of the Chinese 55th Division in Karenni failed. The enemy broke into the town to be repulsed by the defenders who were now repeatedly bombed by Japanese aircraft. Six Tomahawk fighters of the A.V.G. did their best, but they were not numerous enough. On March 21st Allied aircraft had destroyed nine enemy fighters in combat and 16 aircraft grounded at Mingaladon. Within 24 hours the Japanese air force in a series of devastating raids on Magwe had practically wiped out the Allied air force. What was left of it, 'somewhat prematurely' in the words of General Wavell,[1] flew north to Lashio and Loiwing, and later was withdrawn to India where it was essential to organise the defence of Calcutta and Ceylon; 'aircraft were only reaching India in small numbers.'[2]

From the time that Magwe was abandoned Japanese aircraft enjoyed the freedom of the Burma skies and by the systematic bombing of important centres like Mandalay, Thazi and Maymo they were able to make confusion worse confounded in the essential public services.

On March 29th the Chinese fought their way out of Toungoo and succeeded in re-establishing a line south of Yedashe; unfortunately they failed to destroy the bridge over the Sittang which gave the enemy direct access to the important road through Karenni to the Shan States.

[1] General Wavell's Despatch of July 14th. [2] *ibid.*

Alexander had flown to see Chiang Kai-Shek toward the end of the month and in an attempt to relieve the pressure on the Chinese Fifth Army he had ordered a local offensive from Prome, the first objective being Paungde. The striking force consisted of the R.H.A. Battery, the 7th Hussars, the much depleted battalions of the West Yorkshires, the Duke of Wellington's and the Cameronians; the 1st Gloucestershire Regt which was now the reconnaissance unit of the 17th Indian Division was already observing Paungde. A Commando under Lieut.-Colonel Musgrave was moved by river steamer to deal with a reported advance up the west bank of the Irrawaddy by a large mixed force of Japanese and Burmans. Co-operating with the Commando was the Royal Marines river patrol with a detachment of the Burma Military Police.

By the morning of March 29th the enemy was already at Padigon, six miles north of Paungde off the main road and on the railway. This suggested an outflanking march against Prome, and the greater part of the striking force under Brigadier Anstice was diverted to counter such a threat. Repeated attacks by the Cameronians with a squadron of the 7th Hussars made considerable progress but did not succeed in reaching Padigon. Meanwhile, the company and a half that now represented the 2nd Duke of Wellington's Regt operated against Paungde and killed many of the enemy; however, he was continually being reinforced, and in the end the attack had to be given up that afternoon for lack of weight.

By now the Japanese who had advanced up the east bank of the Irrawaddy were discovered to be astride the main road at Shwedaung and therefore behind the striking force, which was instructed to break out either by way of Padigon or Shwedaung as circumstances decided and to fall back on Prome. Anstice decided on Shwedaung; breaking off the actions at Padigon and Paungde, he concentrated his force at Inma. At sundown Major Pereira R.H.A. with a troop of the 414th Battery R.H.A., a troop of the 7th Hussars, and two companies of the Gloucesters was sent ahead to clear a road block which the enemy had established at Shwedaung. By then Major-General Cowan had sent the 4th Frontier Force Regt and the 2nd Frontier Force Rifles supported by a battery of the 1st Indian Field Regt to retake the town from the north. The Piffers in some fierce fighting killed and captured a number of Burmese insurgents, but they could not penetrate beyond the northern outskirts of the town, which ran for more than a mile along the east bank of the Irrawaddy. At 7 p.m. Pereira's Force struck a block two miles south of Shwedaung. Lightly held, this was soon cleared; but on the

outskirts of the town another block strongly held checked further progress. The rest of the striking force having now arrived, Brigadier Anstice decided on a stern effort to break through the block at 2 a.m. of March 30th. Just before the attack was launched Lieut. Patterson of the 7th Hussars was captured by the enemy who tied him to the road block while it was being shelled by our guns. With his hands bound behind him Patterson managed to extricate himself from the ropes and make his way back to his own regiment through the enemy lines.

The 2 a.m. attack failed to force the block; at daylight it was resumed after the heavy river mist had cleared. The fighting was long and bitter and the block was not overcome until 10.30 a.m. when the enemy fell back toward the end of the town. Our troops followed up; the transport column moved forward. The latter was soon halted by another block and attempts to seek diversions were thwarted by accurate mortar fire which wrecked many vehicles and closed the side streets. On the flanks the progress by the troops was more rapid, though fiercely contested at every yard. However, that progress did not help the transport, which was heavily bombed from the air during the afternoon. Shwedaung was now on fire; our rearguard was fighting hard with fresh enemy units coming up from the south; our relieving forces to the north had not been able to advance. A last desperate effort was made to save the transport. The tanks managed to find a way round, but in the face of the heavy mortar and machine-gun fire few unarmoured vehicles managed to get out. The remaining transport was then abandoned. The British infantry battalions with the 4th Frontier Force Regt and the 2nd Frontier Force Rifles fought their way through and out of the burning town sustaining severe casualties. Eight tanks and two guns were lost. The enemy was the 215th Regt of the Japanese 33rd Division.

On March 29th disaster overtook the Commando and the Royal Marines river-patrol at Padaung through the treachery of the inhabitants who hid the enemy in their houses and helped him to make a surprise attack that night in the course of which our force was destroyed. Next morning a dozen Royal Marine and Commando prisoners were lined up before a battalion on parade and charged by a section with fixed bayonets. A sergeant-major with three bayonet wounds somehow escaped and was able to report this atrocity. The Japanese crossed from Padaung to reinforce their troops in Shwedaung.

The continued occupation of Prome now became an urgent

problem. Slim after 10 days with Burcorps reported that the troops had been tried too hardly and that their morale was not good. Yet the great dumps of petrol, ammunition and stores in Prome were vital to future operations in Burma and must somehow be back-loaded. This was a difficult task now that the Japanese air force had control of the sky, and it necessitated the despatch of road convoys entirely by night. To add to the difficulties the Irrawaddy was abnormally low, which made nocturnal navigation extremely dangerous.

Prome was a bad place for defence. The town straggled along the east bank of the Irrawaddy for over two miles, the outskirts surrounded by dense scrub jungle and much of the town dominated by jungle-covered hills, particularly on the important south side.

Prome itself was held by Barlow's still raw 63rd Indian Brigade, and the area east by the 16th Indian Brigade, now consisting of the 2nd Duke of Wellington's Regt, the 1st Royal Jat Regt, the 4th Frontier Force Regt, and the 7th Baluch Regt; on the left of them was the 1st Gloucestershire Regt. The 48th Gurkha Brigade, now commanded by Brigadier R. T. Cameron of the 2/5th Royal Gurkha Rifles, was round Hmaza to the left and somewhat forward of the 10th Brigade. At Tamagauk not far from divisional headquarters was the 7th Armoured Brigade with the 1st West Yorkshire Regt.

On the evening of April 1st the Japanese began to close in on Prome. One may suggest that the 63rd Brigade should not have been given the difficult perimeter south to hold; it was a job for the more experienced 48th Brigade. The enemy drove the 5th Dogra Regt back toward the east, and by 1 a.m. of April 2nd Brigadier Barlow decided to withdraw from Prome and take up a position along the line of the road and railway in the area of the 16th Brigade. Farther east the enemy attempted a wide turning movement, singing in the moonlight as he advanced in close formation. This column was allowed to approach to within 50 yards of the 1/4th Gurkha Rifles before it was engaged with all weapons and shot to pieces. The Japanese scattered into the dry paddy-fields swept by machine-gun fire, and Gurkhas in the forward defence lines worked outwards to bomb parties of the enemy taking cover in the ditches.

At 3 a.m. after the withdrawal of the 63rd Brigade the 48th Brigade was ordered to break contact with the enemy and withdraw to a position south of Tamagauk covering the main road. Three hours later the 16th Brigade also began to withdraw. At 10 a.m. of April 2nd Major-General Cowan received a report that a strong enemy column had moved northward through Prome during the

night; it looked as if the enemy was marching on Dayindabo with the object of cutting off the 17th Indian Division. The main road along which the division must fall back on Allanmyo ran for 15 miles through forest, a stretch which offered the Japanese just the country they wanted for their road block tactics. Cowan got into touch with Slim who ruled that the right course was for the 17th Division to anticipate the enemy's threat to cut them off from the 1st Burma Division by marching at once to Dayindabo.

By 11.30 a.m. the 17th Division was tramping through the hottest part of Burma at the hottest time of the year. The dust was inches deep. The sun blazed down. Many of the men had not tasted water since the previous evening. There was a shortage of water-bottles and the rare water-holes on the line of march tainted by the cholera spread by the unhappy refugees on their *via dolorosa* to India could not be kept clear of parched stragglers. Toward evening the long column of troops was attacked by enemy bombers and casualties were heavy.

The concentration of the 1st Burma Division was not quite completed when the 17th Division reached the Dayindabo area that night. On April 3rd it passed through the 1st Burma Brigade and marched on to the area of Allanmyo and Ywataung, again heavily attacked by bombers. During April 4th the troops were able to get some hours of rest; they needed it. On the night of April 5/6th Allanmyo and Thayetmyo were evacuated. Prodigies of effort by the administrative services had managed to backload all stores and ammunition; both towns were burnt.

Burcorps continued to withdraw northwards. By April 8th it was on the general line Minhla-Taungdwingyi covering the oilfields. This front was 40 miles long and with the forces at our disposal impossible to defend in depth. On April 6th Alexander had met Chiang Kai-Shek and asked him for a division to help in holding this line. The reinforcement was promised but it never arrived, and its failure to arrive compromised the whole plan of defence. This had provided for a series of widely-spaced brigade posts with their forward screen manned by units of the Burma Frontier Force. The centre of the line was held by the Corps Striking Force commanded by Major-General Bruce Scott. This consisted of the 1st Burma Division (less the 2nd Burma Brigade), the 48th Gurkha Brigade and the 7th Armoured Brigade; its disposition was determined by the water supply. The 48th Brigade and 7th Armoured Brigade were round Kokkogwa on the Yaume Chaung about 10 miles west of Taungdwingyi; the 13th Brigade was eight miles west of Kok-

kogwa in the Thityagauk-Kyaungyatsan area; the 1st Burma Brigade was about Migaungye on the Irrawaddy, 10 miles south-west of Kyaungyatsan.

The wide gaps between the brigades were a grave menace. A further handicap on the security of the front was imposed by the fact that the main line of communication, the road from Taungdwingyi to Magwe and the Yenangyaung oilfields, ran parallel to and close behind the front. The enemy was quick to exploit his advantage. He ignored Taungdwingyi which was held in force to cover Mandalay; he ignored the right flank of the Chinese Fifth Army now fighting south of Pyinmana; he made directly for the oilfields. By April 10th the forward screen was being probed by Japanese patrols, and on the black night of April 11th in a fierce thunderstorm a general attack was made on the Kokkogwa perimeter, the defence being at a heavy disadvantage through lack of signalling equipment for inter-communication. The Japanese broke through on the south and penetrated to the area of brigade headquarters where the officers stood by as a bombing squad ready to fight in any sector where the situation was critical.

At about 3 a.m. Captain Grieve led his company of the 5th Royal Gurkha Rifles in a counter-attack which after savage hand to hand fighting partially restored the position. Then the enemy broke in on the west by the village of Thadodan which was held by a platoon of the combined battalion of the 7th Gurkha Rifles, and advancing over the plateau east reached the gun positions of the 2nd Battery of the 1st Indian Field Regt. The Japanese were repulsed at the bayonet's point, and the guns were swung round to shell them point-blank.

It was near to dawn before the enemy began to draw off. At first light the 1/4th Gurkha Rifles with a squadron of the 2nd Royal Tank Regt cleared much of the area in a spirited counter-attack in which many Japanese were killed. The casualties of the enemy in that thunderstorm battle were very heavy, but so were the casualties of the 48th Brigade. On that evening Cameron reported that he now had only seven infantry companies left and shortened the perimeter. On the night of April 12/13th the enemy again heavily attacked the southern sector, but by 3.30 a.m. he broke off the engagement, not having been able to pierce the line at a single point. On the morning of April 13th fighting patrols of the Gurkha units were active in the surrounding villages and the Japanese lost heavily. Their aircraft made three attacks during the day in the course of which Kokkogwa was set on fire by incendiary bombs, much ammunition being

destroyed. Just before dark the 1/10th Gurkha Rifles reinforced the 48th Brigade. During this desperate fighting General Stilwell had a 'filthy breakfast' but a 'good dinner' with 'crême de menthe as wine.'

On April 13th he 'dubbed around all day playing rummy. Hot night. Ants got all over me.'[1]

Meanwhile, the Japanese advancing up the east bank of the Irrawaddy had captured Migaungye, masquerading as Burma Rifles, the result of which was that our left flank was completely exposed, compelling a withdrawal to the line of the Yin Chaung, south of Magwe, which was held by the weak 1st Burma Brigade with the weak 13th Indian Brigade on its left round Pado and the 7th Armoured Brigade (less the 7th Hussars) in support. In Magwe was the divisional reserve (Magforce) made up of the 5th Mountain Battery, the 1st Cameronians and the 7th and 12th Burma Rifles. Twenty-five miles to the east the 17th Division with the 7th Hussars closed on Taungdwingyi and Natmauk. Through this gap enemy columns were hurrying by unfrequented tracks and dry stream beds or chaungs to reach the Yenangyaung oilfields. The Japanese used native carts and were helped by the Burmans of that sparsely populated arid countryside.

Burcorps hoped to hold the Yin Chaung position long enough to give the exhausted troops rest in the violent heat; the next possible line of defence in this waterless inferno was along the Pin Chaung, north of Yenangyaung and 40 miles distant by road. Those hopes were not fulfilled. Throughout April 14th the 2nd K.O.Y.L.I. was attacked in an isolated position south of the Yin Chaung and after losing most of its transport in an ambush it was hard put to reach Magwe after some desperate fighting.

At 1 a.m. on April 16th an attack was launched against the whole front of the 1st Burma Brigade. The 5th Burma Rifles fought well for a while, but in the end disintegrated. Simultaneously the forward company of the 2nd Rajputs was overrun. Lieut.-Colonel Rea, finding that his battalion was practically surrounded by dawn and out of touch with the battalions on his flanks, withdrew his men towards the main road. The 1st Burma Rifles formed a rearguard to cover the now much disorganised brigade. The K.O.Y.L.I. with a strength of 200 was rushed back from Magwe to cover the passage of the transport on the road for Yenangyaung.

The holding of the Yin Chaung was a transient mirage. By the evening of April 16th the Burma Division was halted near the dry

[1] *The Stilwell Papers*, p. 99.

watercourse of the Kadaung Chaung, a long day's march south of Yenangyaung. Leaving one squadron to act as rearguard to the division, the 7th Armoured Brigade went on to the Pin Chaung. On the same day the 2nd Burma Brigade withdrew from Minbu opposite Magwe and moved on up the west bank of the Irrawaddy. The 17th Indian Division remained disposed about Taungdwingyi and Natmauk with orders from Burcorps to operate strongly against the right flank of the enemy following up the Burma Division. Stilwell now offered Slim the Chinese 38th Division, then in Mandalay. The offer was accepted, though after General Tu's failure to provide a Chinese division when such a reinforcement would have been of real value it may be doubted if this new offer was much of a tonic.

In his diary for April 15th Stilwell noted:[1]

> Arrived Maymo . . . with Lo and party saw Alexander. . . . Did Aleck have the wind up! Disaster and gloom. No fight left in British. 'Afraid of the Japs' who dress as natives and live openly in the villages. . . .
>
> Situation very bad. If Mandalay is lost, one Indian brigade and the tanks are to cover our rear at Lashio. The rest of the British go to Kalewa and Myiktyina. . . . Alex calls me 'Joe' now. . . .

On April 17th he noted:[2]

> Alexander impressed me as sucking a lot of moral support out of being around us. His own surroundings are constant gloom.

It did not occur to General Stilwell that the greedy, feckless, undisciplined and ill-equipped Chinese troops and generals he was supposed to be commanding might be adding to the gloom. On the contrary, he wrote on April 16th that 'the Chinese troops have been doing pretty damn well.'

[1] *The Stilwell Papers*, p. 99. [2] *ibid.*, p. 100.

Chapter 37

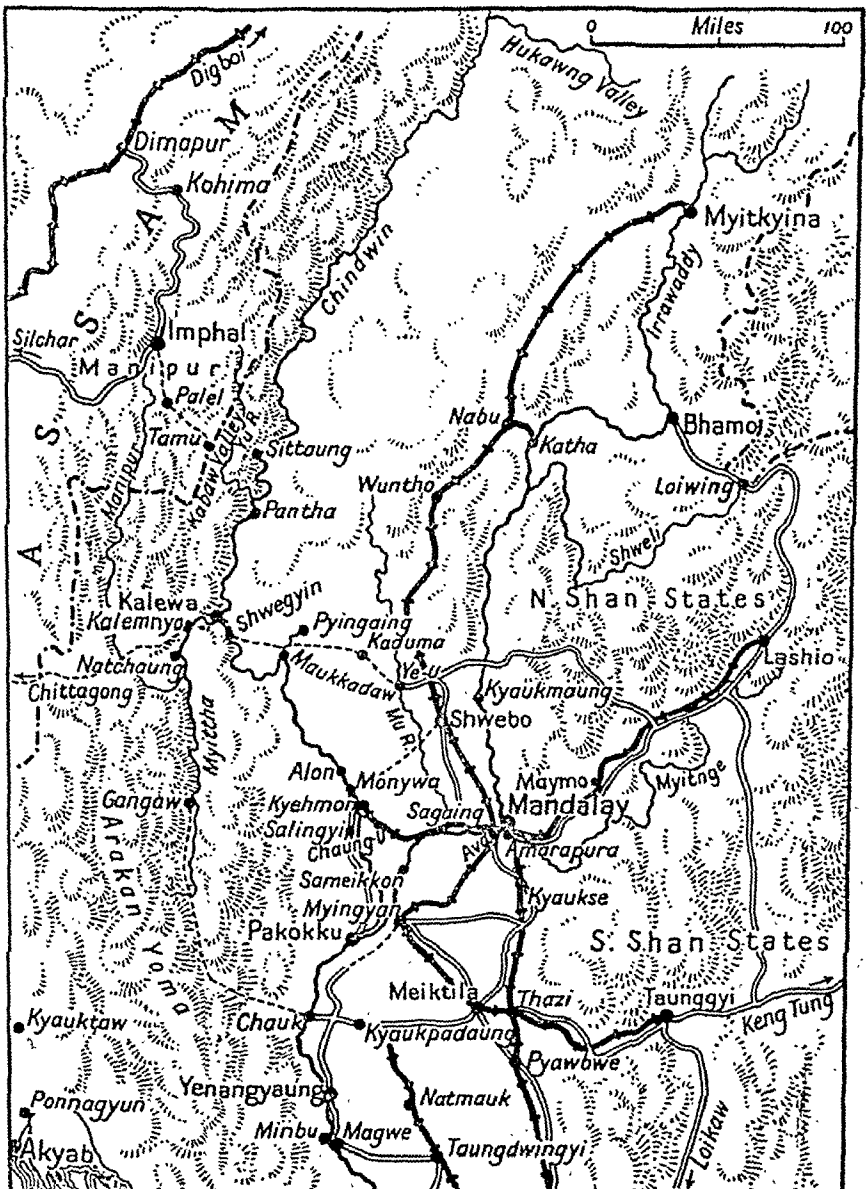
April, 1942. Destruction of oilfields—fatal thrust at Yenangyaung—building the Tamu road—brilliant rearguard action at Kyaukse—demolition of Ava Bridge at Mandalay.

THE task of denying the oilfields at Yenangyaung and farther north at Chauk was entrusted to Mr W. L. Forster who had already carried out the destruction of the oil refineries round Rangoon. A word of admiration is due to the magnificently selfless way in which members of the staffs of the companies concerned carried out that dangerous and distressing task.

The demolition signal was given by Burcorps at 1 a.m. on April 15th, the power station at Yenangyaung being excluded for the nonce from the operation of the order. When millions of gallons of crude oil in an immense sheet of fire leapt high toward the smoke-thickened sky, and wells, plants and installations were burning to the accompaniment of explosions, Mr Forster and a few of his assistants remained behind to destroy the power station on the signal's being given. Soon all that would be left for the enemy was a broken sweep of parched country from which rose hundreds of rust-red derricks like a forest of skeleton trees. One rifle company of the 1st Gloucestershire Regt remained as guard; the other was at the Chauk oilfield where the scene was similar. Neither company had mortars or automatic weapons.

The road to Meiktila and Mandalay, the only road north from Yenangyaung, crossed the Pin Chaung by a difficult ford three miles beyond the town. A section of the 8th Heavy Anti-aircraft Battery R.A. in position on the north bank near the ford was surrounded by the enemy who had moved up unobserved along the dry bed of the Paungwe Chaung. Most of the gunners were unarmed and were captured; later the majority of them escaped and the guns were brought out by tanks.

At 10.30 a.m. the leading vehicles of the 7th Armoured Brigade crossed the Yin Chaung; two miles north of the ford fire was suddenly opened on the column, and a blazing tank was quickly used by the Japanese as a road block. Presently other enemy parties seized the ford and Twingon village to the south of it. Then after blocking the road the enemy entered Yenangyaung. The company



Northern Burma

of the Gloucesters fell back fighting; at a minute to midnight the demolition of the power house began and was completed just in time.

Back by the Chadaung Chaung, headquarters of the Burma Division received news at 2 a.m. of April 17th of what was happening round Yenangyaung. Bruce Scott at once ordered the move northward to start at dawn and himself hurried on ahead of his troops to the oilfields.

North of the Pin Chaung the enemy had remained astride the road until he was dislodged on the morning of the 17th by the 2nd Royal Tank Regt, a company of the West Yorkshires and units of the Burma Frontier Force; he retained, however, his hold round the ford.

Most of the enemy dead were found to be wearing khaki uniforms and the felt hats used by the Gurkha and Burma riflemen. The Japanese would probably have been successful in reaching so far to the rear of the Imperial troops in any uniform, but regardless of the conventions of what is called civilised warfare they tried to make things as easy as possible for their troops.

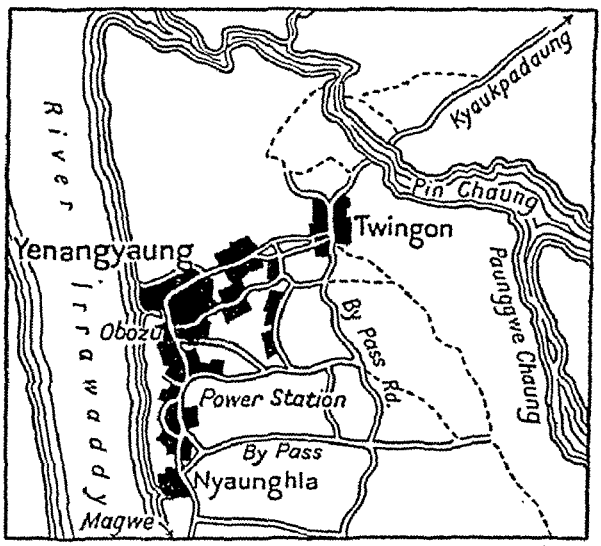
Elements of the 113th Regt of the 38th Chinese Division arrived from Mandalay to reinforce our troops south of the Pin Chaung. Throughout that day the company of the Gloucesters, supported by a company of Indian sappers and miners and the Employment Platoon of the Burma Division, hung on to the southern fringes of Yenangyaung while the division hastened north through the searing heat, without water and continually harassed by hostile aircraft; but it was not until late that night that the division was concentrated in the area between Yonzeik and Milestone 358.

Bruce Scott managed to get into touch with Slim through a signals detachment of the 7th Armoured Brigade, which was the only wireless he had, and it was settled that at dawn next day Magforce should attack Yenangyaung, the ridge north of Nyaunghla being the first objective from which it would exploit forward to cover the main advance of the division along the by-pass road. Simultaneously Curtis' 13th Brigade was to attack astride the by-pass, move on to Twingon, force the road block there and exploit toward the Pin Chaung. The 1st Burma Brigade was to cover the rear of the division; the Chinese reinforcements were to operate north of the Pin Chaung but not across it to avoid any possible confusion between them and Japanese troops.

So much emphasis has been laid on the jungle in all accounts of the Burma fighting that the reader may find it hard to picture the scene of the Yenangyaung fighting. The broken country seems

almost as sterile as the stony desert in North Africa for much the greater part of the year. Deep watercourses with dry beds of sand or pebbles except when they turn to torrents in the monsoon traverse it in all directions. In April the temperature in the shade (but there is no shade) is about 115°. Our troops had to fight in this inferno for two days, many of them without water and without rations, in the reek of burning oil and ruins.

Magforce under the command of Lieut.-Colonel W. B. Thomas of the Cameronians attacked at 6.30 a.m. and gained its first objective with slight opposition while at the same time the 5/1st



Punjab Regt and the 1st Royal Garhwal Rifles of the 13th Brigade gained their first objective and moved on Twingon with the 1st Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers in reserve. However, when Magforce after clearing the Nyaunghla by-pass gained the sere ridges to the north, the Cameronians and the 7th Burma Rifles were held up by stiff opposition on the adjoining ridges and from buildings of solid masonry. The guns of the 5th Mountain Battery had only 40 rounds a gun and the ammunition was now north of the Pin Chaung; it was necessary to engage all the targets with a single gun. A squadron of the 2nd Royal Tank Regt, which had been operating with the 13th Brigade near Twingon, broke through to help Magforce, but the ground was unsuitable for tanks and the squadron went back to

the 13th Brigade. When the tanks withdrew, the 12th Burma Rifles, a territorial unit, cracked and, though the fire of the Cameronians kept some of the riflemen in position, many flung away their arms and ran south along the river. The behaviour of the 12th Burma Rifles shook the 7th Burma Rifles which had fought well until now, and it was clear that by this time only the Cameronians were still capable of offensive action. Thomas decided to move Magforce along the Nyaunghla by-pass and rejoin the rest of the division south of Twingon.

Curtis' 13th Brigade after gaining its first objective had continued across the oilfields. The 5/1st Punjab Regt was advancing on a wide front with all four companies forward when about 500 yards from the Twingon ridge the battalion came under heavy fire from prepared positions, the enemy using rifles, light machine-guns, mortars and infantry guns. Casualties were heavy, including several officers. The advance was held up, but the Punjabis made a second attack and managed to gain a footing on the ridge by 11 a.m. to which they clung until the middle of the afternoon. Lieut.-Colonel K. D. Marsland asked brigade headquarters to send another battalion through the position. Soon after this battalion headquarters received a direct hit and Marsland was wounded. A Japanese counter-attack forced the Punjabis to give ground with heavy casualties, and both the other two battalions of the brigade went forward to relieve the situation. All day the Inniskillings, the Garhwalis and the Punjabis were heavily engaged, supported by the guns of the 2nd and 23rd Mountain Batteries. Two companies of the Inniskillings were taken prisoner after fraternising with what they thought were Chinese troops, but they escaped next day during the counter-attack carried out by the Chinese with the tanks of the 2nd R.T. Regt to support them. Two companies of the Garhwalis made the same mistake but the mistake was discovered in time.

At 4.30 p.m. Bruce Scott asked Slim for permission to abandon his transport and fight his way out across country. His men and his animals without water were succumbing to exhaustion. Slim ordered the Burma Division to hold on because the Chinese 38th Division was to attack at dawn next day and cross the Pin Chaung west of the main road. Bruce Scott therefore formed a perimeter just south of Twingon on the high ground astride the by-pass which was now chock-a-block with transport. There was no water in the area, and the only piece of fortune was the comparative quiescence of the enemy's air force on account of the smoke from the demolitions, the close fighting, and the broken country.

By now the 1st Burma Brigade was the shadow of a brigade, all the battalions having lost heavily, and it was used to cover the movement of the transport behind the 13th Indian Brigade without being engaged with the enemy. As the transport crawled northward up the by-pass Japanese troops were observed landing from the Irrawaddy about Nyaunghla, and during the night the enemy closed in north, west and south of the Burma Division: eastward the ground was precipitous and impassable for vehicles. A desperate attempt to find water discovered a small quantity in damaged oilfield pipes; there was not even enough to quench the thirst of the wounded.

At dawn, after a night made hideous by the jackal-howling of the Japanese round the perimeter, the enemy attacked the northern sector manned by the 13th Brigade; the attack was easily held, but it had a bad effect on some of the Burma Rifles units which by now were in a nervous condition. Soon after 7 a.m. the 13th Brigade supported by tanks made another attempt to force the road through Twingon. The Inniskillings and a company of the Royal Garhwal Rifles penetrated the village, but could not clear the road block.

The situation of the Burma Division was worsening all the time; men were dying of sheer exhaustion under that pitiless sun; without water the battle could not go on. The Chinese attack north of the Pin Chaung had been postponed from dawn to 12.30 p.m., from 12.30 p.m. to 2 p.m.

Meanwhile, a squadron of the Royal Tank Regt with a company of the West Yorkshires had thrust south across the ford and by midday had gained the south bank where against stiff opposition they established contact with the K.O.Y.L.I. on the east. At this moment the West Yorkshires company was recalled by Burcorps because all available troops north of the Pin Chaung were required to concentrate at Gwegyo to deal with a reported Japanese advance from Kyaukpadaung, on the vital road to Meiktila. These Japanese turned out to be Chinese.

One reads with some surprise General Stilwell's entry for April 19th[1]:

> We have another wonderful chance for a killing [at Yenangyaung]. Alexander and Slim and Lo and Tu, Winterton[2] etc. in. 'My men are simply afraid of the Japs.' Long bellyache. Well, they delayed lunch till 3.15. . . .

[1] *The Stilwell Papers*, p. 103.

[2] Major-General T. J. W. Winterton, C.B., C.B.E., who had just succeeded Lieut.-General Hutton as General Alexander's Chief of Staff.

and also apparently the Chinese attack. It seems strange that between them all nobody at headquarters could find out whether the troops in Kyaukpadaung were Chinese or Japanese.

The unnecessary withdrawal of that West Yorkshire company was probably the decisive factor in the course events took because it stopped the forward move of the R.T.R. squadron which might well have cleared the ford.

By 2 p.m. there was still no sign of a Chinese attack and Bruce Scott, who had received disquieting reports from two of his brigadiers about the morale of their men maddened by heat and thirst, decided to make a final effort to save the transport before it was too late. The tanks had reported that higher up the Pin Chaung there was a by-pass track to the east along which determined drivers might get the vehicles away.

The transport was formed up with the guns in front and the wounded in lorries next. When many of the drivers could not be found, orders were given to destroy or immobilise all vehicles not absolutely necessary; some notion of the state of the Burma Division may be gathered from the fact that there were not enough unexhausted men to carry out even this task thoroughly. Bruce Scott himself led the transport as it moved along the by-pass track under mortar and gun-fire. The 13th Indian Brigade and 1st Burma Brigade were to cover the movement. On the track one of the tanks was hit by a mortar shell; vehicles were knocked out; some of the animals got out of control when they began to scent the water in the Chaung ahead. At last the whole column was halted by loose sand, and had to be abandoned; fortunately it was possible to transfer many of the wounded from the lorries to the tanks.

The Pin Chaung was reached by the main body about two miles above the ford and came under machine-gun fire from the village of Thitpyubin which was in the enemy's hands. However, the division pressed on and reassembled that night on the Kyaukpadaung road, afterwards moving to the area of Mount Popa, that strange isolated mountain haunted by hamadryad snakes, which rises in a triangle over 5,000 feet above the rolling arid plain-like Mount Athos beheld from the Aegean Sea.

It is idle to discuss the 'ifs' which might have averted the exposure of the 1st Burma Division to such an ordeal. When the task set to our commanders in Burma was beyond the skill even of brilliant generals like Alexander and Slim it was certainly beyond the ability of the troops to perform miracles. When we have admitted that some units lacked morale we must remember that the strain imposed upon

them might have tried the morale even of a British division like the immortal 29th of the First World War or an unmilked Indian division before the Second World War with long service on the North-West Frontier and trained to perfection. Let us remember those heroic wounded—Indian, Burman and British, many of whom lay in agony under the stifling shade of lorries without water for 48 hours without complaint.

The Chinese relieving operation announced for dawn was finally launched at 3 p.m. when Major-General Sun's 38th Division helped by the 2nd Royal Tank Regt and a troop of the 414th Battery R.H.A. made a well executed attack across the Pin Chaung and reached Twingon by evening. Next morning Yenangyaung was penetrated; by dusk the Chinese were in position along the south bank of the Pin Chaung. During the night Major-General Sun decided that the Japanese would counter-attack in strength at dawn and withdrew to the other side, falling back towards Gwegyo.

Stilwell and Alexander, both of them for a little while in the land where dreams come true, had discussed offensive action by the Chinese south of Pyinmana, and the latter had ordered the 7th Hussars to be ready to move to Pyawbwe. That was on April 17th. Two days later Alexander was feeling much less sure about Pyinmana, and he stressed the importance of holding strongly the centres of communication on the line Chauk-Kyaukpadaung-Meiktila-Thazi. With Stilwell's agreement it was settled that the Chinese 38th Division should be placed under the command of Burcorps.

Dreams of offensive action were still floating about. The deep thrust of the Japanese 33rd Division at Yenangyaung suggested a counterstroke. This was beyond the capacity of Burcorps alone, and Stilwell who, to use his own word, had been bellyaching about the distaste of the 'Limeys' for offensive action agreed to the use of the Chinese 200th Division, which had fought well at Toungoo, and one regiment of the Chinese 22nd Division for this counter-offensive. The dream faded abruptly. On the night of April 18/19th the Chinese 55th Division covering the Mawchi-Loikaw-Taunggyi road was destroyed south of Loikaw by a motorised column of the newly arrived Japanese 56th Division. By the afternoon of April 20th Taunggyi and the road through it to Thazi and Meiktila were open. That same day the Chinese Fifth Army was forced out of Pyinmana and it looked as if the Chinese 96th Division was about to go the way of the 55th.

'Are the British going to run out on us? Yes,' Stilwell wrote in his diary: it would have revealed more common sense if he had

asked and answered that question about the Chinese he still tried to suppose he was commanding.

It seemed essential to plug the gap at Taunggyi. So the Chinese 200th Division and the regiment from the Chinese 22nd Division were diverted east of Meiktila to attack the Japanese force holding Taunggyi.

A plan for the defence of Northern Burma in the event of the loss of Mandalay had been considered at the end of March and approved by Wavell. This provided that the troops of the Chinese Sixth Army east of the Salween should withdraw to China and troops west of the Salween towards Haipaw and Lashio. The Chinese Fifth Army would withdraw to stand astride the Mandalay-Lashio road, accompanied by a composite British infantry brigade from the 17th Indian Division and the 7th Armoured Brigade. The rest of the 17th Division would withdraw on the axis Mandalay-Shwebo-Katha, covering the newly projected road between India and China through the Hukawng Valley. The 1st Burma Division would cover the approaches to India through Kalewa. Early in April administrative arrangements were put in hand in accord with this plan.

The rapid changes in the situation soon made it obvious that it would be impossible to accumulate enough stocks of rice in Lashio or beyond it to feed the Chinese armies, which was our responsibility, for more than a few weeks. The loss of the chief rice-producing areas in Burma, the closing of the mills, and the difficulty of collecting the grain through the collapse of the railways meant that a withdrawal north of Mandalay would result in the starvation of the Chinese armies unless supplies could be sent from China. That of course was out of the question. Indeed, many trucks of rice were being sent into China by the Chinese commanders to enrich themselves. 'That's why we can't get trucks at the front,' Stilwell noted.[1]

There was, however, a prospect of obtaining food supplies in the Shwebo district, and Alexander decided to ask the Chinese to withdraw some of their forces through Shwebo. At the same time he sent Hutton on a special mission to discuss with Wavell the advisableness of letting part of the Imperial forces accompany the Chinese to China. Wavell was prepared to accept this plan. On April 21st at Maymo Alexander met General Lin Wei, Chiang Kai-Shek's principal liaison officer, to give him an opportunity of accepting the 7th Armoured Brigade. Lin Wei agreed that the bulk of the Chinese Fifth Army should move north, by way of Shwebo, but thought it would be better if no Imperial forces accompanied it

[1] *The Stilwell Papers*, p. 104.

towards Lashio. The tanks should be employed in the battle for Northern Burma on the more suitable ground west of the Irrawaddy towards Shwebo.

A new operational instruction agreed to by General Stilwell's staff at Maymo was issued to Burcorps on April 23rd. West of the River Mu would be Burcorps, the 1st Burma Division astride the River Chindwin with a strong detachment covering the approach to Kalewa by way of the Myittha Valley on the west bank of the Chindwin. Between the Mu and the Irrawaddy would be the 7th Armoured Brigade and the Chinese 38th Division. The Chinese 22nd, 28th and 96th Divisions would be in and south of Mandalay and holding the crossings over the River Myitnge. All Chinese forces east of the Mandalay-Pyawbwe railway would move towards Lashio.

This plan did not commit Alexander to immediately abandoning Kyaukpadaung and Meiktila; he still hoped to cover these places. By this time, however, he was realising the danger of hanging on too long and he had to consider the bottleneck of the great Ava Bridge, which was the only road by which tanks could cross the Irrawaddy. The approaches to the bridge ran through Mandalay and were most vulnerable to air attack. Japanese aircraft had maintained a steady attack on the city, which was already a burnt-out ruin. Alexander rightly dreaded the prospect of being compelled to fight in the loop of the Irrawaddy below Mandalay; he decided that as soon as his advanced forces were compelled to fall back from Meiktila the crossing of the Irrawaddy must be made and the Ava Bridge blown. Early in April steps had been taken to construct ferries over the mighty river, and it was by such a ferry that the 1st Burma Division ultimately crossed. The obscure situation in the Shan States did not allow a decision to be made now whether the Chinese 22nd, 28th and 96th Divisions should fall back northwards or strike east toward Lashio.

On April 23rd Stilwell persuaded the Chinese 200th Division to make a counter-attack on Taunggyi by directing it himself under heavy fire. Whatever strictures have to be passed upon the American General's attitude during these difficult days none can be passed upon his personal courage; that was always of the finest quality. The action by Taunggyi stopped that motorised column of the Japanese 56th Division for a space, but by April 29th it had driven on to capture Lashio, which cut the only serviceable line of communication with China and left the Japanese at liberty either to threaten the rear of the Imperial and Chinese forces through Bhamo and Myitkyina or sweep down in strength on Mandalay.

By the morning of April 25th Alexander had realised that he must get his own forces out and that the defence of India was now paramount. He gave orders for the plan of withdrawal north of Mandalay to be put into operation that night. Burcorps provided a rearguard for the much depleted Chinese 22nd and 96th Divisions to withdraw between Meiktila and Mandalay. The evacuation of units and installations in Maymo was begun. Advanced Army Headquarters moved to Shwebo. The plan was to leave two brigades astride the Chindwin to delay the enemy as far south as possible and for the rest of the Imperial forces to move on Kalewa by way of Ye-U. It was hoped to take the Chinese 38th Division, which had fought well, back to India.

Between Ye-U and Shwegyin on the Chindwin almost opposite Kalewa there was a rough track of about 120 miles through the jungle forest and preparations to make this fit for motor transport were at once put in hand. Provision was made to stock the track with supplies and water; there was one waterless stretch of 30 miles. Major-General Wakely R.E.[1] Commanding Lines of Communications Area, was in charge of this urgent and laborious task, which he carried through with magnificent resolution. Major-General Goddard,[2] the M.G.A., added a few more miracles to those he had already accomplished in solving the problems of administration.

On the other side of the Chindwin the condition of the road through the jungle of the Kabaw Valley as far as Tamu would certainly be impassable for stores once the monsoon started early in May, and its present maintenance capacity not being known at Burma Army Headquarters the size of the force it would be feasible to maintain south of Tamu was equally problematical. Beyond Tamu lay 60 miles of virgin mountainous jungle. Work on making a road through this from Palel had started in March and its achievement in time to let the Burma Army get safely back to the Imphal plain was one of the outstanding feats of the Second World War. The tremendous task was in charge of Colonel Michael Gilpin R.E. and it was performed almost entirely by tea-garden coolie labour working under a British staff provided by the Indian Tea Association. We shall have occasion to refer again to the superb devotion of the tea-planters in other directions. It was fortunate for Great Britain that Americans have always liked coffee better than tea; otherwise

[1] Major-General A. V. T. Wakely, C.B., D.S.O., M.C.

[2] Lieut.-General Sir Eric Goddard, K.B.E., C.B., C.I.E., M.V.O., M.C. (Frontier Force Regiment.)

the tea-planters might have found themselves in the position of the Malaya rubber-growers and tin-miners and been ordered by Whitehall to earn dollars even at the expense of the military situation. The importance of the Palel-Tamu road will be realised when we see the Burma Army compelled to abandon all its motor transport on the eastern bank of the Chindwin and dependent entirely henceforth for its survival on supplies from India. The desperate battle against time and inadequate resources fought by Colonel Gilpin was gloriously won. 'I shall never forget the sight of the first echelon of bulldozers bursting through into Tamu at the end of April,' General Goddard has recorded.

The reader is invited to bear always in his mind as he follows Alexander's retreating army the fearful anxiety in the command about the completion of that road in time to avert disaster.

It was reckoned that the stocking of the track from Ye-U to Shwegyin would require seven days; Alexander hoped against hope to be able to hold the Mandalay-Irrawaddy position long enough for this to be accomplished. The Q Staff worked as even a Q Staff has seldom worked, and somehow the track was stocked in time. Goddard's foresight had already accumulated supplies in the Shwebo-Ye-U area. Vehicles, of which there was now an acute shortage, were taken from every unit; all kit and stores without an immediate fighting value were dumped; rations, petrol and water were stored at likely staging camps.

The 1st Burma Division (less 2nd Burma Brigade), crossing the Irrawaddy by the Sameikkon ferry, some miles west of the Ava Bridge, was established beyond the farther bank by the evening of April 28th. The Chinese 38th Division also crossed without incident. The Burma Division received orders to move on to the Monywa area on the evening of April 29th where it was planned that the 13th Indian Brigade should cross the Chindwin to operate south and south-west of Salingyi. This move was postponed to the evening of April 30th on account of the exhausted condition of the 13th Brigade. The 2nd Burma Brigade originally intended to fall back from Pakokku on Monywa was ordered to fall back by way of Pauk to Tilin to forestall any enemy movement reported moving up the Myittha Valley with the aim of cutting the Kalewa-Tamu road, which if successfully accomplished would have opened a grim prospect for the Burma Army. Such a move may seem an impossible feat on the map, but by now there was an apprehensive respect for this kind of Japanese feat. The change in direction for the 2nd Burma Brigade meant that from the night of April 28/29th the approach

from Pakokku to Monywa along the west bank of the Chindwin was unguarded; the 24 hours' delay in the march of the rest of the division prolonged this dangerous state of affairs with results which will presently appear.

Meanwhile, the 17th Indian Division and 7th Armoured Brigade had fallen back on Meiktila to cover the withdrawal of the broken remnants of the Chinese Fifth Army on Mandalay. Advancing enemy forces were given a rough time, motorised columns being shot up with heavy losses for the Japanese and on April 27th enemy tanks being successfully engaged. During this period the 48th Gurkha Brigade had taken up a rearguard position at Kyaukse to cover the Chinese withdrawal on Mandalay and our own final crossing of the Ava Bridge. With the brigade were the 7th Hussars, a company of the West Yorkshires, demolition parties of the Bengal Sappers and Miners, a troop of the 414th Battery R.H.A., a troop of the 95th Anti-tank Regt R.A. and the 1st Battery of the 1st Indian Field Regt, I.A.

The road and railway to Mandalay passed through Kyaukse, crossing the small Zawgyi River on the southern outskirts of the town. East of Kyaukse and overlooking it a steep ridge served the gunners with fine observation posts. The surrounding country was mostly paddy fields and banana plantations with dense jungle on the banks of the Zawgyi. The ground near the main road was seamed with irrigation channels. The brigade's position covered the southern approaches to the town which had been burnt out by Japanese aircraft; dead Burmans and dead cattle were rotting in the streets. On the south-west was the 1/4th Gurkha Rifles; in the centre the combined battalion of the 7th Gurkha Rifles straddled the road and railway, its left flank on the river; eastward the 2/5th Royal Gurkha Rifles continued the line to the ridge. The 1/3rd Gurkha Rifles was in brigade reserve behind the 1/4th. The total strength of the weak brigade was about 1,700. Signalling resources hardly existed, which meant that the defence was dependent for its communications on runners.

During the night of April 27/28th the 63rd Indian Brigade passed through the position followed by the last elements of the Chinese Fifth Army.

From dawn of April 28th the tanks of the 7th Hussars and patrols of the 7th Gurkha Rifles were in contact with the enemy as far as 10 miles south of Kyaukse. That enemy was the 18th Chrysanthemum Division which after fighting with deadly efficiency in Malaya had moved over to the Philippines for the final kill and was now in Burma.

By evening the enemy had reached the 48th Brigade's main position, and at 10 p.m. in bright moonlight he attacked east of the road. The 7th Gurkha Rifles' fire was held until the Japanese were within 150 yards. Then the enemy was driven back in confusion, leaving about 25 dead and many of his wounded screaming. Near midnight his vehicles tried to cross the river by a diversion to the east, but the 25-pounders of the Indian Artillery and the 2-inch mortars of the 2/5th Royal Gurkha Rifles disposed of that attempt with heavy losses for his troops. At 3 a.m. another attack was launched against the 7th Gurkha Rifles, when the enemy was allowed to come closer than before to leave 40 dead behind him. A supplementary attack was easily repulsed by the 2/5th Royal Gurkha Rifles. At 5.15 a.m. after moonset the Japanese again attacked the 7th Gurkha Rifles and again they suffered heavily.

At dawn of the 29th our patrols and tanks cleared the front and flanks, and then at 9 a.m. a company of the 7th Gurkha Rifles attacked the burnt out village of Htansungbinhla in front of the brigade's forward defence lines between the road and the railway, where it was hoped to obtain a good bag of Japanese. Expectations were not disappointed. Thirty-eight corpses were pulled out of a culvert in which the enemy had taken refuge. That company of the 7th Gurkha Rifles then went into the village. The Japanese who tried to escape were killed by the fire of the rest of the battalion from the forward defence lines. When the company halted to reorganise at the southern end of the village it had lost one rifleman killed and there were three wounded. Over a hundred dead Japanese were counted; three 2-inch mortars, five automatics, many rifles and a Japanese flag were captured. The Chrysanthemum Division had had a foretaste of what would happen to its petals on the edge of another monsoon three years hence.

Orders were received in the morning for the 48th Brigade to withdraw that night; the exact time would depend upon the movement of certain Chinese troops, and the brigade might have to fight its way out of Kyaukse. All day the enemy shelled the positions with heavier guns than he had yet used in Burma; but although the fire was powerful and concentrated it was ineffective and the troops were unperturbed by it. Word came that the brigade was to withdraw at 6 p.m. or as soon as possible afterwards. During the afternoon an enemy attack was broken up by machine-gun fire, and at 5 p.m. Japanese aircraft were dive-bombing the Gurkhas without doing any damage. The stout-hearted Brigadier Cameron was determined to withdraw punctually at 6 p.m. and before that hour the forward

defence lines began to thin out and the first line transport to move off. At 6 p.m. to the minute the main road bridge over the Zawgyi River was blown with a tremendous explosion. The firing on both sides stopped until the unnatural silence was broken by the sound of our guns opening on the forward positions of the enemy. The riflemen on the south of the river began to wade across it under the protection of two tanks which then turned west along the road by the river and after blowing a second bridge rejoined the other tanks. By 6.15 p.m. the brigade was passing through the 1/3rd Gurkha Rifles in a lay-back position by a mound near the road just north of the town. Five minutes later the tanks followed as a rearguard during the brigade's march to the waiting lorries. The casualties were 10 killed and wounded, and the brigade left at least 500 dead Japanese round Kyaukse. Let it be remembered that the 48th Brigade was a shadow of itself after nearly three months of hard fighting, of exhausting marches in torrid heat, and of a catastrophe like that of the Sittang which might have demoralised a brigade permanently. In the circumstances the rearguard action at Kyaukse so splendidly handled by Brigadier Cameron must be saluted as an outstanding feat of arms by all those concerned from Cameron himself downwards. It gave the Japanese a lesson, and the Chrysanthemum Division in spite of superior numbers made no attempt to follow up and force the Myitnge position covering Mandalay.

'Alex has 36,000 men to take out! Where in the hell have they all been?' General Stilwell asks in his diary for April 30th. Some of them had been in Kyaukse, fighting a rearguard action of classic perfection.

All that day Burcorps had been working hard to clear Mandalay of accumulated stores, but owing to shortage of transport much had to be destroyed and a certain amount was handed over to the Chinese. The latter were almost completely out of the control of Stilwell who was waiting for instructions from Chiang Kai-Shek about their future. On April 27th the latter was ordering him to stay in Burma 'which is more than the British will do,' Stilwell noted fatuously in his diary.[1]

He proposed to move the Chinese 96th Division to Myitkyina by railway and the Chinese 22nd Division up the east bank of the Irrawaddy to cross to the west bank by the ferry at Singu. He asked for the Chinese 38th Division to revert to his command in order to cover the withdrawal of the Chinese Fifth Army. Alexander felt bound to agree to this in spite of the fact that the withdrawal of the 38th

[1] *The Stilwell Papers*, p. 106.

Division would expose the flank of Burcorps when it moved into position west of the Irrawaddy. While these arrangements were being made the Japanese were almost in Lashio which they entered next day and thus cut the main line of communication with China. Ahead of them was the road to Bhamo and Myitkyina. On April 30th only one battalion was on the Myitnge position; the rest of the weak 22nd Division was looting in the Amarapura-Mychaung area south of Mandalay.

After the 48th Indian Brigade passed through, the 63rd Brigade was ordered to fall back from the Myitnge position to cover the Ava Bridge. During April 30th the 63rd Brigade remained on the east side of the river; but it was evident that the great Ava Bridge must very soon be blown. Japanese tanks were reported to be advancing on Mandalay from Lashio; enemy forces were closing in from the south; the Chinese 22nd Division was incapable of fighting. When darkness fell the last of the Imperial forces crossed the bridge, and at a minute to midnight the great structure was blown, the two blood-red central spans collapsing into the mighty stream.

Stilwell tried to reach Myitkyina, but the railway was jammed through a collision and he had a very tough tramp over the wild jungle-covered hills with what was left of his American staff to reach Imphal.

Chapter 38

May, 1942. Loss of Monywa—an order strangely countermanded—the race for the Chindwin—battle at Shwegyin—safe withdrawal to Imphal—losses from disease.

IT is now time to turn to events at Monywa on the evening of April 30th. Monywa was garrisoned by a detachment of the 1st Gloucestershire Regt and the river patrol of the Royal Marines. In the town there were hundreds of refugees waiting for steamers to take them up the Chindwin. Six miles north at Alon also waiting for transport there were nearly 2,500 clerks and servants with their women and children who had been sent off from Army Headquarters at Shwebo on the previous evening. Ten miles farther north Burcorps Headquarters had just been established at Songon. Burma Division Headquarters was at Ma-U four miles south-east of Monywa.

Suddenly just after 7 p.m. without warning mortar, machine-gun and shell fire was opened on Monywa from the other side of the river. A Japanese motorised column with seven tanks had entered the village of Ywashe where two Marines, part of the guard of a launch moored on the west bank, gave their lives in trying to stop the column with a Bren gun, two more heroes of the Corps of Royal Marines.

During the night the enemy crossed the river and established a road block between Monywa and Burma Division Headquarters. At this time the 2nd Burma Brigade was marching on the long trail from Pakokku to Gangaw and Kalemnyo; the 1st Burma Brigade and the 13th Indian Brigade were marching across country from the Sameikkon ferry not yet within striking distance of Monywa, for which they had started 24 hours later than originally planned.

Burcorps on being informed of the firing on Monywa supposed that the town had been captured and gave orders for it to be cleared of the enemy as soon as possible. For this purpose the Burma Division was ordered to concentrate at Chaung-U, the 48th and 63rd Indian Brigades being placed under its command. The 16th Indian Brigade, which was moving from Indaw to Mua, was ordered to reach Ye-U by the quickest route, but did not leave Mua until the evening of May 1st. The 63rd Brigade in transport

was expected to reach Chaung-U by the morning of May 1st. At midnight of April 30th a squadron of the 7th Armoured Brigade was ordered to move on Monywa by way of Ye-U and a second squadron was despatched to support the Burma Division about Chaung-U.

At 5 a.m. on May 1st a mixed party of Japanese and insurgent Burmans attacked divisional headquarters at Ma-U. The platoon of raw Burmese troops guarding it vanished, but Bruce Scott and his officers and clerks with the cyphers and the papers made a fighting withdrawal north along the railway line and succeeded in reaching Chaung-U.

Soon after this a dozen enemy aircraft reconnoitred Monywa from a height of 100 feet. Heavy shelling was concentrated on the area round the landing stage. Three large launches came up the river and pulled up to the west bank where each took on board about 200 Japanese. They then crossed the river. The detachment of Gloucesters with 20 Royal Marines and some of the Burma Frontier Force opened fire with small arms and light automatics at the approaching launches, but heavily shelled and mortared as they were from the opposite bank they could not prevent a landing. The small defending force under the command of Lieut.-Colonel Thomas of the Cameronians withdrew from Monywa northwards to protect the road to Ye-U.

The sudden thrust for Monywa by the Japanese was a well conceived seizure of an opportunity. They had entered Pakokku immediately after the 2nd Burma Brigade had left it on the night of April 28th, and until they opened fire 12 hours before their attack on Monywa it was well executed. The premature shelling spoilt the surprise and gave time to group forces against the threat to the communications of the Burma Army. It would seem that an uxorious watchman on a river launch, yearning for the domestic comfort his wife could provide in Monywa, started to take his craft across from the west bank and that the Japanese tried to sink the launch, thus disclosing their arrival.

The situation on the morning of May 1st was that two brigades of the Burma Division were still marching across country on the way to Monywa, that a small garrison now joined by a squadron of the Royal Tank Regiment was anxiously guarding the road to Ye-U, and that the 63rd Brigade was moving by train from the area of the Ava Bridge to Kyehmon, eight miles south-east of Monywa. Early that afternoon the 1/10th Gurkha Rifles and the 2nd Frontier Force Rifles were advancing towards Monywa where east of Ma-U the Piffers were in contact with the enemy. Beyond Ma-U the opposition

was heavy and the advance was halted. At 3 p.m. the 1st Sikh Regt went forward through the Frontier Force Rifles and took up an outpost line west of Ma-U. After dark a perimeter camp was formed round Ma-U. There was no artillery support for the infantry, but a squadron of the 7th Hussars did all that was possible and lost a tank in doing so.

Meanwhile, the 13th Brigade reached Ma-U that evening and was ordered to attack at dawn. The 1st Burma Brigade which had reached Chaung-U was ordered to continue its march toward Monywa at 5 a.m. and take part in the attack.

Events at Monywa were talked over at Ye-U that evening by Alexander and Stilwell: that town was now Burma Army Headquarters, Burcorps Headquarters and 17th Division Headquarters, 120 miles from Monywa, the occupation of which not only cut off all the Imperial forces west of the River Mu from the direct approach to Ye-U but, more gravely, denied the use of the Chindwin and gave the enemy a chance to cut the Burma Army's line of withdrawal through Kalewa. In these circumstances Alexander had to recall the 7th Armoured Brigade from its position in support of the Chinese 38th Division east of the Mu, to which Stilwell agreed. The American General informed Alexander that he intended to withdraw the Chinese Fifth Army to the Katha area, after which his plans were uncertain. This was the last time Stilwell and Alexander met during the campaign, and as Stilwell's wireless failed soon afterwards further communication was impossible until he reached India.

On May 2nd Monywa was attacked on a two-brigade front, the 63rd advancing north-west astride the road and railway, the 13th moving on the town from Zalok with the railway line as its first objective. Early in the afternoon as soon as available the 1st Burma Brigade was to support the 63rd Brigade.

Monywa, surrounded by flat open country with a good field of fire and the command of all approaches, was ideally situated for defence, and the enemy had established himself in strong positions in buildings and at suitable points on the outskirts.

Curtis's 13th Brigade left Ma-U at 4 a.m. and reached Zalok at dawn. The 5/1st Punjab Regt and the 1st Royal Garhwal Rifles were both on two-company fronts, respectively north and south of the road; the Inniskillings were in reserve. The Garhwalis cleared the enemy out of a village, but 50 yards short of the railway they were halted by heavy fire from the Japanese strongly entrenched with mortars and automatics along the railway line; a mortar and an infantry gun behind a wall covered the level crossing. Some 800

yards south of the road a grove of toddy palms was well defended. The Garhwalis tried to turn the position at the level crossing without success, although the enemy's mortar behind the wall was compelled by the guns of a mountain battery to be withdrawn. North of the road the Punjabis met stern opposition in an attempt to gain the railway station, and were held up with heavy casualties. Then a company managed to work forward and drive the enemy out of the station. Two hours later the enemy retook the station. It changed hands again at noon and was held until 2 p.m., when superior numbers forced the Punjabis to yield it a second time. By the middle of the afternoon the 13th Brigade was halted just east of the railway.

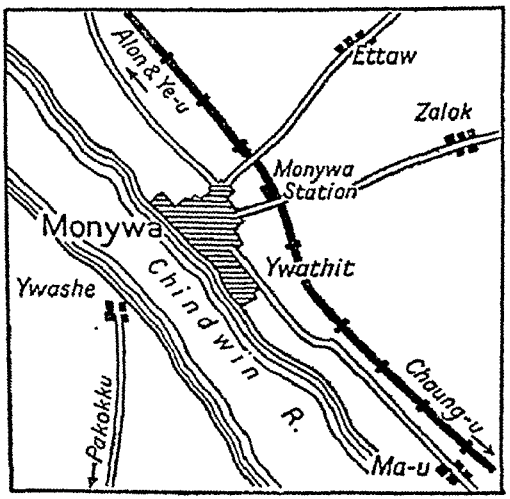
The advance of the 63rd Brigade from Ma-U began at 8.40 a.m., the 1st Sikh Regt moving astride the road to Monywa with the 1/10th Gurkha Rifles on its right; the 2nd Frontier Force Rifles was in reserve. The two forward companies of the Sikhs reached the village of Ywathit on the outskirts of Monwya to find it apparently empty; but when battalion headquarters and the two rear companies entered the village they came under intense fire from buildings and from the trees round it, one of which prepared for felling crashed at this moment across the main road in front of the leading companies. Ywathit was cleared except of two or three snipers who continued to harass the attackers until the village was fired and they perished in the flames.

The road block was now well covered by mortars and machine guns, and the Sikhs after suffering many casualties were halted about a hundred yards from the Japanese position. The two rear companies tried to turn the block on either flank, but the fire was too heavy and the battalion could do no more than hang on to its position. The left forward company had only 16 unwounded men left out of a strength of 90. At 2 p.m. two companies of the Frontier Force Rifles were sent forward as reserve, and tanks of the 7th Hussars tried to force the block without success. On the right the 1/10th Gurkha Rifles were held up outside the town.

The 1st Burma Brigade, which now consisted of the 1st Cameronians, the 2nd K.O.Y.L.I., and the 2nd Rajputs, had been moving up from Chaung-U during the morning and was presently joined by the 1/4th Gurkha Rifles from the 48th Brigade. The 1st Burma Brigade attacked just before 3 p.m. on a two-battalion front, the Gurkhas on the left between the main road and the railway, the Rajputs on the other side of the railway, moving northwards. The two British battalions were in reserve. Both Gurkhas and Rajputs came under very heavy fire. The Rajput

attack went wide at first but direction was restored and finally contact was made with the Garhwalis, the Rajputs being astride of the railway south of the station. The Gurkhas were held up by fierce machine-gun fire from the station and also from inside a pagoda near by. These targets were shelled by the Gurkhas' mortars and those of the 1st Sikh Regt.

Round 3 p.m. Brigadier Curtis had received an order from an officer of the 7th Armoured Brigade, who said it came from General Alexander himself, to withdraw the 13th Brigade to Alon. Curtis passed the order to divisional headquarters and by 5 p.m. the 13th Brigade was withdrawing, no opposition being encountered.



The commander of the 1st Burma Brigade had also been ordered to stop his attack and consolidate the gains already made. He urged upon divisional headquarters the advisableness of maintaining the attack until 7 p.m. and this was agreed to, However, the life of the attack had been lost and the earlier withdrawal of the 13th Brigade made it difficult to give it a fresh impetus. So at 7 p.m. the 1st Burma Brigade and the 63rd Brigade withdrew down the road to Ma-U; the enemy did not follow up and the only activity came from mortars and machine-guns.

The divisional transport was escorted by two battalions of Burma Rifles taken from the 1st Brigade, the vehicles moving round Monywa by cross-country tracks and being frequently dive-bombed by the enemy's aircraft. Towards evening the Cameronians joined

the transport's guard. The 48th Brigade (less 1/4th Gurkha Rifles) which had been standing by for the Monywa operations at Myinmu was ordered to proceed to Ye-U by way of Shwebo.

The mystery of that order to the commander of the 13th Brigade has never been solved. Later Curtis asked the Army Commander why he had stopped the attack just when the Japanese were beginning to stream out of Monywa and cross to the west bank of the Chindwin. Alexander disclaimed all knowledge of the order; enquiries at Army Headquarters and Burcorps Headquarters could discover no authority for it. So it remains a mystery, and as the transport of the 1st Burma Division reached Ye-U in safety it could be argued that there was no point in prolonging what had been a costly operation. The revenge for Monywa would have to wait until the Silver Swords of Douglas Gracey's wonderful 20th Indian Division cut the Japanese out of Monywa nearly three years hence —in a brilliant and resolute attack by the 9/14th Punjab Regt, the 3/8th Gurkha Rifles and the 1st Northamptonshire Regt of Mackenzie's 32nd Brigade.

The night march of the two brigades of the 1st Burma Division along bullock-tracks through Zalok and Ettaw to concentrate north of Alon on the Monywa-Ye-U road, which itself was no better than a winding track for over a hundred miles, was none too easy. The enemy harassed the withdrawal for the first couple of days, but after the morning of May 4th attempts at interference ceased. The worry was whether the enemy could collect enough craft to move up the Chindwin in force and reach Kalewa before the Burma Army; if he did and could hold it up until the monsoon broke it could mean the complete destruction of Alexander's forces. The 16th Brigade which had arrived in Ye-U on May 2nd was rushed forward along the formidable track through the jungle forest to Shwegyin on the banks of the Chindwin to cover the Kalewa area. Brigade headquarters and the 4th Frontier Force Regt left Ye-U on that same night with orders to make for Kalemnyo. The other battalions left on May 3rd, the 1st Jat Regt to hold Shwegyin, the 2nd Duke of Wellington's Regt and the 7th Baluch Regt to undertake the defence of Kalewa.

During the operations of these days the 2nd Burma Brigade, consisting of the 2nd and 8th Burma Rifles and a unit of the Burma Frontier Force with bullock and mule transport, was making its arduous march toward the Myittha Valley. The brigade reached Pauk on May 1st to find it looted and burnt by insurgent Burmans. The bridges for some distance north had been destroyed and dacoits

were ubiquitous. The heat was shattering; the track was vile; the bullocks crawled. It was only possible to move by night, and during the day defensive positions had to be manned. At last after marching 216 miles in 14 days the 2nd Burma Brigade made contact with the Chin Hills Battalion of the Burma Frontier Force near Natchaung, a few miles south of Kalemnyo beside the dark green waters of the Myittha on the edge of some of the wildest country in the world. This long indomitable march by the 2nd Burma Brigade through the insufferable hot dankness of that hate-haunted valley at the end of an exhausting campaign of over three months was one of the notable feats of the Second World War.

After the departure of the 16th Brigade the rest of the Burma Army began its move back along the track to the Chindwin. There was naturally much congestion round Ye-U, but fortunately the enemy's air force lacked either the skill or the imagination to take advantage of it. He had almost destroyed Shwebo while it was occupied by Army Headquarters; he had bombed mercilessly the miserable throngs of refugees on the banks of the Irrawaddy at Kyaukmaung, one day to be the scene of 'Pete' Rees' crossing of the great river with the 19th Dagger Division on the way to recapture Mandalay; he had heavily bombed the trains on the railway between Saigaing and Katha. Yet at Ye-U he confined his attention to the rattling bridge over the Mu leading to the Shwebo road. His failure to bomb the weary troops marching along the wide track to reach the shelter of the virgin forest is inexplicable.

Alexander's original plan was to hold a line south of Kalewa, and it was known that the 1st Indian Brigade was marching from Dimapur (Manipur Road) by way of Palel and Tamu to reach Kalewa by May 12th. However, when G.H.Q. India heard that the Burma Army was falling back on Kalewa the march onward of the 1st Indian Brigade was stopped at Palel because it would be impossible to maintain it in addition to the Burma Army. On May 3rd Alexander was ordered to take his troops back to the existing roadhead for motor transport, one march north of Tamu, as soon as it was tactically feasible. He was further informed that no maintenance south of Tamu was possible but that echelons of 3,000 daily could be supplied at the roadhead.

On that May 3rd Alexander was visited at his headquarters in Kaduma, a village at the end of the wide track out of Ye-U on the edge of the vast jungle forest, by Major-General Sun commanding the Chinese 38th Division which was acting as rearguard to the Chinese Fifth Army's withdrawal north. As a result of this, doubtless

for political considerations, Slim was told that he must not withdraw from the Ye-U area until Sun's 38th Division had passed north of Shwebo.

During these days the evacuation of the sick and wounded by rail and river to Myitkyina had been proceeding; from Myitkyina the casualties were being flown to India. Soon the swift advance of the Japanese through the Shan States made Myitkyina doubtfully tenable, and our casualties that were still with the main body and in the Shwebo hospitals had to be taken out by the only route left. 2,300 wounded and sick were carried by motor transport to Shwegyin. They suffered much, but the devotion of the medical services never flagged, and the wounded and the sick were saved. The I.A.M.C. doctors after marching all day through that forest, so lovely and so fearful, performed five major operations in an abandoned Buddhist fane at Pyingaing within a few minutes of arriving there. The devotion of those doctors under the direction of the D.D.M.S., Major-General Treffry Thompson,[1] was absolute, and that fane in the vast solitude of the awe-inspiring jungle still held the fragrance of such devotion five years later, and one could fancy that the small gilded Buddha in his dark sanctuary had blessed it and that here in this fane wrecked by war's violence contending creeds were for ever at rest.

On May 5th the rearguard withdrew from the line of the canal at Ye-U to Kaduma, and the tanks of the 2nd R.T. Regt patrolled the track without contact with the enemy. As the 1st Burma Division continued along the track through the jungle the 1st Burma Brigade broke off at Pyingaing on May 8th to execute a flank march up the east bank of the Chindwin through waterless and most difficult country to cross the river at Pantha, 70 miles above Kalewa. It then proceeded along the Yu River and reached Tamu by May 16th, after a march which rivalled that of the 2nd Burma Brigade up the Myittha Valley.

The 13th Brigade crossed the Chindwin on May 9th and began its march to Tamu on the same day. From Kaduma the 48th Brigade formed the rearguard supported by the 7th Hussars. By now motor transport was scarce, but there was enough to move the 63rd Brigade to Shwegyin. The 48th Brigade with units of the Burma Police and Frontier Force marched the 40 miles from Kaduma to Pyingaing in 30 hours, close-piqueting the route all the way.

There was apprehension about the dry sandy bed of the Maukkadaw Chaung, for this allowed the enemy an easy approach from

[1] Major-General Sir Treffry Thompson, K.C.S.I., C.B., C.B.E.

the Chindwin and the establishment of a road block which in such country might have been fatal to the troops on the wrong side of it. To anticipate such a threat a company of the 2/5th Royal Gurkha Rifles and a company of the 7th Gurkha Rifles commanded by Major Holdaway were posted at the confluence of the Maukkadaw Chaung with the Chindwin. This force withdrew up the east bank of the great river on the morning of May 9th after the rearguard was clear of Pyingaing by the afternoon of May 8th.

The traveller who has beheld these vast and solitary forests marvels that an army could pass through them without disaster.

General Alexander wrote in his Despatch:

> Anyone seeing this track for the first time would find it difficult to imagine how a fully mechanised force could possibly move over it.

Vehicles foundered in the sandy beds of the numerous chaungs that the track crossed and recrossed. Traffic was blocked by vehicles slowly negotiating frail bamboo bridges. For miles the forest on either side was littered with abandoned vehicles which are now slowly rusting away under the shade of the towering primeval trees, man's squalid little toys rebuked by nature.

Through the nightmare beauty of this forest the Burma Army pressed on at the utmost speed attainable. It was not merely a question of reaching the Chindwin before the Japanese could cut the road to India; it must be reached before the breaking of the monsoon. If the rains came before the Army was clear of this country that Army would be as helpless as driftwood in a torrent. The winding chaungs with their sheer sandstone cliffs were difficult enough to traverse when dry; when the monsoon broke they would be impassable. The wonderful effort of the administrative services directed by the tireless Goddard had ensured abundance of rations and petrol along the route; there was enough to feed the refugees, some of them army families, who were taken to Shwegyin in military vehicles, many of the troops themselves marching on foot to allow this act of mercy.

The embarkation point at Shwegyin was a small sandy bay approached through the 'Basin,' a level hollow about half a mile long and a quarter wide commanded by an enclosing switchback of steep tree-fringed cliffs but opening at the southern end on the little bay where the Shwegyin Chaung entered the Chindwin.

The Engineers had constructed a jetty which was almost at once submerged by a rise in the river, adding greatly to the difficulty of

embarkation and transportation until on May 9th the Engineers built a more serviceable jetty.

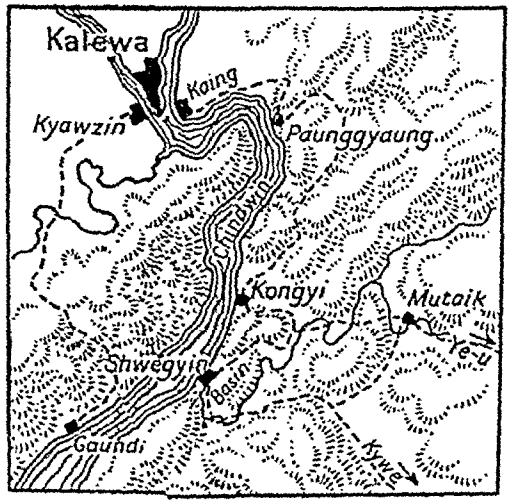
There were six river steamers, each capable of carrying about 600 men but only two lorries and two jeeps, which meant that the great bulk of the transport had to be left behind.This foreshadowed a grave problem from Kalewa onwards because there would be only enough transport for the wounded and a certain amount of absolutely essential equipment and ammunition. The problem was solved by the establishment of staging camps stocked with supplies sent by India in the motor transport of the General Purposes Transport Company of the Indian Army Service Corps which as always carried out its Herculean task with most admirable efficiency. The level ground of the Basin was used to park the abandoned transport, which was then methodically destroyed; here for many years to come the rare traveller who passes this way will see a fantastic replica of the Slough dump that during the First World War and for several years after it offended the eyes of passengers in the trains of the Great Western Railway.

Japanese aircraft soon spotted the activity at Shwegyin. On May 7th they bombed and burst a protection boom across the Chindwin about two miles downstream; on May 9th they attacked Shwegyin, and our anti-aircraft guns had the satisfaction of bringing down two of the enemy's aircraft to crash in the jungle. These air attacks had a demoralising effect on the native crews of the steamers who now refused to ferry except by night.

On the night of May 9th the 63rd Brigade and most of the 2nd Royal Tank Regt crossed to Kalewa, the tanks being destroyed except those of one squadron which had been unable to cross. In order to relieve the congestion in the Basin many men, guns, vehicles and animals were halted near Mutaik along the track about 10 miles short of Shwegyin. Here were advanced headquarters of the 17th Division and the rearguard consisting of the 7th Hussars, the West Yorkshires and the Gurkhas of the 48th Brigade. Shwegyin was covered by three weak companies of the 1st Jat Regt, one of them on the west bank of the Chindwin; the battalion at the same time had to provide a large party to cut firewood for the steamers. Downstream on both banks covering the boom near Gaundi were the 5th Dogra Regt and some Royal Marines. On May 9th Major-General Cowan prudently decided to strengthen the garrison of the Basin and detailed the 7th Gurkha Rifles to reinforce the Jats and take over defensive positions.

Meanwhile, unknown to the rearguard, the Japanese had come

up the river in fast landing craft and on the afternoon of May 9th had landed men, ponies, and at least a couple of infantry guns at Kywe, a village on the east bank of the river about eight miles from Shwegyin. That evening a larger enemy force landed at Ingongyi on the west bank of the river opposite Kywe. The first enemy force probably about 700 strong marched due north to Thanbaya thus circumventing the covering troops outside the Chindwin at Gaundi. North-west of Thanbaya a path along a dry tributary of the Shwegyin Chaung allowed the enemy access to its lower reaches unknown to us. Major Calvert, who was with Major Holdaway's two Gurkha



companies that had been watching the Maukkadaw Chaung, observed the landing, but owing to the utter exhaustion of his men Holdaway decided not to attack but to march due north to the track and rejoin the 48th Brigade at Shwegyin. He lost touch with the platoons that were carrying the wireless set and he was therefore unable to give our troops at Shwegyin warning of the enemy's approach.

The waterless march through the jungle that night was a grim ordeal and it ended in the force's being split, only one small party getting through to take part in the fighting at Shwegyin. Other parties were never heard of again and Holdaway himself was killed when swimming the Chindwin under fire. The rest finally rejoined our main body on the Tamu road.

On May 10th, just when the 1st Jat Regt was standing to in the twilight of dawn, there were bursts of light machine-gun fire as the enemy tried to advance down the Shwegyin Chaung to attack the landing-stage and the Basin. The movement was checked by mortar and machine-gun fire; later the Japanese began to work along the ridge of the cliffs, bombing the eastern side of the Basin and at the same time keeping up their pressure on the Chaung. The Jats had a hard time of it until the 7th Gurkha Rifles went forward to reinforce the positions. The fighting on the hilltops round the Basin was confused and bitter. The dense undergrowth reduced fields of fire to a few yards. The Gurkhas fought doggedly, making repeated small counter-attacks on the enemy wherever he secured a dominating position. The Japanese casualties were heavy; 20 of them were caught in a ravine by some Gurkha riflemen and destroyed by grenades. Still, it was an unpleasant situation. The Bofors guns of the 3rd Indian Light Anti-aircraft Battery gave covering fire to the Gurkhas scrambling up the cliffs to attack a ridge east of the Basin where the enemy had established himself on a knoll from which it was found impossible to dislodge him. One party managed to enter the Basin and threaten battalion headquarters of the 1st Jat Regt until driven out by the Jats and Gurkhas.

Meanwhile, Cowan had arrived from Mutaik to ascertain the situation and almost at once he and his party came under automatic fire, his A.D.C. being wounded. Cowan ordered the 48th Brigade to move on the Basin from Mutaik in order to cover the track between and also the path up the east bank of the river by Kongyi to Kaing, immediately opposite Kalewa.

The track between Mutaik and the Basin was close-piqueted by the 1/3rd Gurkha Rifles, now only a company strong, and the 1/4th Gurkha Rifles, the latter being barely in time to prevent the enemy's cutting the track just north of the Basin. The battalion repulsed numerous enemy attacks, supported by a section of the 12th Mountain Battery; the piquet positions were held all day with the support of tanks of the 7th Hussars.

The jetty could not be used that day because the crews of the steamers would not work. However, three steamers commanded by Mr Murie and Mr Hutcheon of the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company and Lieut. Penman of the Burma R.N.V.R. with a skill and resolution beyond praise drew in below a sheer cliff about 200 yards upstream and continued to work the ferry. Troops were embarking steadily, sick and wounded were somehow got down the cliff face. Japanese reconnaissance planes were active, but the close fighting

deterred their aircraft from bombing attacks in support of their troops.

At 2 p.m. an attack was made by the 7th Gurkha Rifles on the knoll from which the enemy was directing the fire of his mortars. He had brought up an infantry gun but before it could open fire some grand shooting by a Bofors of the 3rd Indian Light A.A. Battery put it out of action. The attack by the Gurkhas failed in spite of several attempts to dislodge the enemy.

Meanwhile, his pressure on the positions about the Chaung covering the jetty was intensified, and a two-company attack by the 2/5th Royal Gurkha Rifles to sweep this area and recover the knoll was planned for 4.50 p.m. Later this was cancelled because Cowan, assured that the ferry would not be operated from the jetty that night and that the enemy strength was increasing, decided to fall back along the difficult path by Kongyi to Kaing over steep jungle-clad hills which would allow only the minimum of equipment.

This meant the destruction of all the guns, and at 5 p.m. wasting down their ammunition was begun by heavy fire on the Japanese positions. This kept the enemy quiet and the evacuation of the non-essential elements was able to continue unmolested. At 7.30 p.m. the path to Kongyi was reported clear; the withdrawal of the covering troops was fixed for 7.55 p.m. Two lay-back positions were established by the 2/5th Royal Gurkha Rifles to protect the withdrawal of the forward troops through the northern outlet of the Basin. The piquets along the track would close in behind the rear battalion.

At 7.55 p.m. every gun increased its rate of fire and for ten minutes put down a terrific barrage on the positions vacated by the 7th Gurkhas and the Jats, and on the hills round the Basin.

A War Diary says:

> The chief contribution came from the Bofors whose tracer shells lit up the descending darkness. It was a cheering sound the like of which we had not heard during our time in Burma. At 8.15 the guns ceased fire, and five minutes later we received the order to go. As we left the Basin enormous fires were getting a good hold on the dumps of stores and ammunition, tanks and lorries. It was an eerie night in the gathering gloom and distressing to think so much material had to be left behind. From the Japanese there wasn't a sound. They had apparently had enough.

The enemy's satiety was a cause for thankfulness. The path to Kongyi, packed with troops and animals, was soon hopelessly

blocked. The rear battalions could make no progress and were halted along the track north of the Basin.

The War Diary continues:

> We were surrounded by cliffs 300 feet high on two sides, difficult enough to climb by day, impossible to take against opposition at night. The 3rd Gurkha Rifles held the third side behind us, and on the fourth to the east, ran the track back to Burma, on this track were several ammunition lorries burning furiously, lighting us up as we sat there. Small-arms and mortar ammunition were exploding continuously for some three hours afterwards. Our only exit was up the narrow path on which, at the moment, movement was negligible . . . So there we were, a sitting target.

One of the Stuart tanks of the 7th Hussars crossed the Chindwin and what is more re-crossed it again in January 1945 to avenge its comrades; its name was the Curse of Scotland. Presumably it had kept some lorry out of a place on the steamer. Beside the track near the Basin six tanks of the 7th Armoured Brigade were still standing side by side in exact alignment five years later; they were painted the colour of yellow ochre to help them mingle with the desert scene, for they were intended to be used against Rommel. They had done noble work in a greener land, and we may fancy them in a seeming stiff salute to the men of Slim's Fourteenth Army on the way south to inflict upon the Japanese by far the greatest military defeat in their history. As the chronicler pens these words eight monsoons have broken above those Stuart tanks and a ninth will soon break, but without doubt they are still there standing stiffly in exact alignment, for the termites which can fell the most powerful tree cannot destroy those tanks, and they will still be standing there when the chronicler's pen has rusted away.

It was well that the enemy did not follow up the rearguard on that sweltering May night. Even the mules were falling over the edge of the always narrow and often precipitous path. The sun was up before the rear of the column reached Kongyi, moving at hardly a mile an hour. There was no sign of the enemy. In spite of the difficulty of that night march the 12th Mountain Battery brought out a section of its guns by an astonishing feat of endurance and determination. The Royal Regiment of Artillery can be proud of those Indian gunners who have inherited its own incomparable traditions.

During May 11th the troops were ferried across to Kalewa from Paunggyaung, the mules from Kaing. On the west bank of the

Chindwin the 5th Dogra Regt had carried out an equally arduous night march through the densest jungle from Gaundi to Kalewa.

On the night of May 11th the 48th Brigade with the 2nd Duke of Wellington's Regt proceeded by steamer from Kalewa to Sittaung whence on May 14th the troops marched to Tamu; the Chindwin fleet was sunk. The main body of the Burma Army withdrew on Tamu along the track from Kalewa through the Kabaw Valley. The 63rd Brigade now formed the rearguard, leaving Kalewa on May 12th and marching through Tamu on May 19th.

The tracks into India over the wild Chin Hills west of the Burma Army were covered by the Chin Hills Battalion of the Burma Frontier Force which when the nearest Imperial troops were 100 miles away continued unsupported to protect the Indian approaches.

The first heavy rain of the monsoon fell on May 12th; two or three days' delay eastward of the Chindwin would have meant the loss of the greater part of Alexander's troops. Nevertheless, the monsoon took its toll. The men exhausted by the campaign fell easy victims to dysentery, cholera and malaria, and let it be remembered that in the Kabaw Valley cerebral malaria and blackwater were both endemic.

The Army did not bring out of Burma much equipment or transport. Ten 25-pounder guns, four anti-tank guns, 14 3·7 mountain guns with hardly any ammunition, one tank, 50 lorries and 30 jeeps all urgently in need of maintenance, that was the total.

On May 20th IV Indian Corps assumed operational control and General Alexander's command ceased.

The rest-camps in the Imphal area were most inadequately equipped at first. Transport from the railhead at Dimapur (Manipur Road) was severely limited, and the shortage of troops in India made it impossible to withdraw the Burma forces from forward areas. Food was scarce; medical arrangements were defective; only a portion of the troops could be given billets; the rest camped in the open. There was a great shortage of tents, ground sheets, blankets, mosquito-nets and clothing, and the rain was now heavy and continuous.

An entry in the War Diary of the 17th Division notes on June 1st:

> Majority of troops ill with malaria, very few fit men left.

The notion that Burma was lost without a fight must be sternly rebuked. That melancholy little sentence was penned hardly a fortnight after the end of a retreat of a thousand miles always in close contact with a ruthless and aggressive enemy who had planned his campaign with much skill and entrusted the execution of it to troops which had been trained to the moment for such an undertaking.

On May 4th Stilwell noted:[1]

> London radio. 'General Alexander, a bold and resourceful commander, has fought one of the great defensive battles of the war.' And a lot of other crap about what the Limeys have been doing.

But General Stilwell was indifferent to the menace of an invasion of India if Alexander's army had been destroyed; his narrowly circumscribed mind was obsessed by the menace to China.

It is outside the scope of this chronicler to record in detail the Chinese fight, for which in any case material is almost completely wanting.

The ability of the Japanese to pass through our thin line and cut off the 1st Burma Division at Yenangyaung which had a fatal effect on the progress of the campaign was due to General Tu's failure to carry out his orders by sending a division across the Yomas to Taungdwingyi. Stilwell's despatch of the Chinese 38th Division from Mandalay to the help of Burcorps was too late to turn the day.

It may be admitted that the Imperial forces might have been enveloped after the fall of Rangoon if the Japanese had not been compelled to deal with the Chinese forces, and to that extent the Chinese intervention can be said to have prolonged the campaign in Burma. It must also be remembered that the Chinese could not understand our lack of equipment and supplies, our meagre air force and our shortage of transport. If Stilwell could have used his alleged knowledge of the Chinese character to interpret the situation to them his appointment to command the Chinese forces would have been a boon. He, however, appeared as ignorant as the Chinese and his attitude of suspicion toward the British is evident throughout his diary; he would have been a brave and good soldier in the American Revolution.

When the Japanese reached Myitkyina, General Tu with his headquarters and the remains of the Chinese 22nd and 96th Divisions turned away from the railway near Nabu and moved north-west through the Hukawng Valley to reach India. Sun's 38th Division which had been covering Tu's divisions turned south-west at Nabu and fought an engagement with the Japanese at Wuntho. Then Sun moved west across wild country to reach the Chindwin. On May 14th he encountered a Japanese force moving up the river, but the 38th Division succeeded in crossing it except the 113th Regt which was cut off. The Imphal area was reached on May 24th.

[1] *The Stilwell Papers*, p. 108.

The retreat of the Chinese from Burma was an affliction for the troops, the civilian population and the refugees. Every town and village through which they passed was looted. Their behaviour on the railway was intolerable, refugees, British casualties and nurses being taken out of the trains they forcibly commandeered. Their interference with the railway was the cause of several accidents including the one which prevented Stilwell's reaching Myitkyina at the beginning of May. Later on even the scanty stores put out for the refugees were pillaged. The Chinese could not pass through Mandalay without burning the printing-press of the Buddhist shrine on Mandalay Hill.

Alas, when as much has been said about behaviour of the Chinese, it is necessary to add that with the notable exception of the Chins in the Burma Frontier Force whose discipline was always perfect some of the armed forces, officers included, who made their way out through the Hukawng Valley and other routes farther north to Assam, failed to live up to their responsibilities and were willing to push even women and children on one side in their urge for safety.

Chapter 39

May, 1942. Fall of Akyab—the refugee problem—horrors of the march to India—foresight and devotion of the Assam planters.

IN the course of telling the story of the First Burma Campaign allusions have been made to the refugees, and any account of it would be incomplete without some account of the effect of that campaign on the million Indians living and working in Central and Southern Burma, whose industry for many years had filled the Burmans with a resentment which may be compared to the state of mind now all too painfully evident in South Africa. Let it be clear from the start that the Indians dreaded the Japanese invasion because they believed the Burmans would take advantage of it to persecute a hated minority whose presence in the country was one of their grievances against the British Raj.

Thousands of Indians were sufficiently disturbed by the prospect to leave Burma in good time by sea for Calcutta and Chittagong, but the gradual paralysis of Rangoon made evacuation by sea impossible, and the next route followed by the refugees was along the coastal belt to enter India by way of Cox's Bazaar and Chittagong. Akyab had been organised as a naval base under Commodore Graham R.N., commanding Burma Coast, and here were stationed the R.I.N. sloops *Indus* and *Sutlej* with five armed motor launches of the Burma R.N.V.R. This force was continuously patrolling the many islands and creeks along the Arakan coast, a task for which it was quite inadequate, besides lacking maps and charts accurate enough to explore the creeks without the risk of being stranded. The main task, however, proved to be the evacuation of the Indian refugees, and it was due to the Royal Indian Navy that between the end of March and the beginning of May no less than 35,000 refugees were sent by sea to India from Akyab and the little island post of Kyaukpyu. At the latter place Sub-Lieut. H. C. Brown of the Burma R.N.V.R. with the crew of his launch and the help of a few military stragglers from the front in Burma restored order and handled many thousands of refugees who had been attacked and robbed all the way through Arakan.

It is convenient to complete the story of Akyab before returning to the refugees on their way to India by other routes. In view of the

importance of Akyab as an air base the garrison of the young and partially trained 14th Rajputana Rifles under Lieut.-Colonel O. C. Munckton was strengthened by H.Q. 109 Indian Brigade with the 6th Jat Regt and the 9th Rajputana Rifles and some anti-aircraft guns from India. This was on March 18th. On March 23rd the Japanese occupied the Andamans from which the garrison had been evacuated on March 12th. On the same day Akyab was heavily raided, the attack being repeated on March 24th. This was just after the devastating attack on Magwe. It was decided to abandon Akyab as a base and use it only as an advanced landing ground. Headquarters of the 109th Indian Brigade and the two newly arrived battalions were at once withdrawn, leaving the 14th Rajputana Rifles with one section of the 67th Heavy Anti-aircraft Regt and two troops of the 1st Indian Light Anti-aircraft Regt.

Continued raids on Akyab badly affected morale. One of the Commissioners went off with most of his civilian officers on March 30th: there were numerous desertions among the troops and police. Arson in the port was rife; rice mills were burnt; the oil installations were menaced. On April 19th deserters from the Burma Frontier Force and Military Police joined with a gang of Arakanese in massacring a number of Indians, mostly women and children, at Gopethaung on the mainland.

On April 6th H.M.I.S. *Indus* was sunk in an air raid. Morale among the troops and sailors deteriorated. Malaria increased; on April 21st 142 men of the 14th Rajputana Rifles were in hospital. By this date the unrest had developed into open rebellion, and at the end of the month the Japanese were concentrating in the Minbya area with an evident intention to advance on Akyab on which air attacks were intensified.

On May 2nd the enemy was in Kyauktaw and Ponnagyun and at the latter place the Deputy Commissioner U Kyaw Khine, who had remained at his post and displayed the highest moral courage, was killed in his launch. Patrols of the Rajputana Rifles up the creeks were met by machine-gun fire. Throughout May 3rd Akyab was severely bombed, in the course of which the garrison's ammunition reserve was blown up.

Munckton's orders were to withdraw the garrison overland toward Chittagong when every prospect of holding the port had vanished. Accordingly in the early hours of May 4th our forces left Akyab; the coast road by now being flooded and the inland route threatened with cutting by the enemy, Lieut.-Colonel Munckton evacuated the garrison by sea after demolitions in the port had been carried out.

We must now return to the refugees.

By far the greatest number of the Indian refugees, to which in due course would be added many Europeans, moved northward before the Japanese advance, and finally took any path that led into India, though such paths led across some of the most formidable country in the world. Yet before they could reach the north the progress up through Burma was purgatorial, for to fatigue and sickness was added the likelihood of being murdered by Burmans, should one straggle on the way.

Thousands moved up the Chindwin Valley, making for Kalewa and thence through Tamu to Manipur, but when the Army left Kalewa and it was occupied by the Japanese that route was no longer available. Myitkyina was the centre of a large concentration, and here besides the Indians there were many women and men who had stayed at their administrative or commercial posts until the last moment. It is impossible to acquit the civil authorities in Burma of moral cowardice in failing to order the evacuation of civilians earlier. Both here and in Malaya far too much attention was paid to official opinion at home. The bureaucrat's caution is too often inspired by consideration for his future career; the dread of being criticised in Whitehall for accepting the fact of the inevitable Japanese victory and taking appropriate action in time was responsible for an immeasurable amount of suffering. The refugees in Myitkyina expected to be evacuated to India by air, but the Douglas transports available, even though they would carry dangerous loads of 75 on every trip, were far too few to relieve the congestion. Anyway, the bombing of the Myitkyina airfield on May 6th put it out of action; thereafter the fearful exodus on foot began.

Many of the refugees at Myitkyina, expecting to be flown out, had brought with them money and jewels and their most expensive clothes; some died in remote forests clad in evening gowns.

Without the help of the several hundred European tea-planters and over half a million garden-labourers the bulk of Alexander's army must have perished miserably before it reached Imphal, for that road from Manipur to Tamu would never have been made without them. It was they, too, who began to cut the road from Ledo which was intended to take the place of the lost Lashio road to China. By May 1942 the Indian Tea Association had mobilised all its resources to help the authorities: it now turned itself into a charitable organisation to relieve human misery as far as possible by coming to the rescue of the refugees.

At the end of February the Government of India notified the

Government of Assam that a mass movement of Indian refugees had begun and that the largest number might be expected by way of Tamu. That was correct; over 150,000 passed through to reach the railway at Dimapur, and the dead strewed the path behind like paper in a paper-chase. Another 37,000-odd passed through the camp at Silchar and 22,000 more through the camp at Ledo at the end of that ghastly progress through the Hukawng Valley.

The Government of Assam asked the Indian Tea Association's representative at Shillong whether the European community could find men to organise camps for the refugees reported to be streaming north towards India. The Association had already released half its men for military service, but it immediately assumed a new responsibility. By March 3rd 12 men assembled at Dimapur with stores, transport and equipment where they were joined almost at once by a medical unit from the Assam Oil Company at Digboi. The Association was already at work repairing and improving the Manipur Road, then a single track running 134 miles to Imphal. In a day or two its labourers would be working against time to drive the road on from Palel to Tamu to save the Burma Army. 45,000 labourers were working on that road; 30,000 were working on the road from Imphal north. Thousands more were carrying food to the various camps.

The camp at Dimapur was put in charge of Alexander Beattie, the Scottish manager of a big tea estate. He was to give his life for suffering humanity, for in July 1942 he died of typhoid.

Mr Justice Braund, Refugee Administrator, Shillong, wrote in a letter:[1]

> I feel it right that I should let you know . . . of the wonderful work that Beattie had done. He has been at Dimapur from the beginning, and his utter steadiness and reliability throughout has been remarkable. Whatever else happened, we always knew that Beattie would still be there doing his work. I cannot tell you what a help that was at a time, in May-June, when the Manipur Organization was strained to its utmost. As you know, the Dimapur Camp has not been a pleasant place. Close on a hundred and fifty thousand refugees have passed through Beattie's hands there. From May onwards, there was a progressive deterioration in conditions there and the whole camp was inches deep in mud. After the bombing of Imphal, and with the increased pressure of refugee traffic which followed, the physical condition of the refugees grew steadily worse and the means of helping them at Dimapur were all too few. Deaths in the Camp multiplied, and

[1] Quoted by Mr Geoffrey Tyson in *Forgotten Frontier*, p. 40.

sanitary conditions became appalling. I venture to think that few of those who did not witness these conditions can really realise how bad they were. Yet Beattie went on steadily doing everything in his power, without a day's rest, to see that all that was humanly possible, in these conditions and with the resources at his disposal, was done to get the refugees who came to him safely away, and to care for those who had to stay behind. He worked day and night and I have seen him myself on the station at all hours, always with a kindly word for the distressed, and a pocketful of sweets for the children. He did not spare himself for a moment, and I have met no one—whether refugee or member of his staff—who has not spoken of him in terms of admiration and affection. He never spared himself, and in the end I cannot doubt that he has given his life for the refugees he served.

The peak month at Manipur was May when 51,000 refugees passed through. After some delay the Government of India sent a number of young Indian assistant commandants who did splendid work under Beattie's inspiring leadership. Early in June the Assam Provincial Congress Committee joined him with nine volunteers, and a few days later a completely equipped Congress Medical Mission under Dr Bose arrived from Calcutta, giving invaluable help to the overstrained camp medical staff.

Fortunately, Mr C. Gimson, the Political Agent at Imphal, had foreseen as early as February the possibility of a breakdown of transport between Imphal and Dimapur and on his advice a supplementary route from Bishenpur to Silchar with six camps was undertaken by the Surma Valley Branch of the Indian Tea Association; this route was in operation by the end of April.

When the Japanese advance closed the Tamu-Dimapur route the only possible route for the refugees was through the Hukawng Valley and over the Pangsau Pass to Ledo on the first part of the road ultimately intended to reach China, on which the labour of the Indian Tea Association was engaged. News reached its chief representative on the road operation that an evacuation by this route might occur, the number being wildly underestimated at not more than 10,000. Major-General Wood,[1] the Administrator-General Eastern Frontier Projects, who was now Refugee Administrator as well, produced a scheme for the succour of those unhappy creatures, but he asked the Indian Tea Association to assume responsibility for the work from Tipong forward. Wood himself was now faced with so many urgent problems that he had no other course.

[1] Lieut.-General Sir Ernest Wood, K.B.E., C.B., C.I.E., M.C.

In passing, a tribute must be paid to his undaunted achievement on that fearful frontier in conditions almost beyond imagination during the monsoon.

The great majority of the refugees set out from Myitkyina to Shinbiwyang, a small outpost on the frontier where a Junior Political Officer called North with half a dozen policemen administered the local Naga and Kachin tribesmen. It was arranged that the first four camps from Shinbiwyang should be managed from Burma and that thence forward from Taikham Zup the I.T.A.'s effort would start, following an old opium track from there to the base at Lekhapani, which meant the stocking of 16 camps.

Young North's conduct was superlative. His little post at Shinbiwyang became the centre of the exodus from Myitkyina, Suprambum, Mogaung and other places in Upper Burma. By the middle of May there were thousands in a tiny village devoid of all necessities. It was estimated that 45,000 refugees, British and Indian soldiers released too soon from hospital, lost units from Alexander's army, and Chinese troops, reached Shinbiwyang in the space of five hideous months, many of whom reached this remote frontier post only to die. North by precept, example, courage and resolution never lost control of the situation, and to him thousands owe their lives. At one period the refugees were dying at the rate of 50 a day and it was a hard task even to get the corpses buried. The Chinese soldiers were prepared to use armed violence to obtain more than their share of the little food available. Malaria, dysentery, cholera, typhoid and other diseases were rife. To treat them North had only some exiguous medical supplies dropped by air at irregular intervals. For a long time until he received a not too efficient wireless set he was only able to communicate by runners with the outside world. Neyertheless, he stuck to his post throughout the monsoon and had the gratification of receiving the M.B.E. for his services to agonised humanity; no doubt to have given him a higher distinction might have seemed too conspicuous an admission of how much officialdom owed him for saving some of its scarred face.

One of the worst obstacles on the way to Ledo was the Namyung River, the ford over which could rise and fall three feet in an hour, at its deepest moments rising to eight feet of swift icy water swirling over round slippery boulders. At one time before food was being dropped by air hundreds of refugees were waiting on the wrong side, unable to cross and faced with the prospect of starvation. Twelve Gurkha riflemen volunteered to take a rope woven of rattan cane to the other bank. Seven of these brave men reached the other side alive

and by the help of the rope the refugees were able to cross. The names of these heroes none of whom was a waterman have not been recorded, but valleys in far Nepal are the poorer for the five who did not return.

On May 20th a liaison officer of the Indian Tea Association, and an Assistant Political Officer with 60 Naga porters tried to get food to the Naungyang, a river nearly as fierce as the Namyung, on the Burma side of the 4,000 feet high Pangsau Pass. A bank about 100 yards long ran precipitously down to the river on the other side of which were over 1,000 waiting refugees with many women and children who, with hardly any food left, had been waiting four days in incessant rain to cross. Somehow they were ferried over by means of one small raft and a rattan rope. The difficulty of that country may be imagined from the fact that nobody had explored the lake into which the Naungyang flowed since an American Baptist missionary had reached it in a Rob Roy canoe in 1885.

Besides the refugees there was a motley train of British and Indian troops cut off in the fighting or compelled to leave hospital too soon to escape the Japanese; they were most of them just rags and bones, with hardly enough flesh on their limbs to feed the leeches, as they staggered through the mud of this frightful journey.

By the third week in May pilots of the R.A.F. under the direction of Brigadier Whitworth, who had at his disposal never more than two planes a day, were dropping supplies as regularly as possible. These pilots flew in unarmed planes over savage mountainous country, often through thick cloud on their perilous mission. They can be regarded as the forerunners of those pilots, Indian, British and American, who would one day supply the Fourteenth Army and secure Slim's victory over the Japanese; it may be doubted, too, whether Wingate would have succeeded in obtaining approval for his Chindits without the example set by these pilots of what could be achieved by skill and daring in the menacing air of that North-East Frontier.

The organisation set on foot was in full running order by June 1st. From Tipong to the Pangsau Pass the liaison officers of the Indian Tea Association had established a reserve of rations in every camp. There was a fully equipped hospital at Nampong. Refugees were taken from Tipong to Lekhapani by trolley cars, and on from there by train to Margherita.

A Burma officer who served for a while on the road ended his report:

> To my mind the tea planters of Assam and Bengal, especially those who worked on the road, and the doctors from the tea

gardens who were attached to the road camps, are chiefly responsible for the success of this evacuation. No praise can be too high for the work they have done. I would not have believed that a body of men could have worked in such a wholehearted fashion, if I had not seen it for myself. They were cheerful with never a grumble, not wanting to go back to base if they felt seedy; in fact the tendency was to get forward if they could, and stick it out until the last evacuee had gone through. In the midst of all the discomforts of this trip this was the one bright part. A lot of it I would rather forget, but it will always give me pleasure to remember that I was associated for a time with such a fine lot of fellows.

The merest fringe of this story has been touched in these pages. eeds of heroism and self-sacrifice like other deeds of cowardice id greed have been passed over.[1] Nothing has been said about the ssam Rifles who commanded by British and Indian officers set an ample of the finest discipline and shirked no task assigned to them this wilderness which was incapable of supporting the life even bird or beast and was fit only for insects.

The beauty of the scene is sometimes beyond description and the ew from the top of the Pangsau Pass, over green ranges stained ith blue air to the Himalayan snows a hundred miles away and own upon that wide expanse of grey-green marsh through which ow those deathly rivers, can vie with any on earth. Yet he who ands there, awed by the beauty and vastness of the scene, is haunted y the memory of those nameless, numberless dead—Indian men nd women and children of every caste and province, British men, omen and children of all classes, Anglo-Indians, Anglo-Burmans, ritish, Indian, Gurkha and Chinese soldiers, their bones soon to ingle with those of American airmen lost in flying over the Hump f those sublime Himalayan snows to take supplies to China. gony, terror, bravery, cowardice, squalor, starvation and disease nay be at one now for ever with beauty; but the silence of the angsau Pass is the voice of Death himself.

An officer who made a last search for stragglers when the evacuation was complete wrote in his diary:[2]

> It was a beautiful day, and from the top of the hill I could see the great basin of the Nawngyang lake. There were no villages in the valley, but the hill-sides had been extensively jhumed. These

[1] The reader is referred to *Forgotten Frontier* by Geoffrey Tyson which tells the ull story of the exodus.

[2] Quoted in *Forgotten Frontier*, p. 79.

jhums[1] were covered with secondary forest, but they showed up clearly as they were of lighter green. This area looked as if it would have been a perfect game sanctuary teeming with bison, elephant and rhino; but I saw no sign of wild life, not even a marsh bird.

To the south in the Tagun Valley, several large grassy jhums occupied the top of the ridges. In each jhum was a small hut built high off the ground, where the Nagas lived while tending their crops. Here too there was no sign of life. At every footstep I was reminded of death and destruction. The struggle for existence seemed too hard for man and beast. I had not seen a single bird since I left Ledo. Only butterflies seemed to be happy in the monsoon, and they flitted round in their thousands to cheer and brighten every corpse.

The Tagun Hill had been a favourite resting-place for refugees, and the clearing was littered with tumble-down huts, where often whole families stayed and died together. I found the bodies of a mother and child locked in each other's arms. In another hut were the remains of another mother who had died in childbirth, with the child only half-born. In this one jhum more than fifty people had died. Sometimes pious Christians placed little wooden crucifixes in the ground before they died. Others had figures of the Virgin Mary still clutched in their skeleton hands. A soldier had expired wearing his side cap, all his cotton clothing had rotted away, but the woollen cap sat smartly on his grinning skull. Already the ever destroying jungle had overgrown some of the older huts, covering up the skeletons and reducing them to dust and mould.

[1] A jhum is a clearing in the jungle made by Nagas for temporary cultivation.

Chapter 40

1941–1942. Survey of the First Burma Campaign—civil and military administration—lack of communications and transport—Japanese training and tactics—achievements of the campaign.

MUCH criticism at the time was directed against the civil administration in Burma, and in fairness to that and to the military administration some brief comments may be included. In the first place it must be borne in mind that before December 1941 the view of His Majesty's Government was that war with Japan was improbable but that if war did come the invasion of Burma was a remote possibility and that the main danger would be attack from the air. The Government of Burma accepted this view of the future and tried to make its preparations accordingly.

The recent separation from India and the ill-timed introduction of a large measure of self-government in consequence was a severe strain upon the administration at a moment of mundane crisis and reflected gravely upon the statesmanship of those responsible. Nevertheless, in spite of a total lack of help from His Majesty's Government the newly created Defence Department and the Civil Administration, still in the swaddling clothes of self-government, made painful efforts to prepare for war. Unfortunately the mood of flaccid optimism prevailed even after the Japanese entered Indo-China in September 1940 and as late as that neither the Burma Government nor the G.O.C. Army in Burma was warned to make any preparations to meet a full scale invasion. The lack of any Directive in the circumstances was bad enough; the failure to supply any material help was worse. This mortal sin of omission is to be remembered when the civil and military authorities in Burma are criticised for their more venial sins of commission. It is necessary to stress by repetition the fact that G.H.Q. India repeatedly urged upon the War Office the need for an adequate staff and services. These representations were made personally both by General Hutton in 1940 when C.G.S. India and by General Wavell in the summer of 1941, who pleaded for Burma to be placed under India Command. This was only done after the outbreak of war with Japan when it was too late to undertake measures vital to the defence of Burma.

There had been little or no co-ordination between the civil and military departments. No arrangements had been made for the militarisation of transport and other essential services. The provision of an overland link with India had not been contemplated as an immediate necessity. No plans had been made to make use of the local knowledge of Government servants and commercial employees. Little encouragement had been given to plans for raising irregular fighting forces from the Karens, Chins and other highlanders. No attempt had been made to provide an adequate number of guides and interpreters for the troops. Such few maps as existed were obsolete and on the miserable scale of four miles to the inch. So when invasion came the effort to repel it was dependent upon improvisation which often collapsed. The majority of the European, Indian and Burman civil officers stuck to their posts, but too many of their subordinates fled from the bombing of hostile aircraft, and this led to a breakdown of the police and of essential services. Fears for the safety of the women and children added to the instability, and if the administration lacked the moral courage to confront the problem of evacuation this was the result of the failure of His Majesty's Government to face its responsibilities in the Far East. When evacuation on a grand scale began it was beyond the power of the civil authorities to control, and this mass evacuation was a continuous hindrance and menace to the troops. The military authorities, sensitive to the charge of defeatism, had no more moral courage than their civil colleagues.

Work on the road to link Burma with the Assam road began in December 1941 by trying to improve the tracks between Kalewa and Tamu with local Public Works Department resources. The original proposal to the Government of Burma was the construction of a road from Tamu to Sittaung and thence to the railway at Wuntho. This plan was given up in January 1942 in favour of the easier alignment to Kalewa and on to Ye-U. The work was not given priority until after the invasion had started by which time the efforts of the P.W.D. staff to collect tools, plant, material, labour and rations were seriously affected. Many of the labourers joined in the flight of the refugees; cholera broke out; the work on the Indian side of the frontier did not progress as speedily as was hoped, which meant that the Indian help could not be forthcoming.

Yet in spite of all their difficulties the P.W.D. staff managed somehow to improve the rough jungle tracks sufficiently to allow the Imperial forces to make their way out and without that devoted work by the staff of the P.W.D. it is certain that the Imperial forces

would never have reached India. If the construction of that road had been undertaken and completed it might have compensated for the disastrous effect of the fall of Rangoon upon the operations of the troops by providing a line of communication for reinforcements and supplies.

In view of the difficulties by which it was faced it is a matter of astonishment that military administration did not break down completely, and no praise of the achievement of the administrative staff could be exaggerated. To Lieut.-General Hutton's attention to these difficulties both as G.O.C.-in-C. and afterwards as Chief of Staff to General Alexander the ability of the military administration to stand the strain imposed upon it was largely due, to that and to Major-General Goddard's fantastic energy and extreme skill.

There were never enough administrative units for the force they had to maintain. Transport, supply, medical, ordnance and labour units were all too few. There was no secure base after Rangoon had fallen, and as the fall of Rangoon had never been contemplated no base in Upper Burma had been established before active operations began. The Army had too much motor transport at the expense of animal transport, and the lack of animal transport in such a country by which the troops were tied to the roads was one of the main causes of the Japanese success. Let it be added, in case anybody should suppose that there was enough motor transport, that there was a serious shortage of it. Units often disembarked without their transport, which might be in another convoy, and as often they would have to be sent into battle as soon as they landed with improvised transport, which led to the loss of much equipment and kit, and by lowering fighting efficiency lowered morale at the same time.

Under the direction of the United States authorities hundreds of motor vehicles destined to equip the Chinese under Lease/Lend were destroyed at Rangoon, permission to remove them having been refused by the Chinese. On their own initiative the Gloucesters saved 150 new vehicles from the burning parks and equipped themselves.

Vehicles for supply services had been hired before hostilities began, and these naturally became unreliable. A certain number of vehicles was then bought or requisitioned from Lend/Lease material, but the loss of transport from bombing and road blocks was heavy and after the fall of Rangoon this could not be replaced. The Chinese Armies were practically without transport of their own, and as we had undertaken to supply them with rations an almost unendurable strain was placed upon our supply transport. The

thousands of tons of rice collected at Prome were almost all lost when the town was abandoned. We have heard about the superhuman efforts made by the administrative services to supply the troops during the last phase of the campaign. The surprise attack on Monywa cut off the stocks there, but enough remained in the Shwebo area to maintain the troops as far as Shwegyin, and after crossing the Chindwin they were supplied from India by those roads made by such a desperate last effort.

The supply of petrol, oil and lubricants was a continuous anxiety. After the fall of Rangoon the Army had to rely on the oilfields which were not on the railway. Then the oilfields went, and that set a term to its ability to stay in Burma, whatever the result of the fighting.

The arsenal at Rangoon had never been suitable as a base, intended as it was to maintain in Burma a force of only two brigades, and until hostilities began the ordnance staff was not told to provide for more than one additional division. Stores and equipment were quite inadequate for the forces that arrived. If the Chinese Government had not released a supply of automatic weapons and 3-ton lorries the situation would have been even worse than it was. When the campaign opened the ordnance staff at Army Headquarters consisted of an administrative officer and two officers on the engineering side. The arsenal itself was run entirely by civilian clerks and labourers, most of whom disappeared from Rangoon after the bombing on December 23rd 1941 and never came back. There were no facilities for handling large quantities of stores and, being situated close to the Mingaladon airfield, the area was under constant air attack. A great dump of ammunition was built up in a rubber estate near Milestone 18 on the Prome road, but when Rangoon was abandoned most of this ammunition had to be destroyed for lack of transport.

When Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith arrived to take up his post as Governor of Burma early in 1941 he asked His Majesty's Government for the services of a transport expert; the request was refused because Burma's priority for such luxuries was low. So work on the co-ordination of transport had to be undertaken by the Burma Government from its own larder.

In December 1941 Army Headquarters appealed to India to form a Transportation Directorate for Burma and send such personnel as were available. Two officers from Iraq reached Rangoon in January 1942 to find no previous planning; their own previous ignorance of Burma did not make their task an easy one. A Directorate of Transportation and Movements requires men trained in military

duties. Regular officers were not available, but substitutes were found in officers taken from their civil occupations, and they did good work.

The Burma Railways and the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company had all they needed in the way of organisation and equipment except for the emergency of war, when civilian labour could not be trusted under the strain of air raids and the steady Japanese advance. In January 1942 Army Headquarters asked India for Railway, Docks and Inland Water Transport units to make up for the mass desertions. It will be remembered that India had already been called upon to help almost to the limit of her capacity with the transportation problem in Iraq created by the effort to feed the cold esurient Russians with material of war. Nevertheless, India offered three of the very few units left to her; she sent Headquarters No. 2 Docks Operating Group, No. 213 Docks Operating Company and Headquarters No. 3 Railway Construction and Maintenance Group. Besides these a number of I.W.T. crews, engine-drivers and firemen were flown into Burma later in the campaign. An attempt was made to raise units locally with staffs from officers in Burma, and a company was raised from casual labour in Rangoon by H.Q. No. 2 Docks Operating Group. When not employed on dock work this company received military training with 300 Italian rifles.

The Director of Transportation noted:

> Even this modicum of military training, the possession of uniform and arms, and the cohesion afforded by working as a unit with their own officers amply demonstrated the value of a military organization in war. The Company worked through air raid alerts whilst their civilian comrades were under cover. Later on, during the last two weeks in Rangoon, only a small proportion of the Company absented themselves at a time when there was a wholesale desertion of civilian labour.

Yet even this gallant attempt at last minute militarisation was opposed by the transport organisation involved, and it remained a solitary attempt.

On February 24th the Chief Railway Commissioner was reported to have declared in Rangoon that 'the Railways are finished and not another train can be run.' This was too much, and the Governor sanctioned the militarisation of the railway south of Toungoo. Considering that the Army was unable to feed, clothe, arm or even pay the staff it was really only militarisation in name. Yet even so much raised the morale of those working on the railway,

for there was at any rate the consolation of knowing that a war pension would be granted to their dependants if they became casualties. To the end of the campaign, in spite of the defection of so many of the subordinate staff of the railway and river steamers and the abandonment of such a large quantity of stores in Rangoon, the Army was able to live and fight until the last moment.

The difficulties of the transportation services were intensified by the interference of the Chinese whose threats to use violence caused further desertions, and there was always the enemy air force which was particularly severe on Mandalay. The railways did not function well, but it is astonishing that they were able to function at all. Most of the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company's fleet was scuttled at or near Mandalay and what was left of the Chindwin fleet was scuttled at Sittaung on May 14th.

The rapidity of the Japanese advance, the lack of labour and the paucity of engineering units prevented demolitions from being carried out on any large scale, and in the long run it was certainly to our benefit that no policy of 'scorched earth' was feasible. The behaviour of the Japanese whose arrival had been almost unanimously welcomed by the population was already turning the Burmese against them before the Imperial forces had left their country, and when the latter came back in 1945 they received more help from the Burmans than the Japanese had received from them on the way in.

The Burma Posts and Telegraph Department was not militarised until well on in the campaign, but throughout members of it were conspicuous for their devotion to duty. The Army sorely needed that devotion, for its own signal services were very short of equipment. Indeed, one of the chief causes of the enemy's successfully rapid advance was the difficulty of maintaining communication in the field, which has already been noted. The gallantry of runners and liaison officers could not compensate for the failure to provide the signals with suitable equipment.

The medical services were equally handicapped, and the shortage of medical officers led to much suffering for the sick and wounded. The Indian Hospital Corps did well: the Burma Hospital Corps was less satisfactory. Medical conscription was instituted, but the country had been shattered by bombing and confused by the mass flight of the refugees before it became effective.

Shortage of transport was acute. Two motor ambulance sections arrived without vehicles. One improvised section had 15 Ford cars all of which broke their half-shafts. Three ambulance trains

were improvised. They were non-corridor and had other disadvantages, but they saved the situation many times and without them medical evacuation would have been at a standstill. Towards the end of March several river steamers and launches were converted into hospital ships, and there is no report of the Japanese aircraft having attacked them.

The Chinese had no medical organisation, and inadequately supplied as we were with medical stores and equipment we had to provide them for the Chinese, and on top of that give them, besides medical units and staffs accommodation in our own hospitals, ambulance trains and ships. The evacuation of the sick and wounded to India was a problem growing continuously more complicated. After Rangoon fell casualties were evacuated by air from Shwebo. When such evacuation was easy in the early part of April there were not enough aircraft available, so that the sick and wounded accumulated in the hospitals. Towards the end of the month evacuation to Shwebo became impossible and many casualties were on the Irrawaddy bound for Myitkyina when the Japanese captured Lashio. It was too late to divert them, and when Myitkyina fell next many of these sick and wounded made their way along that fearful route to India, God knows how. The evacuation of many casualties from Shwebo to Shwegyin has already been told.

At this point a word must be said about the famous and well-beloved 'Wasbies.' The Women's Auxiliary Service (Burma) was formed in January 1942 to work on cypher duties with the Army in Burma. Of the 350 original members nearly 300 were evacuated from Rangoon at the last moment. Sixty-five Wasbies remained and they moved north with the retreating army. They left Rangoon by train, the railway being heavily bombed, and resumed their work again with Army Headquarters at Maymo. From here in April they moved to Shwebo. When the train was pulling out of Mandalay on the first night a coupling broke as it was going up a gradient and half the train went backwards. The stranded Wasbies were rescued. When at last they reached Shwebo Mrs Taylor, the Commandant, found a very dirty empty house in which the 32 girls in her unit camped. The cypher work was carried on the town being heavily bombed all the while. In their spare time the Wasbies worked at the hospital dressing wounds, helping in the operating theatre and carrying out the dead.

At last, with the worsening of the strategic position, the Wasbies were ordered to Myitkyina. The train travelled about eight miles every day. There were no signals, and it was a single track line.

Every carriage was chock-full; sleep was impossible in the sweltering filthy carriages; the only water was a small ration from the engine boiler for drinking; food was usually a can of beans shared among eight. The railway was lined on both sides by unhappy refugees hoping to get places on the northward bound train. Just behind the train in which the Wasbies were travelling was a heavily loaded ammunition train which would have been a rewarding target for a Japanese bomber.

When it was beginning to look as if the Wasbies would never reach Myitkyina their train was met by a small diesel truck in which was a senior official of the Burma Railway who transferred the girls to it and got them through to Myitkyina, whence they were flown out to Assam and finally reached Simla in May 1942. Here the W.A.S. (B) Organisation in its original form was disbanded, many of the Anglo-Indian and Anglo-Burmese girls in it volunteering for service with the W.A.C. (India) of which they formed the first platoon.

Mrs Taylor set about the task of reforming the unit as a canteen service for the troops of the Burma Command. The new Wasbies opened their first canteen at Shillong in September 1942, and from that time onwards the Wasbies served the troops with domestic skill and most admirable devotion. There will be more to tell of the Wasbies when we reach the years ahead. Meanwhile, a salute to those gallant women.

After the fall of Rangoon the medical services were faced by the prospect of cholera, which had started in the camps of the refugees and threatened to spread to the troops. Energetic preventive measures kept the disease under control and a general epidemic was avoided, for which the medical services functioning under every disability deserve the highest praise.

One result of the lack of transport and the speed of the Japanese advance was that the retreating Army was hampered by the wives and families of many of the clerks, servants and other employees. These women and children suffered heavy casualties when Shwebo was bombed. They were then sent to Monywa to be evacuated up the Chindwin, but by the time their train reached Alon on the morning of April 30th movement up the Chindwin had ceased. Another Japanese air raid inflicted further casualties, and in the event they accompanied the Army by the Ye-U-Shwegyin track to Kalewa and thence on through Tamu to Assam.

This train of women and children did not add to the efficiency of the Army in Burma which had already been impaired by the lack of so much essential equipment. There were other factors which

affected morale and discipline. Some of the Indian battalions consisted almost entirely of young recruits not even half-trained, and too many of their British officers were inexperienced emergency soldiers with hardly any knowledge of the languages spoken by the men. The shortage of troops involved frequent changes in the composition of brigades which was destructive of *esprit de corps*, that priceless quality for which the English have borrowed a French name to avoid being suspected of undue emotion. This *esprit de corps* remained high throughout the campaign in the 48th Gurkha Brigade and the 7th Armoured Brigade, both of which formations were well-trained, if not for jungle warfare. The 48th Brigade recovered from the Sittang disaster in a most remarkable fashion and under the inspiring leadership of Brigadier R. T. Cameron would illuminate the annals of military glory in the months to come as brightly as during the dark days of this retreat they had illuminated them at Kyaukse.

If almost all that could be left undone to prepare for the remote possibility of a Japanese invasion of Burma was left undone by us, all that could be done to prepare for that invasion of Burma was done by the Japanese. It was a vital part of the vast Japanese offensive against Allied possessions in the Far East, and Britain may consider herself fortunate that during the days of benevolent American and malevolent Russian neutrality she had Germans to contend with, not Japanese.

For every operation undertaken—Pearl Harbour, Hong Kong, the Philippines, Malaya, the Dutch East Indies and Burma—the Japanese High Command trained their men to the hour for that particular operation. They used China as a vast Salisbury Plain on which to exercise their troops and test their arms and equipment. Every kind of operation was rehearsed many times in advance until those chosen to take part in it were perfect. Meanwhile, the propaganda and espionage were constant and the right guns, the good maps, the suitable rubber boats, outboard motors and landing craft were got ready. A captured film of the Japanese advance through Malaya staggers the onlooker by its presentation of ruthless energy and efficiency in the repair of demolitions.

The Japanese were hampered by no rules of warfare. They wore any kind of dress that suited the occasion: they massacred their prisoners if it was convenient; they lived on the country; they moved by tracks believed to be impassable; they were able alike to raise a Burma Independent Army of several thousands and enjoy the whole resources of Siam; they seemed for a long while invincible.

The Japanese troops used in Burma and Malaya were expert

jungle-fighters to whom the jungle was an ally and in which they seemed terrifyingly mobile to troops completely without jungle-training. The shock troops were individually intelligent and individually courageous; the snipers were one and all as selfless as a V.C. Yet the main body of these Japanese troops often fled from the British and the Indian bayonets and were unable to stand heavy shelling. The Japanese artillery lacked initiative; their mortars and infantry guns were full of it.

The Japanese air force was not impressive, even after the successful attacks on Magwe and Akyab when it had the freedom of the Burma skies. Let it be added that, in spite of failing to do as much damage as it should have been able to do, it could not fail without opposition to be a powerfully unpleasant influence. And let it also be added that the speed with which it retaliated for the losses inflicted upon it at Mingaladon caught the Allied Air Force completely by surprise at Magwe.

Even as early as this, and in the middle of a brilliantly successful campaign, there was evidence of inherent weaknesses in Japanese tactics which were one day to destroy them. They were accustomed to advance on a fixed objective without having made any provision to exploit success; they displayed little initiative in pursuit; most serious of all, they could not deviate from a fixed plan.

The only instance of the exploitation of a success by a rapid pursuit was when the Japanese 56th Division drove through Karenni and the Shan States after it had destroyed the Chinese 55th Division. On the other hand, it was not Japanese initiative but our own delays which allowed the enemy to cut off most of the 17th Indian Division on the east bank of the Sittang River, and when this had been done he was quite unable to exploit his success. If he had known how to use his two divisions against the almost unarmed 17th Division which then had only the support of the 7th Armoured Brigade he might have been the master of Burma by the middle of March. Again, by moving on Rangoon instead of concentrating upon cutting off the greater part of the Imperial forces the Japanese missed a great opportunity. So they did at Yenangyaung, Monywa and Shwegyin. Indeed, the more one studies this First Burma Campaign the more clearly does one perceive in it intimations of ultimate defeat for the triumphant invader. At the time the Japanese conquest of Burma, following as it did upon so many other Japanese conquests, seemed as incomprehensibly easy as all the rest of them. We can see now that the resistance was tough enough to avert the major calamity of an invasion of India. The 8,000 men of the Indian

Army and the 1,600 men of the British Army did not give their lives or their liberty in vain. Those who reached India after that long and hazardous retreat of 850 miles by the shortest route from Moulmein to Tamu had not endured and suffered through four blazing months, continually harassed by an unopposed air force, to no purpose.

It has been a melancholy task to relate the story of Hong Kong, Borneo, Malaya and Burma, and the melancholy is not lightened by the knowledge that these bitter tragedies were caused by lack of trained troops, lack of proper material of war, lack of air-support, lack of medical supplies, lack indeed of everything that could have enabled those men, sacrificed to pusillanimous economy and besotted unreadiness, to defend themselves against the superior forces of a highly trained, a well prepared and a dauntless enemy.

Chapter 41

1942. Japanese activity in Bay of Bengal—situation in India—expansion of forces—defence of Assam frontier—inadequate roads and railways—political unrest.

IT is now time to take up the tale of events in North Africa, but on our way west it will be convenient to pause in India for a brief glance at the war effort there during 1942.

Ever since the beginning of the war India had been sending troops abroad before they could be fully or suitably trained for the tasks in front of them; it has already been made clear that this was due to the failure of His Majesty's Government, even after Hitler's attack on Poland, to appreciate the potentialities of India and its discouragement of every Indian attempt to play more than a minute part in the conflict. It was no matter for astonishment that the sub-continent as a whole was inclined to take a detached view of the war. The Japanese successes came as a profound shock, for it was realised that neither the armed forces nor the nation was prepared to meet the invasion now threatened. By March 1942 when Rangoon fell, there was not a single fully trained or equipped division in India; the Air Force was practically non-existent; the Eastern Fleet had lost control of Indian waters.

Nevertheless, when the Japanese naval raid on Ceylon had still further crippled that Eastern Fleet, when 100,000 tons of shipping had been sunk in the Bay of Bengal, when the undefended east coast was open to attack, and when the exhausted troops were staggering back to Assam, the Commander-in-Chief, India, offered and sent aid to the hard pressed Middle East Command. Wavell had had bitter experience of being hard-pressed in both eastern theatres of war. The 7th Armoured Brigade and the 5th British Division, the former back from Burma, the latter recently arrived from England, were sent to Iraq in September 1942, and the two Australian brigades in Ceylon were relieved by Indian troops.

On April 5th 1942 seventy-five Japanese aircraft raided Colombo. Some harbour workshops were destroyed, slight damage was done to railway workshops and negligible damage to the Ratmalana aerodrome. H.M.S. *Tenedos* and S.S. *Hector* were sunk; H.M.S. *Lucia* was hit. However, the enemy's aircraft suffered heavily at the

hands of the defending Hurricanes. He lost 26, probably 31 of them, and 35 were damaged. Twelve Hurricanes and twelve other of our aircraft were lost.

On the following day Vizagapatam and Coconada were raided. A Japanese naval force consisting of four heavy cruisers and one or two aircraft carriers with a number of lighter units, attacked merchant shipping in the Bay of Bengal, sinking off the east coast 25 merchant vessels with a gross tonnage of 121,461 tons. Four-engined bombers probably based on the Nicobar Islands were responsible for some of these sinkings.

On April 9th Trincomalee was raided by a large force of Japanese aircraft. Many direct hits were made on the dockyard and much heavy damage was done. H.M. Aircraft Carrier *Hermes*, the Australian destroyer *Vampire*, and the corvette *Hollyhock* were sunk; this was the end of effective action by the Japanese in the Bay of Bengal.

In March as already related small ships of the Indian Navy had helped to evacuate refugees from Burma, and early in April H.M.I.S. *Indus* was sunk in Akyab harbour. H.M.I.S. *Sophie Marie*, one of the requisitioned auxiliary ships, struck a mine during the evacuation of the Andamans in March.

Soon after the loss of Burma the Royal Indian Navy began to lay the foundation of its coastal forces. The first Captain, Coastal Forces, was appointed in May 1942; three months later H.M.I.S. *Cheetah*, the first Coastal Force Base, was commissioned at Trombay outside Bombay. The Royal Indian Navy was beginning to grow. During 1942 12 fleet minesweepers were commissioned, and there were other additions. Training establishments were developed. H.M.I.S. *Machlimar*, the new Anti-Submarine Training School, was commissioned at Andherei near Bombay before the end of the year and also H.M.I.S. *Valsura*, the Torpedo and Electrical School, was commissioned at Jamnagar, a finely appointed and up-to-date establishment. Progress was made during 1942 with other new naval establishments.

On October 16th H.M.I.S. *Lady Craddock* capsized and sank in the Hooghly during a violent cyclone accompanied by a tidal wave; but the year 1942 was memorable for a naval action which will bear comparison with any fought by a small ship. H.M.I.S. *Bengal*, a minesweeper of the *Bathurst* class under 1,000 tons and, besides her close-range anti-aircraft weapons, armed with a single 12-pounder gun, was on her maiden voyage to India from the builder's yard in Australia. She was commanded by Lieut. W. J. Wilson R.I.N.R. and she was escorting the Dutch tanker *Ondina*, a 6,000-ton vessel

armed with a single 4-inch gun. On November 11th 1942 south of Cocos Island *Bengal* encountered two Japanese armed merchant cruisers of 10,000 and 6,863 tons respectively, of greatly superior strength in armament and equipped with torpedo tubes and aircraft. Wilson at once closed with the two Japanese ships, and courageously supported by the Dutch tanker he fought a most gallant action in the course of which *Bengal* sank the larger of the enemy ships and compelled the other to abandon the action. *Bengal* suffered some damage, but she and the *Ondina* were able to proceed and reach their Indian port of destination. It was already clear that the young Indian Navy would in the fullness of time follow the path of glory trodden for so many years by the Indian Army.

At the end of 1941 India was informed by the War Office that the latter was anxious to further Indian expansion in every way.

> By this means only can requirements for India, Middle East (*i.e.* North Africa), Iraq, Persia, Malaya, etc. be met.

This is presumably the date, more than two years after the outbreak of war, when Whitehall woke up to the fact that the war could not be fought to a successful conclusion without the help of India; Rip Van Winkle hardly slept more soundly.

The most acute problem was the provision of additional manpower for the British personnel, the limitation of which was seriously holding up expansion. It was proposed to convert certain additional British formations in the Middle East to Indian and to hasten the Indianisation of various technical units in the same area in order to release the British personnel for India. The shortage of British personnel had involved a general lowering of efficiency because the trained Indian personnel to take its place did not yet exist. Expansion continued, but the calls on India's inadequate sources of skilled men grew heavier and progress was slower accordingly; by the end of the year the want of skilled personnel was imperilling the whole future of expansion.

The shortage of officers, acute in India, was equally acute in the British Army and India was called upon 'to meet requirements including a proportion for the Indian Army' from British other ranks in India. It was pointed out that 'British units in India before the war or arriving early in the war either did not contain suitable material or had been extensively milked.' Troops still under training for the defence of India were rushed off to Malaya and Burma with the results we have seen. Divisions like the 23rd, 25th and 26th were improvised; their tale will not be told in this volume. After the

evacuation of Burma the 1st Burma Division was re-formed as the 39th Indian Division; the 17th Indian Division was reconstituted.

Towards the end of 1941 a new recruiting directorate was set up in the Adjutant-General's Branch which eliminated competition between the Services and contributed to the solution of the problem of suitable man-power.

In May 1942 the situation was summed up by the General Staff, India, in these words:

> Before these events (Japan's near approach to India) such direct threats had not been seriously contemplated as an immediate possibility, and our main efforts were directed to the production of formations for overseas, the construction of defences and installations to meet the threat from the *West* and the development of the bases and transportation systems of Iraq and Persia.
>
> Our elaborate and detailed programme for the raising of units: the order of battle; war establishments; scales and types of transport; equipment; and training were all principally arranged with a view to operations to the *West* of India. These have required rapid and extensive revision which has involved considerable changes in the location, composition and commitments of such formations as we have available.
>
> The immediate result of the War with Japan was the diversion of formations to the Far East and the acceleration of their despatch. In addition, in response to urgent requests from Malaya, reinforcements equivalent to the infantry of a division were collected, chiefly by withdrawal from active units. All of these had not reached Singapore before it fell, so some of them are still available.
>
> The effect of this accelerated despatch of formations was to leave this country with very few troops and those not fully trained . . . to give the forces sent overseas a minimum scale of weapons and vehicles it was necessary to postpone still further the issue of these to formations and training establishments in India with the effect (as has happened previously) that expansion and readiness for war have been inevitably delayed.

The system of military command was now reorganised by the constitution of three armies to deal with the threats of invasion to North-West, North-East, and Southern India; at the same time Central Command was created to relieve Army Commanders of internal security problems, and much of their responsibility for administration and training.

Bases in the Indian Ocean were garrisoned for naval purposes. These included Addu Atoll in the Maldive Islands, Diego Garcia in the Chagos Archipelago, Cocos Island, the Seychelles, Mauritius,

and Rodriguez. The last three passed to East African Command in due course.

The lesson thrust upon His Majesty's Government by the deplorable result in the Far East of failing to appreciate the vital importance of air-power seemed to have been learnt in March 1942. Machinery was at last set in motion to make the Indian Air Force a self-contained service, manned and administered by Indians.

On March 1st India had no airfields completed to the new standard of runways and accommodation; there were 16 airfields with one all-weather runway, most of them under 1,200 yards, and there were 20 airfields with only fair-weather strips. Now a programme to construct 222 modern airfields was given top priority, and by the end of 1942 no less than 150 of those new airfields were usable. The men and the machines waited for so long began at last to arrive from Britain, but although recruiting in India was intensified the problem of finding enough men of the right type for technical jobs remained acute.

In March the Indian Air Force had four squadrons and the Indian Air Force Volunteer Reserve had six coastal defence flights. It was decided to disband the latter and expand the Indian Air Force to 10 squadrons to be operational by the end of 1943. The increase in airfields and squadrons demanded an extensive development of communications by water transport and land lines, the latter of which was undertaken by the Indian Posts and Telegraphs Department.

The Observer Corps which had started in a very small way on the North-West Frontier was extended to reach as far as Eastern India. There was no warning system in India at the beginning of 1942; by the end of the year radar equipment enabled the major ports of India and Ceylon to be covered. The training of technicians expanded to six times as many; the first batch of pilots for the future went to Canada under the Empire Air Training Scheme, and another batch of 34 officers and technicians went to England among whom were some young pilots that were absorbed into Fighter Command of the R.A.F. During this year of 1942 the Indian Air Training Corps was launched, and there were 17 technical and non-technical schools located all over India.

By the end of 1942 the India Service Command had developed from a few obsolete aircraft and converted airliners in March to 29 fully operational squadrons with modern aircraft and 20 squadrons at various stages of training and equipment but not yet operational on modern types. There were also two transport squadrons and one photo reconnaissance unit. In all there were 1,443 aircraft and

the combined strength of the air forces was 4,000 officers and 57,000 men.

After the loss of Burma the almost negligible air power remaining in India was concentrated in Ceylon where it taught the Japanese that lesson. Air operations during the monsoon may have been on a small scale, but they were carried out with skill, courage and determination and they were an earnest of what was to happen in the years to come. Calcutta and Chittagong were both defended resolutely and in consequence suffered little damage. Large quantities of supplies were dropped in the Chin Hills and also for the Karen levies and that gallant little isolated garrison at Fort Hertz.

The Japanese air force which had remained inactive during the monsoon did a certain amount of damage in the Dinjan area during the last quarter of the year when the Americans had first taken over and where the warning system was ineffective. Small night raids were made on Calcutta which did very slight material damage but caused an embarrassing exodus of labour.

Mention has been made already of the splendid work of the American Volunteer Group against the Japanese. On March 12th 1942 an United States bombardment group with an operational strength of six planes together with a fighter group landed in India as the nucleus of the United States 10th Air Force with headquarters at Delhi; on April 2nd offensive operations against the Japanese in the India-Burma theatre started from bases in Bengal.

When the Burma road was cut plans were made for an air-ferry service over the Himalayas, and the United States-Assam-Burma-China Ferry Command was formed to carry munitions and other supplies into Burma and to evacuate the sick and wounded and civilian refugees.

By the end of July 1942 base units of the United States Air Forces were in operation at Kunming in China, Dinjan and Chabua in Assam, and at Allahabad, Chakulia, Agra and Bangalore; the total strength of the United States Air Forces in India consisted of 812 officers and 8,350 men.

In November the United States 10th Air Force was divided into an administrative headquarters at Delhi and two tactical headquarters, one controlling air operations over Burma, the other over China. By the end of the year the ferrying of supplies over the Hump between Chabua and Kunming began from airfields built in the Brahmaputra Valley at Sookerating, Tezpur, Jorhat and Mohanbari. That dry statement covers heroic effort; in one electric storm 32 American airmen were lost.

We have run ahead too far. In the first half of 1942 India was practically defenceless. That weary army so much in need of rest and reorganisation after the ordeal of the Burma Retreat had to take its place in IV Indian Corps to defend the 500 miles of Assamese frontier. The only other troops available for this were the 1st Indian Infantry Brigade which was astride the Palel-Tamu road, having been moved hastily from the North-West Frontier, and one battalion of the 49th Indian Brigade. The story of the Fighting Cocks of Savory's 23rd Indian Division of which these units were the vanguard in this fierce country must wait for celebration in another volume.

Besides these troops, the local tribes of that wild frontier—Lushais, Chins, Nagas, Kachins, and the rest of them—were organised into levies to undertake guerilla operations against the enemy's lines of communications if he tried to pass through their country. When the Japanese advance was halted the activities of these levies assumed an aggressive character, and the contingent known as V Force did magnificent work. Patrols penetrated deep into enemy-held territory to obtain information and to harass the foe. These patrols could cover 30 miles a day with full packs; they were masters of the surprise; they were able to lead army patrols on their first sorties into enemy territory; they planned ambushes; they provided guides and interpreters. Commanded by British officers familiar with the country, many of them political officers, V Force rendered a service to the army of inestimable value.

IV Indian Corps was responsible for the Assamese frontier; to XV Indian Corps composed of the incomplete 14th and 26th Indian Divisions and a small garrison at Calcutta was entrusted the defence of Bengal, with a further 500 miles of land frontiers and sea coast, against a sea-borne invasion or an advance by the Japanese up the Arakan coast.

The Sunderbans Launch Flotilla was raised early in the year by requisitioning 50 launches with armament and crews. The duties of this flotilla was to patrol the waterways between the Hooghly and the Meghna and resist an attempted enemy landing. To help the flotilla a Sunderbans observer system of four land posts and nine barges for floating posts was set up with carrier pigeon lofts at Khalna for use in the Sunderbans.

The 70th British Division, less a brigade in Ceylon, was at Ranchi to deal with any sea-borne expedition that landed on the 300 miles of the Orissa coast. This division had been sent from the Middle East Command; it was the only reserve in Eastern India. In the

middle of 1942 the 2nd and 5th British Divisions arrived from the United Kingdom, the latter being sent to the Middle East later.

The difficulty of defending North-East India with such a small number of troops was rendered immensely more difficult by the wretched communications between Assam and East Bengal and of both with the rest of India. The mighty Brahmaputra River, without a single bridge, with a level rising and falling during the year as much as 25 feet and with a course capable of varying itself by several miles, cut off Assam from the rest of India. East of the river there was a single-line metre-gauge railway with very small engines and rolling stock and without a modern control system. There were waggon ferries at two crossings with an extremely limited capacity. There was no all-weather road from India to the west bank of the Brahmaputra. The only west-east road in Assam ran from the Gauhati ferry to the north-east which made it impossible to supplement the railway with road transport; indeed, all vehicles had to be sent to Assam by rail. River transport did not help because the river system merely led to the railway system on the east bank, which remained the limiting transportation factor. In any case most of the Brahmaputra steamers had been sent to serve the rivers in Iraq.

Communications were almost as bad on the Bengal front. The delta of the Ganges was unbridged and the railway to Chittagong was a single line metre-gauge. The enemy's command of the Bay of Bengal imposed a further strain on railway communications because petrol, oil and lubricants could only be sent to Eastern India overland. A pipeline from Bombay to Allahabad was put in hand, but pipelines are not laid in a day. Nor must it be forgotten that the Middle East had made heavy demands on India. By June 1942 590,000 tons of stores, 3,100 vehicles, including armoured fighting vehicles and guns, 174 railway engines and 5,600 units of rolling stock had been sent to Middle East, and it became urgent to alleviate somehow the strain upon the railways. In the end the United States agreed to supply locomotives, but the wheels and axles had to be supplied from Britain.

A great burden of work was laid upon the shoulders of the engineer services of India. Dimapur (known as Manipur Road) when it ceased to be a wayside halt for the railway was converted into a railhead able to handle at first 1,000 tons a day and presently 2,000 tons; depot areas were made to hold 30 days' reserves for a corps of three divisions and line-of-communication troops. A new railhead and base was made at Ledo. Another river post was made at Donaigon, the railway being extended to connect with it. More

crossings were made on the railway and the control system was reorganised.

As if the transportation problem was not already difficult enough it was further complicated by an unusually heavy monsoon that year which caused heavy flooding and landslides on the road to Imphal and made the Brahmaputra more unmanageable than ever. The floods were followed by the worst malaria epidemic India had experienced for years. Finally from August onwards political unrest found a target for self-expression in the communications to North-East India.

All these difficulties of transport affected the well-being of the troops. Reduced rations during that summer increased susceptibility to malaria and other diseases. The interruptions to road traffic delayed the provision of medical accommodation and equipment and impeded the evacuation of the sick, of whom no less than 15,000 were evacuated from the Burma Army before the full fury of the monsoon and another 20,000 during the last three months of the year.

Disturbances in India diverted the training and equipment of the Army to internal security, and stopped the flow of reinforcements to the troops on the North-East Frontier whose ranks were thinned by sickness.

The flight of refugees from Burma meant that India was called upon to deal with 400,000 of these unhappy people, and the great majority of them being South Indians a serious additional strain was imposed on the Bengal Nagpur railway. The arrival of these refugees in India added to the panic; thousands more fled from Calcutta and other cities in Eastern India.

A last-minute attempt to placate India's demand for independence was made by His Majesty's Government when Sir Stafford Cripps was sent to offer full Dominion status to 'a new Indian Union.' He arrived in Delhi on March 23rd; the Japanese occupied the Andaman Islands on the same day. After three weeks the negotiations broke down.

Nevertheless, recruiting figures for the month of May, when about 70,000 volunteers came forward, touched a new high record. Over half of those recruits came from classes which had hardly been represented in the standing Army of 1939, and the response from the Province of Madras was particularly noteworthy. No more will be said in these pages about these difficult days; they would require a volume to themselves if every point of view were to be fairly presented.

In a broadcast on the third anniversary of the outbreak of war General Wavell uttered these words:

> It is the disciplined might of her fighting men that is saving and will save India. They must be helped and not betrayed. Lift up your hearts then, and trust in your fighting men.

Those words were prophetic in a wider sense than Wavell himself intended at the time. He was thinking then of the defence of the soil of India by her own troops. He did not and could not imagine at that gloomy date the destruction of the myth of Japanese military invincibility by that Indian Army all but three years hence. To-day there is not an officer in the armies of India or Pakistan who is not proud to have been a brother officer of those devoted Englishmen, Scotsmen, Welshmen and Irishmen who, loving the men they counted it an honour to command, were able in circumstances of almost unimaginable frustration and difficulty to raise the greatest army of volunteers the world has ever known, to lead that mighty army to victory, and with that victory to win for India and Pakistan the independence so long and so ardently desired.

Chapter 42

February–May, 1942. The Middle East—moves of Indian formations—threat to Malta—heavy pressure on General Auchinleck to accelerate his offensive—his warnings over-ruled.

WE left North Africa many pages ago when the Eighth Army had taken up defensive positions from Gazala on the sea-coast west to Alem Hamza and thence south-east to Bir Hacheim where a strong point was planned with the object of forcing the enemy to move wide to the south if he attempted to outflank our position. The 1st South African Division held the coastal section as far as Alem Hamza where the Free French and Poles held the line. On their left was the 5th Indian Brigade with the 11th Indian Brigade, 4,000 yards to the rear in reserve. The 7th Indian Brigade after the break-out from Benghazi had moved back to the Egyptian frontier to refit.

On February 16th orders came that the rest of the 4th Indian Division would be relieved and would hand over to the 50th Northumbrian Division. Before the Red Eagles departed Captain Oldham with 10 sepoys of the 2nd Mahratta Light Infantry and two Bombay Sappers and Miners went off on the night of February 22nd in a couple of trucks to raid the Martuba airfield 60 miles behind the enemy's lines. A few miles from their objective the raiders left their trucks with orders to the drivers to wait until February 26th and then if the party had not returned to go back. The raiders went forward on foot and throughout daylight on February 24th they hid up a little way from Martuba. At nightfall they reached the airfield to find no more than a solitary damaged aircraft. This seemed a poor bag. So the Mahrattas went back to their hiding-place and tried their luck again the next night. This time they found three Messerschmitts and blew them up together with a bomb dump near by. Back at their rendezvous Havildar Babu Sadhao and Sapper Ram Chandra Ghag were found to be missing, and the trucks had gone, it being past the time of the rendezvous. However, the drivers had hidden one truck deep in a wadi, and in this the raiders got safely back to the British lines, having left food and water for the missing men.

Ten days later Havildar Babu Sadhao and Sapper Ram Chandra Ghag arrived at Sollum to which the 2nd Mahratta L.I. had been withdrawn. They had lost their way in the dark when leaving the

Martuba airfield and without food and only as much water as they could find in puddles they had walked through enemy territory night after night. On their way they picked up Sowar Deep Chand of the Central India Horse who was drawing near to the end of a long, dangerous and exhausting tramp from Benghazi.

The 5th and the 11th Brigades now relieved the 7th Brigade on the frontier and were set to the task of constructing fortified positions near Hamra on the escarpment 36 miles north-eastward of Sollum. There fortified positions consisted of areas of ground surrounded by mines and wire with dug-in gun positions. Tommy Atkins called them 'cowpats'; this upset military English, and they were ordered to be called 'boxes.' When boxes became a liability another euphemism was coined, and the order went out that they were to be called 'defended localities.' This belief that by giving a bad dog a good name he need not be hanged is a dangerous piece of English sentimentality which has infected civil and military officialdom too long.

Early in April the 4th Indian Division was dispersed, the 7th Brigade going to Cyprus, the 5th Brigade to work on defences along the Syrian frontier, and the 11th Brigade to the Canal Zone to train in combined operations. The Central India Horse left the division to train with an armoured formation before going to Iraq to join forces being mustered there against a possible German break through the Caucasus. The 1st Welch Regt was replaced in the 5th Brigade by the 1/4th Essex Regt—a territorial battalion which was to become famous for its deeds with the 4th Indian Division. The 1/1st Punjab Regt was sent to Jarabub and replaced by the 3rd Baluch Regt from the 8th Indian Division in Iraq. The 11th Brigade lost the 1st Rajputana Rifles (Wellesley's) which with the 4th Sikh Regt from the 7th Brigade was sent to the Tenth Army to give it the benefit of its experience of battle. These battalions were replaced by the 1/2nd Gurkha Rifles, which joined the 7th Brigade in Cyprus where it found its own former commanding officer General Tuker, and the 2/7th Gurkha Rifles, which joined the 11th Brigade on the Canal.

The Red Eagles were replaced in the desert by their brothers-in-arms of the Ball of Fire, who had been in Cyprus since their brief sojourn in Iraq. Major-General Briggs succeeded Lieut.-General Mayne in the command of the 5th Indian Division.

On February 17th 1942 the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, obviously shaken by the fall of Singapore the defence of which in their good resolutions telegram of January 1st the Chiefs of Staff had

declared second only in importance to the defence of the United Kingdom itself, sent this telegram to General Auchinleck:

> My telegram of 17th February contains warning order to send 70 Div to Ceylon and Burma early and 9th Australian Div to a destination not yet firm as soon as shipping is available.
>
> For your own information, the question of returning to India one of the divs in Tenth Army is also under consideration. You will not be surprised to learn of these decisions which are forced on us by the threat now developing against India and Ceylon and thus to our whole position in the East and Middle East.
>
> From your point of view the loss of three or four divisions and the practical certainty that you will not now receive more than a division from U.K. during the next six months will obviously make your task much more difficult. I realise that your plans for regaining Cyrenaica may have to be abandoned in favour of a defence of the Egyptian frontier and that you will be on little more than an internal security basis on your Northern Front. The weakening of Middle East does not mean that we are now discounting the potential threat to both your Western and Northern Fronts during 1942. It is a question of reinforcing where we are most immediately threatened.
>
> I am particularly sorry that in spite of your very great transport difficulties you are being asked to find a full scale for 70 Div subject to any which India may consider permissible. There is no other way of ensuring that 70 Div will be fit to take the field immediately on arrival.
>
> We will endeavour to spare you the necessity for finding transport for 9th Australian Div, but I can promise nothing at present.

The next day the Governor of Malta was warning the Chiefs of Staff that the supply situation of the island already extremely grave had been made still graver by the failure of the last convoy to arrive, and suggesting that the situation in Cyrenaica was the primary threat to convoys.

On February 20th the Middle East Defence Committee sent a long telegram to the Minister of Defence in which they pointed out that if the enemy were fought on the Kazvin-Hamadan-Mardan-Aleppo-Cyprus-Libyan Frontier line 17 infantry divisions and five brigade groups would be required, but that if a more passive defence in rearward areas was decided upon 12 infantry divisions would be the minimum required. 'When we say minimum we mean minimum.' They went on to point out that when formations called for were withdrawn Middle East would have in all eight infantry divisions and five brigade groups. The Committee were forced to conclude

therefore that, although it was hoped to be able for some months to hold the present positions in Libya and possibly even to gain ground in Cyrenaica, it would be impossible to do more than cause some delay to an enemy advance through Iraq and Syria on the Persian Gulf and the Suez Canal. After further arguments the Committee concluded by declaring that in their opinion the need for reinforcements in the Middle East theatre was so vital to Imperial Defence that the greatest sacrifices would be justified.

> We urge that every measure should be taken to assemble that necessary shipping for the despatch to the Middle East at once of at least four infantry divisions without interfering with the arrangements already made for the despatch of air forces.

Next day in an operation instruction from G.H.Q. M.E.F. General Sir H. M. Wilson, the Commander of the Ninth Army, and Lieut.-General E. P. Quinan, the Commander of the Tenth Army, were notified that each of them could assume that he would have an armoured division consisting of one armoured brigade group and one motor brigade group with two infantry divisions.

No evidence exists on the printed page that anybody at home committed himself to a positive opinion that the Germans would not attempt to strike on the Northern Front of Middle East and the historian is justified in presuming that the risk taken was a gamble which succeeded. Let it be remembered that a similar gamble over the Japanese invasion did not come off, and with that in mind the continuous apprehension in Cairo about that Northern Front should be applauded; in the circumstances of that anxious time any complacency in Cairo would have been reckless.

The Axis threat to Malta was the chief preoccupation of the Chiefs of Staff, and on February 27th the Commanders-in-Chief, Mediterranean were notified that whatever the risk involved for the rest of Middle East Command an offensive must be launched to recapture the air bases of Cyrenaica by the next dark period of the moon in order to get a substantial convoy through to Malta. This telegram crossed another from Auchinleck to the Prime Minister giving a full review of the military situation in Libya, in the course of which he said:

> Inferiority of our tanks to German and possibly new Italian tanks in mechanical reliability and gunpower is being slowly rectified, but must still be reckoned as decisive factor when computing relative strengths. Undoubted excellence of German training and leadership compared with ours is also potent factor in this connection.

> Assuming possibility of enemy building up tank strength as estimated above and maintaining all those tanks in forward area it is clear that we cannot have reasonable numerical superiority before June 1st and that to launch major offensive before then would be to risk defeat in detail and possibly endanger safety to Egypt.

Auchinleck's review 'greatly disturbed' Whitehall. On March 3rd the Chiefs of Staff telegraphed to the Middle East Defence Committee that the 'dominant fact in the Mediterranean and Middle East situation' was Malta. They considered the review 'gave a picture heavily biased in favour of the enemy.' The old British habit of underestimating the enemy which has cost so many thousands of British lives was asserting itself as usual. The Chiefs of Staff admitted to realising 'that the Germans have a definite advantage in the armament of their tanks,' but could not understand how his 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions and the Italian Ariete Division 'can have become so formidable in so short a time after the hammering they received at your hands'.

The telegram concluded:

> We consider that an attempt to drive the Germans out of Cyrenaica in the next few weeks is not only imperative for the safety of Malta on which so much depends, but holds out the only hope of fighting a battle while the enemy is still comparatively weak and short of resources of all kinds.
>
> Apart altogether from the immediate future situation in Africa, Malta and the Mediterranean we have to think of what may happen in the summer. We do not see what hope there will be at that time for the Levant-Caspian front, already denuded by the unavoidable calls of the Far East, if we have meanwhile allowed the enemy to build up in Africa a force which will summon all our remaining strength to the defence of Egypt's western flank.
>
> Viewing the war situation as a whole, we cannot afford to stand idle at a time when the Russians are straining every nerve to give the enemy no rest and when it is so important to increase by every possible means the drain on the German armed forces.
>
> If our view of the situation is correct, you must either grasp the opportunity which is held out in the immediate future, or else we must face the loss of Malta and a precarious defensive.
>
> Please reconsider the matter urgently and telegraph your views.

In their reply on March 5th the Commanders-in-Chief, Mediterranean assured the Chief of Staff that they were fully aware of the urgency of securing Western Cyrenaica, and that from the naval and air point of view there was everything to gain by resuming the

offensive quickly. They then went on to remind him that the offensive must be primarily a land battle and that 'it would be most dangerous in the light of past experience to start before the Army and particularly our armoured forces' were ready.

They concluded:

> As we see it, the point at issue is wider than that developed in your telegram under reply. It is not confined to the question of whether or not in the effort to save the island we are to jeopardise our whole position in the Middle East. In our view a premature offensive to recapture Western Cyrenaica within the next few weeks might result in the piecemeal destruction of the new armoured force we are building up and therefore jeopardise the security of Egypt.

The Prime Minister, determined to press the case for an early offensive, now entered the argument with twenty questions which were answered by General Nye,[1] the Vice-Chief of the Imperial General Staff, on March 22nd. Here is one question with its answer:

> *Q*. Reference has been made to the superior standard of training and leadership of Germans. How is this accounted for; where does the weakness lie; and what steps have been taken to rectify it?
>
> *A*. Superior standard of training and leadership of Germans applies mainly to armoured formations. Our infantry divisions generally are definitely superior to the German equivalent formations.
>
> Reasons for superior standard of training and leadership of Germans and nature of our weakness: General lack of equipment for training before the war began and since then. Lack of sufficient well-trained instructors to meet post-war expansion. Failure on our part to train commanders and staffs in the technique of control of highly mobile operations, mainly due to lack of suitable equipment and mobile troops to command. Failure to recognize till quite recently the vital importance of the closest co-operation between tanks, artillery and infantry in the employment of armoured formations. Low standard of training of drafts from the U.K. Experience has shown that our weakness lies solely in lack of time and equipment for training, and previous practical experience under modern conditions. There is nothing inherently superior in the German leader or soldier.
>
> Steps taken to rectify our weakness: Output of technical schools is being increased to the limit of capacity, more equipment is becoming available for training, and more and more emphasis is being laid on the importance of training. Much more remains to

[1] Lieut.-General Sir Archibald Nye, G.C.S.I., G.C.I.E., K.C.B., K.B.E., M.C.

be done, and will take time. A higher commanders' course is being started to train officers considered likely to make Major-Generals. A tactical training centre which has absorbed already existing, but separate training centres is being established to train officers of all arms from brigade commanders to subalterns. Particular emphasis will be laid on training in the co-operation of all arms in battle. Plans are in hand to group and expand other schools to increase output and pool resources and experience. Two training teams are being formed to assist formations in brigade and divisional training. The Junior Staff School is being expanded to increase the output of trained junior staff officers, and to enable the ground covered at the Middle East Staff School to be extended without decreasing the output. Lessons learnt in recent operations are being published and circulated, and a new pamphlet on the handling of armoured divisions, based on recent experience, and laying particular emphasis on the need for co-operation between all arms and the way in which it is to be achieved, is in draft form and will be issued shortly.

On April 2nd the Middle East Defence Committee telegraphed to the Prime Minister and the Chiefs of Staff:

> We . . . wish to stress point made in General Nye's telegram that no offensive operations are justified before 15th May, and only then if enemy tank strength is less than that given in . . . telegram. There cannot be therefore any question of the acceptance of May 15th as a firm date on which an offensive will be launched whatever the circumstances may be. . . .

The trouble was that the War Office would presume that every tank sent out to the Middle East was hale and hearty. On March 15th there were 1,383 Stuarts, Grants, Crusaders and I tanks in that theatre; 746 of them were in the workshops.

Nye had stopped in Cairo on his way to India with Sir Stafford Cripps in the hope of solving the disagreement between London and Cairo about the ability of the Eighth Army to launch an early offensive. Auchinleck had been asked by the Prime Minister to come to England for consultation. He had considered it impossible to leave his command, but the point of view of the Commanders-in-Chief, Middle East, was well presented by the visitors and it began to seem as if some comprehension of the realities of the situation was beginning to dawn upon Whitehall. Nevertheless, pressure to launch the offensive at the earliest possible moment was maintained.

Then on April 23rd the Chiefs of Staff sent to the Commanders-in-Chief, Middle East a review of the situation in the Indian Ocean

which was so grave, that in their reply the latter suggested that a Libyan offensive for this summer should be abandoned, that Middle East's efforts should be concentrated on consolidating its defences with such resources as were left to it, in the hope that reinforcements might be available before a serious threat materialised on the north or west, and finally that all the land forces which could be spared should be sent to India at once. This telegram was followed three days later by another on May 6th which gave an appreciation of the possibilities of launching an offensive in the Western Desert and finally estimated that it could not be launched before June 15th.

To this the Prime Minister replied in a personal telegram to General Auchinleck on May 8th:

> The Chiefs of Staff, the Defence Committee and the War Cabinet have all earnestly considered your telegram of 6 May in relation to the whole war situation, having particular regard to Malta, the loss of which would be a disaster of the first magnitude to the British Empire and probably fatal in the long run to the defence of the Nile Valley. We are agreed that in spite of the risks you mention . . . you would be right to attack the enemy and fight a major battle if possible during May, and the sooner the better.
>
> We are prepared to take full responsibility for these general directions, leaving you the necessary latitude for their execution. In this you will no doubt have regard to the fact that the enemy may himself be planning to attack you early in June and is trying to be ready by then.

The Middle East Defence Committee made one last effort to impress the Prime Minister and the Chiefs of Staff with the dangers of a premature offensive. Their arguments were disposed of on May 10th in a personal telegram from the Prime Minister to Auchinleck:

> The Chiefs of Staff, the Defence Committee and the War Cabinet have again considered the whole position. We are determined that Malta shall not be allowed to fall without a battle being fought by your whole Army for its retention. The starving out of this Fortress would involve the surrender of over 30,000 men, Army and Air Force, together with several hundred guns. Its possession would give the enemy a clear and sure bridge to Africa with all the consequences flowing from that. Its loss would sever the air route upon which both you and India must depend for a substantial part of your aircraft reinforcements. Besides this, it would compromise any offensive against Italy and future plans. . . . Compared with the certainty of these disasters, consider the

risks you have set out to the safety of Egypt are definitely less and we accept them.

We therefore reiterate the views expressed in . . . our telegram of May 8th with this qualification—that the very latest date for engaging the enemy which we could approve is one which provides a distraction in time to help the passage of the June dark period convoy.

So that was that.

Further argument in any case would have been a waste of time because by May 10th it was practically certain that the enemy would attack first, and this offered a prospect of solving one problem which had perplexed the planners of the offensive. That problem was how to persuade the enemy's armour to attack without weakening the forces that were holding the Gazala position. Now, if his first onset could be checked with heavy loss, all would be in favour of an immediate counter-offensive.

The enemy's plan of attack was revealed by the capture of documents early in the course of the impending battle:

The Afrika Korps and 90th Light Division Battle Group were to concentrate north of Segnali on the evening of May 26th. On the 27th May, after a night advance, the Ariete Armoured Division was to capture Bir Hacheim, while the Trieste Motorised Division was to make a gap in the minefield south of the Sidi Muftah strongpoint, where it was crossed by the Trigh el Abd. Simultaneously the Afrika Korps was to form up south of Bir Hacheim with 21st Panzer Division (less one battalion of tanks) on the left, 15th Panzer Division in the centre and the 90th Light Division Battle Group on the right. These formations were then to advance northwards and, after destroying our armoured forces, were to reach Acroma and El Adem before nightfall. Motorised columns were to seize Sidi Rezegh and El Duda. On 28th May, the three armoured divisions were to attack our positions between Gazala and Alem Hamza from the east, while four Italian infantry divisions, stiffened by two regiments of the 90th Light Division and one tank battalion of the 21st Panzer Division, were to attack the same positions from the west.

Tobruk was to be captured during the two subsequent days.

That plan of attack did not go quite according to plan, but neither did the counter-offensive.

If the new 6-pounder guns had arrived even a week earlier than they did the motorised brigades to which they were issued would have had time to learn something about them, and the infantry brigades to which the old 2-pounder guns were handed on would

have had time to learn something about them. If the American General Grant tanks, although they were much superior to any others available to us, had not had such a limited arc of traverse for their 75 mm. guns and those guns had been sited higher in the tank the Grants would have been more effective than at this date they were; and if those Grant tanks had brought with them spare engines or even spare parts so many might have lived to fight another day. If desert-worthy transport had not been shy of requirements by some 50,000 vehicles, if wireless equipment had not been in such short supply, if the Royal Armoured Corps and the Royal Signals had not lacked trained reinforcements, if . . . but if 'ifs' and 'ans' were pots and pans there'd be no work for tinkers.

Chapter 43

May–June, 1942. Rommel attacks first—a gallant stand at Point 171—a delayed counter-attack—disaster at Knightsbridge—withdrawal from the Gazala line.

IT was the 3rd Indian Motor Brigade which received the full shock of the enemy's onset in the early morning of May 27th.

The 3rd Indian Motor Brigade consisted of the 2nd Royal Lancers (Gardner's Horse), the 11th Prince Albert Victor's Own Cavalry and the 18th King Edward's Own Cavalry. Many pages back at Mechili in April 1941 the 3rd Indian Motor Brigade inadequately armed and equipped had put up a magnificent fight against the enemy's armour. After that the 18th Cavalry had done splendid work in Tobruk as already related. In August the brigade had been re-equipped at Mena and early in September 1941 had gone to north-east Syria where it helped the Free French to restore order in the Deir-ez-Zor. In February 1942 the brigade returned to Egypt where in due course it was joined by the 2nd Field Regt of Indian Artillery and spent three months of intensive training in the desert. It was now commanded by Brigadier A. A. E. Filose (Central India Horse).

On May 22nd the brigade came under the 7th Armoured Division now commanded by Major-General Messervy, and was ordered to hold Point 171 about four miles south-east of Bir Hacheim, where it would act as a pivot round which the British armour would operate to thwart any attempt by the enemy to outflank the Gazala line.

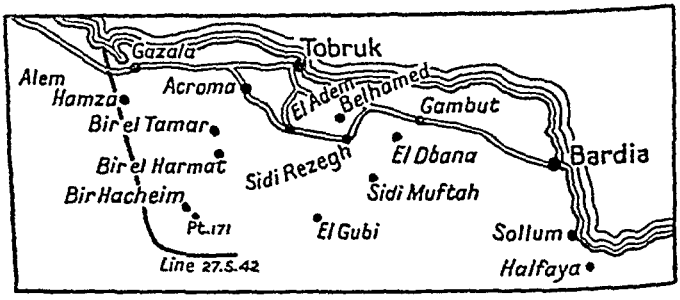
On May 25th air reconnaissance reported much enemy transport moving toward the southern end of the British line. On the following day the three regiments of the brigade took up their battle positions—the 2nd Royal Lancers holding the southern face of the box, the 18th Cavalry the western, and the P.A.V.O. the northern, the eastern face being held by troops of Sappers and Miners and two troops of the anti-tank guns of the 2nd Indian Field Regt. In the centre of the square were the gunners with 24 field-guns and a British troop of six anti-aircraft Bofors guns; the two squadrons of Valentine tanks promised had not arrived; only 30 anti-tank guns had reached the brigade when the action began.

By 8 p.m. on May 26th scouts reported that large enemy columns

behind a screen of armoured cars were moving to the south and south-east. The 7th Motor Brigade retired to a defensive position between Bir Hacheim and Bir el Gubi to meet this attack. The 3rd Indian Motor Brigade spent the night digging in.

At sunrise the two German panzer divisions on the left and the 90th Light Division on the right swept over the 7th Motor Brigade, inflicted heavy casualties on the 4th Armoured Brigade and captured the headquarters of the 7th Armoured Division, including the dashing Messervy himself, who pretended to be a batman and thus escaped.

By 6.30 a.m. Filose reported that the Ariete Armoured Division and elements of the 21st Panzer Division were facing his brigade. Ten minutes later the gunners of the 2nd Indian Field Regt opened fire. The soft-skinned vehicles of the Ariete Division withdrew; the



tanks formed for attack. A wheel by the panzers from east to north took them along the eastern face of the box which was held by the sappers and anti-tank gunners; the latter engaged the enemy's tanks at close range and knocked out several, but in doing so had all their own guns knocked out after a most gallant piece of gunnery in accord with the noblest traditions of the Royal Regiment.

Havildar Mohan Singh, all his gun crew dead around him and himself badly wounded, loaded, laid and fired his gun alone and single-handed knocked out two tanks before he died. Havildar Bahadur Khan was caught in the open when moving his gun into position and hit three tanks before his gun was put out of action. Not one of those gunners flinched, and though every single gun was silenced the enemy drew back from the eastern face.

At 7.15 a.m. a heavy attack by 60 panzers started against the western and south-western faces of the box, and so fierce and accurate was the fire of the Royal Lancers and 18th Cavalry that

the tanks turned away north and north-west; a little later they wheeled in again and were able to overrun the 18th Cavalry and the P.A.V.O., knocking out many anti-tank guns and taking a number of prisoners. Having thundered through the brigade's position, the panzers moved away to the north in the direction of Acroma, many of them left behind disabled. The din of them had not long died away when 200 German and Italian tanks attacked the southern face of Point 171 held by the Royal Lancers. The old 4th Cavalry, one of the component regiments of the Royal Lancers, had not stood at bay like this since it fought with its lances beside the Black Watch in the trenches of Festubert. One by one the anti-tank guns were knocked out, and their crews died where they stood. Lance-Daffadar Ali Mahboob Khan fought on with his gun alone until he fell. A week later the wrecks of six heavy panzers were found close to his smashed gun; two had been knocked out within 50 yards of the lance-daffadar's gun. Against enough anti-tank guns of more powerful calibre those panzers would never have overrun the position. As it was they did not succeed in silencing the Indian field guns, even when the three regiments had practically ceased to exist and every anti-tank gun had been shattered. The tanks moved about the box picking up many prisoners; many died fighting to the last. Daffadar Risal Singh of Gardner's was captured and ordered to get into one of the tanks. When this was engaged by the field guns Daffadar Risal Singh jumped out and ran to board an unguarded truck. As he was going off in it he saw a group of sowars also unguarded. He gathered them up, and then saw a broken-down truck full of soldiers. To this he attached a tow rope and succeeded in driving the whole lot out to safety.

In the middle of the battle a few carriers of the 18th Cavalry arrived and under the command of Lieut. Gillingham charged in a wild and glorious but unavailing effort to rescue their comrades. In the middle of the surging tanks stood Admiral Sir Walter Cowan who was still 'naval liaison officer' with the 18th Cavalry. He and Colonel Fowler were called on by two tanks to surrender. The Admiral refused, and fired the last cartridges left in his revolver at the tanks. Finally he and Fowler had to be seized bodily and dragged off the field. The Admiral was repatriated in 1943, having been too much of a strain on his Italian captors as a prisoner of 72. He received a bar to his D.S.O. he had won on the Nile over 40 years before, and he was elected Honorary Colonel of the 18th Cavalry.

After the enemy armour withdrew infantry appeared in force, but although five of the six troops of the 2nd Field Regt were still in

action their ammunition was almost exhausted, and there was no armour-piercing ammunition left. Brigadier Filose decided to make an effort to save the guns and ordered them to withdraw to a rallying point in the rear. The five troops came out, but unfortunately two attached themselves to enemy columns in the confusion of the desert fighting. In the end brigade headquarters and signals, half the 2nd Indian Field Regt, all six of the Bofors guns, the troop of Indian sappers and miners, and the sparse remnants of the three regiments made their way between enemy columns and rejoined the British forces that evening.

The losses suffered by the 3rd Indian Motor Brigade were very severe. Eleven officers and more than 200 other ranks were killed, and many more wounded. Some 30 officers and nearly 1,000 other ranks were taken prisoner. Fifty-two tanks were knocked out by the brigade in the course of the three-hours' battle, many of them permanently.

On May 28th the fragments of the brigade moved to Buq Buq to reorganise. Within a fortnight 800 of the prisoners rejoined. 600 of them had spent 48 hours in an enemy leaguer without food or water and having been released by their captors reached the Free French at Bir Hacheim, who restored them to safety. The other 200 were rescued from a prisoners' cage by a British raiding column. None of the officers was released, but three managed to escape. This inability of the Germans to find food or water for their prisoners at that time should be remembered in the light of future events.

The panzer divisions rolled on north-east and in spite of opposition from the 22nd Armoured Brigade, the 201st Guards Motorised Brigade and the 1st Army Tank Brigade reached Knightsbridge where they were attacked without conclusive results by the 1st Armoured Division.

The 5th Indian Division now commanded by Major-General Briggs was except for Reid's 29th Brigade having its first experience of desert warfare, and it was dispersed before the battle. Most of Fletcher's 9th Brigade was left in Tobruk, but the 3rd Frontier Force Regt went to El Adem. Charles Boucher's 10th Brigade moved up from Gambut into the Tobruk corridor, 15 miles west of the town at El Merassas. Denys Reid's 29th Brigade was attached to the 7th Armoured Division and operated columns southward from El Adem towards El Gubi. Anderson's 11th Brigade of the 4th Indian Division had been called up from the Canal Zone, and came under the 5th Division, the Camerons going forward to a box at Belhamed; the other two battalions remaining for the present in the frontier area.

The Camerons came under the command of the 10th Indian Brigade. It is difficult to believe that the dispersion of the two great Indian Divisions in this way was advantageous.

On June 1st (by which time the prospect for us had already darkened) the Intelligence Summary of Eighth Army Command announced that the Ariete Division had been repulsed in an attack on Bir Hacheim, that it was being driven west by the 1st and 2nd Armoured Brigades, and that the 90th Light Division near El Adem had been scattered by the 4th Armoured Brigade. It was estimated that 150 enemy tanks had been knocked out and that as many more, much damaged, were immobilised by the British minefield north of Knightsbridge. There were indications that the enemy was trying to escape westward, but it was known that large bodies of Germans were cut off east of the minefields. 'Evening fell with the enemy in utter disorder as the result of air and ground attacks.'

This disastrous optimism recalled the equally disastrous optimism at the beginning of operation *Crusader* in November 1941.

No reflection is cast upon Mr Churchill's leadership by observing that it was sometimes a pity the prefects were so anxious to please the headmaster.

However, whether the enemy was routed or whether he was merely reorganising after the first miscarriage in his plan of attack, it was essential to counter-attack him at the earliest possible moment. Auchinleck strongly urged this upon Ritchie who proposed that the 1st South African and the 50th Divisions with all the heavy tanks should attack and secure Tmimi and Afrag, after which the 5th Indian Division was to pass through into the Djebel Akhdar and the armoured divisions were to move toward Mechili. This counter-attack was timed for the night of May 31st, but both the corps commanders asked for another 24 hours in which to prepare their forces. During May 31st it became perfectly clear that the enemy had no intention of withdrawing; but it was not known how desperate his situation was without food, without water, and without petrol, the barges carrying which having been sunk off the Gazala headland. The release of the Indian prisoners on that account will be remembered. On the evening of May 31st Rommel was even facing the prospect of capitulation within the next 24 hours unless his convoys could get through. A counter-attack at that moment must have been successful. Ritchie, however, could by now muster only about 220 medium tanks; the enemy had as many panzers and these more powerful. Moreover, he feared a threat to Tobruk and the rear of his army while the counter-offensive was in progress.

The 150th Brigade of the Northumbrian Division was in a box at Sidi Muftah about 15 miles west of Sidi Rezegh and within the enemy concentrations. Ritchie therefore decided to establish two more brigade boxes inside the enemy's anti-tank screen and thus provide the artillery with positions from which to shell the enemy's concentrations and the armour with a way through which they could pass to take the enemy in the rear. This was to be the preliminary to a general counter-offensive.

Unfortunately that night the enemy cut two lines through the minefield some 10 miles apart on either side of the 150th Brigade's box and at dawn he attacked with armour and lorried infantry. The 1st Army Tank Brigade was despatched to the rescue, but by noon the 150th Brigade had been destroyed and with it a considerable part of the 1st Army Tank Brigade.

Ritchie did not seem to grasp the full seriousness of the destruction of the 150th Brigade, for on June 3rd Auchinleck was writing to him from Cairo:

> I am glad you think the situation is still favourable to us and that it is improving daily. All the same I view the destruction of 150th Brigade and the consolidation by the enemy of a broad and deep wedge in the middle of your position with some misgiving. I am sure, however, there are factors known to you which I do not know.

Auchinleck was particularly worried by what seemed to him the 'undue dispersion of the 5th Indian Division,' and considered that 'one infantry division, at least, should be held in reserve to provide a strong striking force.'

Ritchie did not feel able to carry out any of the suggestions that Auchinleck put forward for a counter-offensive and he finally decided to make a direct assault on the enemy's wedge.

The two gaps in the minefield known as Peter and Paul, with an island of mines between them and the country east, formed the disagreeably famous Knightsbridge cauldron. A defensive position east of it was now urgently called for, and the 29th Indian Brigade was moved up from El Gubi into the El Adem box, a fortified ridge about 15 miles east of Knightsbridge. The 9th and 10th Indian Brigades were moved south from the Tobruk area by June 4th to help in the establishment of two boxes opposite Peter and Paul. The northern of these was to be placed at Bir el Tamar, three miles west of Knightsbridge, the southern was to be about 10 miles to the south-west, two miles west of Bir el Harmat. The 1st Duke of Cornwall's

Light Infantry from the 21st Brigade of the 10th Indian Division just arrived from Iraq and half a battalion of the Royal Northumberland Fusiliers were to reinforce the two Indian Brigades. The artillery consisted of the 157th Field Regt and the 107th Royal Horse Artillery together with the 4th Royal Tank Regt. The whole operation was under the command of Major-General Messervy and the 2nd and 22nd Armoured Brigades from Lumsden's 1st Armoured Division were to co-operate with the 7th Armoured Division.

The 10th Division, to the command of which Major-General T. W. Rees had succeeded Lieut.-General Slim, had been ordered to Libya in mid-May and it made the formidable journey of 1,500 miles across the desert in a fortnight, to concentrate by the beginning of June at the Halfaya Pass. The Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry was sent forward at once to the Cauldron, and the other two battalions of the 21st Brigade now commanded by Brigadier J. J. Purves (Sikh Regt) remained to guard the routes over the escarpment into Egypt; these were the 2/4th Gurkha Rifles and the 4th Frontier Force Rifles. The 20th Brigade commanded by Brigadier L. MacGregor (Frontier Force Regt) and now consisting of the South Wales Borderers, the 1st Rajputana Rifles, and the 3rd Royal Garhwal Rifles were sent to these boxes. The 25th Brigade commanded by Brigadier R. G. Mountain (Baluch Regiment) and consisting of the 1st King's Own Regt, 3/1st Punjab Regt and 4th Sikh Regt was concentrated at Gambut.

It was not until 2.50 a.m. on the morning of June 5th that the British artillery opened fire on Peter, the northern gap in the minefield of the Cauldron, and that was at least three days too late.

Three days earlier the 29th Indian Brigade had carried out an expensive operation for the Germans. After the 3rd Indian Motor Brigade's great stand at Bir Hacheim the German commander had divided his panzers into two columns, one of them directed north to meet the petrol barges which never reached the Gazala rendezvous, the other despatched eastward towards Tobruk. A number of tanks in the latter column ran out of fuel half-way between Bir Hacheim and El Adem. Reid asked permission after scouts brought in the news to brigade headquarters to attack them. There were exasperating delays, and some of the stranded tanks were refuelled from the air. However, at last on June 2nd, a column drawn from the 3/2nd Punjab Regt and the 1st Mahratta Light Infantry with batteries of 25-pounders and anti-tank guns and a section of Bombay Sappers and Miners set out under the command of Major Leatherdale of the 3/2nd. The column found 12 Mark IV's and 13 Mark III's

immobilised and the crews waiting for fuel planes. The Punjabis and Mahrattas dashed in to the attack; the crews hurried away in lorries; all the tanks were captured. The tanks were all destroyed and later five more were found. The total bag was 30 panzers, none capable of moving again after those Bombay Sappers and Miners had dealt with them. Without that delay the 29th Indian Brigade might have secured twice as many, but the delay was not the fault of the brigade.

At 3 a.m. on June 5th the 2nd Highland Light Infantry and the 4th Baluch Regt—the old 74th Foot of Seringapatam and the old 129th Baluchis of Ypres—went forward when the guns were silent to a day of great glory and disaster. By 4.15 a.m. the Baluchis had reached their objective; by 5.40 a.m. the Highlanders had reached theirs, having had the misfortune to lose three lorries of troops which had come up against a German battery position in the dark and been blown to pieces.

At dawn the enemy heavily shelled the H.L.I. and Baluch position on the Aslagh Ridge, and the forward company of the Highlanders was overrun by tanks, suffering severe casualties. The 4th Army Tank Bn had covered the advance, but not encountering any panzers it had been withdrawn before the enemy attack.

At 6.45 a.m. Fletcher's 9th Indian Brigade went forward to attack the southerly gap in the minefield called Paul, the 4th Army Tank Bn covering the advance of the 2nd West Yorkshire Regt and a company of the Royal Northumberland Fusiliers. The attackers reached the gap but were at once the target of panzers and 88 mm. guns. The West Yorkshires began to dig in behind the tank screen, but the 4th Field Regt which had been ordered by the 5th Indian Division to support the 9th Brigade was unfortunately sent off with a tank column by the 7th Armoured Division. Thus the West Yorkshires were left in a much exposed position with eight anti-tank 2-pounders as their only artillery support.

The XIII Corps attack in the north was held up because the 69th Brigade supported by the 32nd Army Tank Brigade failed to capture the ridge of Sghifet es Sidra which had been strongly fortified by the enemy during the delay in launching the counter-offensive. Worse, the 32nd Army Tank Brigade ran on an unchartered enemy minefield and lost 50 out of its 70 tanks, so that it could give the infantry no support when they were attacked by tanks. The failure of the 69th Brigade to capture that important ridge was probably responsible for some of the difficulties encountered by XXX Corps by not providing the flanking fire for its attack.

Southward the gap in the British defences became more vulnerable when the 2nd Armoured Brigade was drawn from the southern flank into the middle of the battle, leaving the 22nd Armoured Brigade. As a result of this enemy columns were passing through the gap all day and by the afternoon there were strong columns of artillery and panzers behind the British positions.

When the reconnaissance party of the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry joined the battle, the 2/4th Gurkha Rifles of Boucher's 10th Brigade was able to leave its reserve position in the southern area and move north to the support of the Highland Light Infantry. It had been planned that the 22nd Armoured Brigade was to pass through the southern gap, followed by the 9th Indian Brigade, and secure Sidi Muftah. At 9.30 a.m. the 22nd Armoured Brigade reported that the anti-tank screen covering Sidi Muftah was too strong to force and it moved four or five miles north to the heart of the battle area, it was believed with the intention of passing through the northern gap to Sidi Muftah and relieving Boucher's hardly pressed 10th Brigade.

This project did not materialise and at 10.15 a.m. the order to dig in was issued to the 10th Brigade; this order had already been issued to the 9th Brigade. The line was some miles behind the actual gap in the minefields, so that the enemy was able to bring his armour through and deploy to the flanks. Soon tanks and guns were pouring through under cover of heavy Stuka raids, and enemy armour was operating east of the British minefields on the flanks and rear of the 5th Indian Division.

It was a day of extreme heat; dust devils were swaying about the beige monotony of the waste; mirages flickered along the skyline. This caused a certain amount of friction between the armour and the infantry on accounts of reports by the latter of enemy tanks on their front which when investigated proved imaginary.

At 1.30 p.m. the Highland Light Infantry reported a heavy enemy force mustering for an attack from the north and sent an appeal for help; no help came. At 2 p.m. tanks with lorried infantry crashed down upon the old 74th. The first onslaught was somehow repulsed, the carriers fighting as tanks. Twenty minutes later a second fierce attack was made and what was left of the battalion was overrun. Nevertheless, a few survivors came out fighting and managed to join the 2/4th Gurkha Rifles about three miles behind their original position. With the Gurkhas were two companies and the anti-tank platoon of the 3rd Jat Regt and a company of the Royal Northumberland Fusiliers.

Meanwhile, farther south the West Yorkshires after the withdrawal of the 22nd Armoured Brigade had been surrounded by a band of panzers at a range of some 2,000 yards against which the 2-pounders of the Old and Bold kept on firing until all but one had been silenced. Yet these 2-pounders and the gallant carriers which did some damage to the enemy's armoured cars kept him from closing in. Brigadier Fletcher told Colonel Longran, who would succeed presently to the command of the splendid 9th Brigade in the great days ahead, that his battalion could retire at the first opportunity. That did not seem possible before dark, but the West Yorkshires managed to get out and back with the loss of one company.

Auchinleck says:[1]

> Having apparently been informed that it had no responsibility for the infantry, the 22nd Armoured Brigade did not intervene when the right flank of the 10th Indian Infantry Brigade was attacked and driven back, or when a battalion of the 9th Indian Infantry Brigade, which had pushed forward, was also in difficulties. . . . The enemy then engaged the 22nd Armoured Brigade and inflicted on them considerable casualties.

All through the afternoon of June 5th the 1st Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry with newly issued anti-tank guns was arriving company by company, almost one could say direct from Baghdad, to block the lanes through the minefield that came out near Bir el Harmat. As the Cornishmen reached their fatal assignment they were destroyed company by company by strong enemy formations from the south after a desperately gallant resistance. The tactical headquarters of the 5th Indian Division and the headquarters of the 10th Indian Brigade were overrun.

The tank force which had overrun the Highland Light Infantry carried on south towards the position of the 2/4th Gurkha Rifles, coming under heavy fire from the 157th Field Regt which was behind the island of mines between Peter and Paul escorted by two companies of the 3rd Jat Regt. A fresh position for a composite force of the two Indian Brigades was chosen about 10 miles east of Bir el Harmat, which had been the starting line of that tardy counter-offensive this morning. The West Yorkshires, the 3rd Frontier Force Regt and what remained of the Highland Light Infantry under Brigadier Fletcher reached the new position. Brigadier Boucher was left to hold the front line with the 3rd Jat Regt, the 4th Baluch Regt, the 2/4th Gurkha Rifles, the 28th and 157th Field Regts, and with the

[1] Despatch by General Sir Claude Auchinleck, p. 82.

107th R.H.A. farther in the rear. All these units were much reduced in strength and badly mixed. There was no protection from mines. Tanks were to left of them, tanks were to right of them, tanks were in front and behind with tommy-gunners riding on them. Command vanished in the dust. Messervy and Briggs, whose combined headquarters were practically overrun, luckily managed to get through; Boucher was taken prisoner on his way to brigade headquarters, which was destroyed. Few of the gunners, who fought their guns to the last, escaped. The infantry battled with equal courage and determination. The 4th Baluch Regt was dauntless to the end. Indeed every unit, British and Indian, fought that soldiers' battle in the finest spirit of British and Indian comradeship in arms.

By dusk of that disastrous June day what was left of the 9th and 10th Indian Brigades were withdrawn to the El Adem box. Of the 2/4th Gurkha Rifles one officer and 158 men emerged from the Cauldron, of the 4th Baluch Regt five officers and 190 men, of the Highland Light Infantry a company and a half. The 4th Field Regt had been shattered; the 28th Field Regt had vanished. The only battalion of the two Indian Brigades which had not been heavily engaged was the 3rd Frontier Force Regt. This remained in the El Adem box attached to the 29th Indian Brigade. The other two brigades of the 5th Indian Division were withdrawn from the battle area on June 10th to the other side of the frontier.

On June 7th MacGregor's 20th Brigade of the 10th Indian Division moved up to occupy three boxes covering the Trigh Capuzzo and the important road from El Adem. The South Wales Borderers were at Belhamed east. The 1st Rajputana Rifles and the 3rd Royal Garhwal Rifles were at Sidi Rezegh and El Duda respectively; Wellesley's absence from Africa had not lasted long. The El Duda box was not considered suitable for that kind of defence, and the Garhwalis were moved to Belhamed. Purves' 21st Brigade without the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry and now consisting of the 4th Frontier Force Rifles (Wilde's) and the 2/10th Gurkha Rifles moved up to Gambut half-way between Tobruk and Bardia. Mountain's 25th Brigade consisting of the 1st King's Own Regt, 3rd Mahratta Light Infantry and the 2nd (Ludhiana) Sikhs remained in garrison at the head of the Sollum Pass. Anderson's 11th Brigade of the 4th Indian Division, consisting now of the 2nd Cameron Highlanders, 2nd Mahratta Light Infantry and 2/7th Gurkha Rifles, was moving into the Tobruk perimeter. Russell's 5th Brigade was summoned from Palestine.

The El Adem box on a wide ridge above the plain was strongly

defended by the 29th Indian Brigade with powerful artillery and the 3rd Frontier Force Regt as an additional battalion. However, on June 7th the Piffers were sent off to occupy a small box of their own at Point 650 on the Acroma road, five miles north-west of El Adem, and next morning the 1st Worcestershire Regt followed them to construct and occupy a small box 10 miles still farther to the north-west, a few miles south of Acroma itself. It is difficult to discover the tactical logic of what now seems a wanton dispersion of strength at the expense of a strongly held position.

The British plan of battle was simple and logical. If Rommel's tanks could be shepherded into the north-west, a neat cul-de-sac formed by minefields to the west, the escarpment above the coastal corridor to the north, and the defences of Tobruk perimeter to the east, would hem them in. Behind them a series of 'defended localities' would spring up to complete the cordon.[1]

In the event the proposed pastoral operation was more like trying to put wolves into the fold with a number of sheep-dogs chained up in kennels which, when attacked by the wolves, could not retaliate with effect.

Meanwhile, Bir Hacheim had been almost invested by the enemy's 90th Light Division, and on June 10th Ritchie had to order General Koenig to withdraw with the 1st Free French Brigade escorted by the 7th Armoured Division.

No sooner had Bir Hacheim fallen than the Axis forces moved towards El Adem. On June 11th the 4th Armoured Brigade came into collision with some of the 130 panzers reported to be moving against El Adem. Six Mark III's and Mark IV's were knocked out, but it cost ten Grants and three Stuarts to inflict those losses.

By midnight on June 11th the 90th Light Division was in leaguer about nine miles south of El Adem. The 15th Panzer Division which had been engaged with the 4th Armoured Brigade was in leaguer on its left and the Trieste Division echeloned in rear was guarding the left flank.

The 29th Indian Brigade awaited the attack upon El Adem with the 2nd and 4th Armoured Brigades on their left. Columns of the 7th Motor Brigade with lorried troops from the 11th Indian Brigade waited to attack the enemy's southern and eastern flanks.

On this use of the 11th Brigade by now heavily preoccupied with its defensive duties in the Tobruk perimeter the following comment may be noted:

[1] *The Tiger Kills*, p. 126.

> These columns consisted of companies of lorried infantry, troops of field guns and platoons of anti-tank gunners, They remained in the desert for as much as ten days at one time. Their absence manifestly weakened the garrison (of Tobruk), particularly in the artillery area. If all three columns happened to be out, only one battery of twenty-five pounders remained to cover thirteen miles of front.[1]

On June 12th an attack by the 90th Light Division was repulsed by the 29th Brigade, but the enemy was able to occupy the air-strip to the north. The 2nd and 4th Armoured Brigades had failed to pierce the anti-tank screen, and by nightfall they had been forced back four miles north of the Batruna ridge by the 15th Panzer Division. Next day, June 13th, the engagement was renewed, and that afternoon the 21st Panzer Division came into the battle from the west in which the 22nd Armoured Brigade joined. By that night the enemy had secured two more ridges beyond Batruna and with them a dominating line of posts. Moreover, he had reduced the British armour in the Acroma area to 30 cruiser and 20 I tanks against at least twice that number of Mark III's and Mark IV's; and whereas the enemy could recover his damaged tanks from the battlefield the Eighth Army could not.

It was now a matter of urgency to abandon the tactical position from Gazala to Alem Hamza, and on June 14th Auchinleck authorised Ritchie to pull back the 50th Northumbrian Division and the 1st South African Division. The 201st Guards Motorised Brigade which had been garrisoning Knightsbridge had been ordered to move back to Acroma the night before.

That the 1st South African Division was able to reach the frontier with scarcely a casualty was due to the self-sacrifice of the British and Indian troops in El Adem and the two neighbouring boxes. The withdrawal of the South Africans was also helped by the daring and skilful handling of the 50th Division which moving in a series of wide zigzags across the enemy-infested desert reached the frontier practically intact except of course for the loss of the 150th Brigade.

[1] *Fourth Indian Division*, Lieut.-Colonel G. R. Stevens O.B.E., p. 169.

Chapter 44

June, 1942. Decision to hold Tobruk—the El Hamed and Sidi Rezegh boxes—withdrawal to the frontier—Tobruk invested—the fortress is over-run.

BEFORE the desperate fighting in the El Adem area is recounted it will be useful to present what may be called the mental background as it emerges from various telegrams:

From General Auchinleck to General Ritchie:

Cairo 11.30 a.m.
June 14th.

If in your opinion situation has so deteriorated that you can no longer leave 1 SA and 50 Divs in main Gazala position without certain risk of their being cut off and isolated, then I agree to their withdrawal, undesirable as this is in view of tactical advantage this bastion gives us.

While I realise that our armoured forces have been defeated and are now weaker in quantity as well as quality than those of enemy, I must stress my opinion that the enemy, who so far has won all his successes with two German armed and one German motor divs, helped to some extent by one Italian motor div, cannot really be in position to carry out large scale offensive operations for indefinite period at pace he has been doing. He must, I feel, have lost heavily, and we know his ammunition is short. Moreover we are definitely superior to him in the air.

This being so, Tobruk must be held and the enemy must not be allowed to invest it. This means that Eighth Army must hold the line Acroma-El Adem and southwards and resist all enemy attempts to pass it. Having reduced your front by evacuating Gazala and reorganized your forces, this should be feasible, and I order you to do it.

If you feel you cannot accept the responsibility of holding this position you must say so.

From General Ritchie to General Auchinleck:

Advanced Headquarters, Eighth Army.
June 14th.

I agree that the enemy is not in a position to carry out large scale offensive at pace he has been doing. It is for this reason that I have ordered Eighth Army to deny to the enemy the western and

southern perimeter of Tobruk, the Tobruk-El Adem road and El Adem, and to the south. . . .

Acroma and Pt 187 and Pt 209 have been heavily attacked all day. The garrison and I Armoured Division are fighting magnificently to hold their positions. . . . The enemy are reported to have 60 to 80 German and 60 Italian tanks in this attack.

I consider that Acroma is not vital when the troops in the bastion (Gazala-Alem Hamza) have been withdrawn. That is why I chose the western perimeter of Tobruk as the position to be held. . . .

My immediate intention is to give all I can to strengthen 7 Armoured Division in guns and anti-tank weapons by collecting under them all available motorised units and armour for employment on our southern flank. . . .

This reorganization will inevitably take a few days and I cannot guarantee that the enemy will allow me this time. If he does not and if he overcomes my forces and gets astride the eastern heights from Tobruk, I will be faced with a decision to allow Tobruk to be invested or to order the garrison to fight its way out. The garrison probably could fight its way out, but it would undoubtedly lose a considerable amount of equipment and transport and arrive on the frontier in a disorganized condition. Having regard to resources of ammunition food and water now in Tobruk and in ships in Tobruk, I feel confident that it could hold out for two months on its own resources.

The policy which I recommend therefore with all my conviction is:—

(a) To fight alongside Tobruk and to prevent it being invested.

(b) If I fail, to allow Tobruk to be invested rather than to order the garrison to fight its way out in difficult circumstances.

Reference para. four of your signal. If this is a correct interpretation of your orders, I accept responsibility.

From the Prime Minister to General Auchinleck:

London June 14th.

To what position does Ritchie want to withdraw the Gazala troops? Presume there is no question in any case of giving up Tobruk. As long as Tobruk is held no serious enemy advance into Egypt is possible. We went through all this in April 1941. Do not understand what you mean by withdrawing to 'Old Frontier.'

Am very glad you are bringing New Zealand Division into the Western Desert. Let me know dates when it can be deployed and where.

C.I.G.S. agrees with all this. Please keep us informed.

From General Auchinleck to the Prime Minister:

Cairo, June 15th.

Have ordered General Ritchie to deny to the enemy general line Acroma-El Adem-El Gubi. This does not mean that this can or should be held as a continuous fortified line, but that the enemy is not to be allowed to establish himself east of it. The two divisions from Gazala position will be available to help in this. Although I do not intend that Eighth Army should be besieged in Tobruk, I have no intention whatever of giving up Tobruk.

My orders to General Ritchie are:—

(a) To deny general line Acroma-El Adem-El Gubi to the enemy.

(b) Not to allow his forces to be invested in Tobruk.

(c) To attack and harass the enemy whenever occasion offers.

Meanwhile I propose to build up as strong as possible reserve in Sollum-Maddalena area with object of launching counter-offensive soon as possible.

N.Z. Division already moving should be fully concentrated in about ten or twelve days, but leading elements will naturally be available earlier if required.

Trust information you are getting in my signals to C.I.G.S. is adequate.

From the Prime Minister to General Auchinleck:

London, June 15th.

We are glad to have your assurance that you have no intention of giving up Tobruk. War Cabinet interpret paragraph I (b) of your telegram to mean that, if the need arises, General Ritchie would leave as many troops in Tobruk as are necessary to hold the place for certain.

From General Auchinleck to General Ritchie:

Cairo, June 16th.

Although I have made it clear to you Tobruk must not be invested, I realize that its garrison may be isolated for short periods until our counter-offensive can be launched. With this possibility in mind you are free to organize the garrison as you think best and to retain whatever administrative services and stocks of all sorts you consider necessary either for the service of the garrison or to assist the counter-offensive.

From General Auchinleck to the Prime Minister:

Cairo, June 16th.

War Cabinet interpretation is correct. General Ritchie is putting into Tobruk what he considers an adequate force to hold it, even should it become temporarily isolated by enemy.

Basis of garrison is four bde gps with adequate stocks of ammunition, food, fuel and water. Basis of immediate future action by Eighth Army is to hold El Adem fortified area as pivot of manoeuvre and to use all available mobile forces to prevent enemy establishing himself east of El Adem or Tobruk. Very definite orders to this effect have been issued to General Ritchie and I trust he will be able to give effect to them. Position is quite different to last year, as we and not enemy now hold fortified positions on frontier and can operate fighter aircraft over Tobruk, even if use Gambut landing grounds should be temporarily denied to us. It seems to me that to invest Tobruk and to mask our forces in the frontier positions the enemy would need more troops than our information shows him to have. This being so, we should be able to prevent the area between the frontier and Tobruk passing under enemy control. I have discussed matter with Minister of State and other Commanders-in-Chief who agree with the policy proposed.

Undue optimism must not be charged against Auchinleck and Ritchie. It was clear that London was not prepared to contemplate any withdrawal to the frontier, which after the fall of Bir Hacheim was where Ritchie should have made for as rapidly as possible. Optimism was forced upon Auchinleck and Ritchie. Although the Navy had ruled that Tobruk would not be supplied during another siege, a temporary investment for not more than two months with existing supplies was feasible. A chance must be taken with the Northern Front of Middle East Command. The New Zealand Division had been summoned from Syria. The new 10th Armoured Division was on its way to the front, and there were at least 150 tanks in the workshops which would very soon be fighting fit again. *Nil desperandum.*

When the evacuation of Gazala began on June 14th the enemy persistently shelled and bombed the El Adem box, but the lorried infantry did not press home the attack either against the 1st Mahratta Light Infantry or the 3/2nd Punjab Regt. That night the tanks closed round, and although a few of them were destroyed by patrols they remained between the El Adem box and the small subsidiary boxes to the north-west. On the afternoon of June 15th the 3rd Frontier Force Regt at Point 650 was heavily shelled, and when by nightfall every gun had been knocked out the tanks surged in to overrun the Piffers, only a very few of whom managed to escape in the darkness.

A similar attack was launched that same afternoon against the Worcesters at Point 187, but the enemy's artillery failed to destroy the battalion's 2-pounders and when the tanks came in for the

kill several of them were knocked out. At dawn of the 16th another tank attack was delivered, and again the 2-pounders stopped them. Stukas were called up and for the rest of the morning the Worcesters were bombed and shelled. *Firm* is the motto of the old 29th Foot, and never since the regiment was raised in 1694 was that motto more faithfully lived up to than upon that June day in Africa. The panzers surged in again, and again the anti-tank gunners of the old Star of the Line stopped them. No less than 17 of the enemy's tanks were knocked out. After 24 hours of this firm defence when food, water and ammunition were running low the Worcesters were ordered to withdraw into the Tobruk perimeter where they joined the Sherwood Foresters with the 201st Guards Brigade.

On the morning of that June 16th pressure was applied to the Sidi Rezegh box held by Wellesley's with the 25-pounders of the 97th Field Regt. The four rifle companies were strung out in a semi-circle along the ridge commanding the Trigh Capuzzo, having spent a week digging gunpits and trenches and laying what mines could be spared to them. Heavy shelling continued through the morning, and support was asked from the R.A.F. This was generously given, but at sunset a smoke barrage was put down against the western face of the box under cover of which the enemy, identified as part of the 15th Panzer Division and 90th Light Division, moved in to clear the minefield. As soon as it was dark the enemy tried to rush the box in force. One company's position was overrun, but the others were able to prevent further penetration, and the enemy decided to wait until morning for what he expected would be the end of the Sidi Rezegh box, the fall of which would at once make the Belhamed box difficult if not impossible to hold. However, orders came through for retirement to the line of the frontier, the new concentration of the 20th Indian Brigade to be at El Dbana, 10 miles almost due east of Sidi Rezegh. Accordingly the three companies of the 1st Rajputana Rifles with 12 guns of the 97th disembarrassed themselves of the box and managed to reach El Dbana. It is not clear why the Belhamed box was not emptied that night also; it was now untenable, and could do nothing more to prevent the enemy's encirclement of Tobruk.

All through that same day the El Adem box was heavily shelled, but machine-gun fire kept the enemy away from the wire. Denys Reid had been ordered in the morning to get his brigade out of the box that night. No sooner had the plans been made to carry out what would be a tricky operation, with the 15th Panzer and 90th

Light Divisions between him and Sidi Rezegh, than he received orders that the 29th Brigade would hold on at El Adem to the last man and the last round. Reid settled down to prepare for this, but at 4 p.m. the decision whether to go or stay was left to himself. After patrols had brought in the news of the enemy's strength Reid decided to make the attempt to get through. At 2 a.m. of June 17th the Punjabis and Mahrattas of the 29th Brigade walked out of El Adem in small parties to a rendezvous about 12 miles south in the direction of El Gubi where transport of the 7th Armoured Division was to pick them up. Their own vehicles with the guns were sent on ahead. Some ran on to the mines and blew up, but the guns were got out safely and more than three-quarters of the infantry reached the British lines.

By now the 1st South African Division had arrived in Egypt and the 2nd South African Division was in the Tobruk perimeter. The 50th Division was executing that hazardous withdrawal by a circuitous route. Purves' 21st Indian Brigade had pulled back from Gambut to Sollum. By the afternoon of June 17th any chance of preventing the complete encirclement of Tobruk had vanished when the 4th Armoured Brigade after an engagement with 120 panzers was driven back to Gambut, having lost all except 20 of its tanks. That meant an end of whatever faint hope the Belhamed box had of holding out. Its garrison was ordered to withdraw.

The South Wales Borderers and 3rd Garhwal Rifles left on the night of June 17/18th. They marched eastward across country for eight miles before they got into their lorries on the coastal road and moved eastward. At 3 a.m. when approaching Gambut the two battalions were ambushed by a strong force of German tanks and infantry which had cut the road. A few Borderers and a few Garhwalis managed to get through; over a thousand were trapped. There was no chance here of another Rorke's Drift for the old 24th Foot.

On June 15th Lieut.-General W. H. Gott, the commander of XIII Corps, had appointed Major-General D. Klopper of the 2nd South African Division to command the garrison of Tobruk. Klopper had besides the two brigades of his own division Marriott's 201st Guards (Motorised) Brigade formerly the 22nd, Anderson's 11th Indian Brigade, the 32nd Army Tank Brigade and the 4th Anti-aircraft Brigade.

A cloud of contradictory evidence has surrounded the fall of Tobruk with an obscurity which has not even yet been cleared away. In the first place let it be stated unequivocally that General Klopper

himself was the victim of circumstances not of his own soldierly qualities; it is questionable whether in the general confusion of that disastrous June any commander could have held Tobruk.

Our particular occupation is with the 11th Indian Brigade, veterans of the desert, which held the south-east corner of the Tobruk perimeter. The 2/7th Gurkha Rifles was astride the Bardia road; on its left was the 2nd Mahratta Light Infantry facing almost due south; on the right of the Mahrattas was the 2nd Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders. The headquarters of Brigadier Anderson, who had risen from a private in the 2nd Cameron Highlanders to command the battalion before he was given the 11th Indian Brigade, was near King's Cross where the Bardia-Acroma road crossed the El Adem road above the harbour. With the 11th Indian Brigade was the 25th Field Regt, the 18th Field Company of the Royal Bombay Sappers and Miners and the 19th Field Ambulance. From the sea coast to the El Adem road the sector of the perimeter held by the 11th Brigade stretched 13½ miles. On the right of the Camerons across the road was a composite unit of the 1st South African Division, known as the 'Beer' Battalion.

The western half of the perimeter was occupied by the two South African brigades of the 2nd Division with the Guards Motorised Brigade and the 32nd Army Tank Brigade. It had always been considered that the eastern perimeter was the weak part of the defences, and the distribution of strength may seem strange. The probable explanation is that Klopper who had had his headquarters in Tobruk only for a month did not have time to readjust his defences to meet the situation created by the evacuation of the Gazala position. It will be remembered that as late as June 14th Ritchie was writing to tell Auchinleck that he had chosen the western perimeter as the position to be held. It is not clear when Klopper first learnt how far back the line was going. On June 16th the 11th Indian Brigade liaison officer with the 29th Indian Brigade went off to pay a routine visit to the El Adem box to find it in German hands. Captain Wilson of the 2/7th Gurkha Rifles was taken prisoner but managed to escape and got back to Tobruk. It was only then that General Klopper received news of the abandonment of El Adem and Belhamed. Obviously Gott did not know that El Adem was going, and the changes of orders that Reid received are significant.

It was soon evident that the Axis forces were closing in all round the perimeter, and Klopper still kept his main eye on an expected grand assault from the west. The advantage to the enemy of the eastern sector was considerable because he would not have to make

more than a shallow penetration to bring the harbour of Tobruk and the town itself under his fire, and the fall of El Adem and Belhamed should have made the enemy's approach from the south-east a certainty.

'It was only to be expected that the enemy when he invested the fortress,' Auchinleck writes,[1] 'would turn again to his original and elaborate plan of the previous November for attacking it from the south-east. Realising this, General Ritchie had had details of this plan sent by wireless to General Klopper's headquarters.'

Was not this leaving it rather late?

There was a slight regrouping of artillery after the mobile columns with the 7th Armoured Division returned to Tobruk on the evening of June 17th. The handicap imposed on the 11th Indian Brigade by having to find infantry and guns for those columns has been noted. The 11th Brigade was now given two batteries of the 25th Field Regt, one South African Battery of 25-pounders and two medium guns. The anti-tank screen was illusory, for the light guns were sometimes three-quarters of a mile apart. The anti-tank ditch, at any rate in front of the Mahrattas' sector, was almost equally illusory: it would hardly have interfered with the progress of a garden-roller. The aprons of mines badly needed patching after many months.

On the morning of June 18th patrols of armoured cars reported a strong enemy column of all arms to be approaching Tobruk from the east. The guns of the 25th Field Regt did some damage to the advanced vehicles of this force, and they scattered into the desert south-east. Battle patrols were sent out by the 11th Brigade on that night and the next and always they returned with reports of contact with considerable enemy groups and of a heavy movement of his vehicles along the eastern perimeter.

At 4 a.m. on June 20th all formations were warned by Fortress Headquarters that an attack on Tobruk was imminent, but apparently in Fortress Headquarters it was still believed that the main body to this attack would come from the west.

Two hours later 110 Stukas in flight after flight bombed and machine-gunned the minefields and outposts on the centre and left of the 11th Brigade; these raids were followed by a concentration of artillery using high explosive, and smoke shells to destroy visibility. The Stukas and artillery then attacked targets behind the perimeter while a thousand assault troops with sappers drove up under cover of the smoke screen and cleared the mine apron. Behind them were

[1] Despatch of General Sir Claude Auchinleck, p. 87.

panzers of the 21st Division, infantry of the 90th Light Division on foot and Italian troops in lorries behind.

It was just after 7 a.m. when brigade headquarters was informed that German infantry were within 400 yards of the 2nd Mahratta L.I's battalion headquarters, and that Lieut.-Colonel Lancaster was launching a counter-attack at once with his reserve rifle company, his own carrier platoon and the carrier platoon of the 2/7th Gurkha Rifles. This most gallant counter-attack against the swarming enemy checked his further advance for the nonce but lacked the weight to regain the forward posts.

On being informed of this attack General Klopper told the 11th Brigade that a counter-attack would be launched by the Valentines of the 4th Royal Tank Regt with a company of the Coldstream Guards and a number of anti-tank guns.

Anderson at once went off to get in direct touch with the counter-attack group on the Bardia road in order to explain the tactical situation. There was as yet no report that enemy tanks had passed through the gap cleared in the minefield, and the Bombay Sappers and Miners were standing by with mines to close the gap as soon as the counter-attack had driven the enemy back. Speed, however, was vital at this moment, and there was no sign of the Valentines or the Coldstream Guards with their anti-tank guns. The precious minutes dribbled away. The Mahratta counter-attack managed to hold up the enemy until 9 a.m. Then 20 panzers surged through the gap and splitting into a couple of groups sought the rear of the positions held by the Camerons and the Gurkhas. Immediately afterwards another group of about 20 panzers overran the forward Mahratta companies and roared on toward the gun lines of the 25th Field Regt. The attack on the Camerons' rear had been less successful: the enemy had retired leaving behind him several of his tanks disabled.

At 9.30 a.m.—two hours after Klopper had ordered the counter attack—the first Valentines reached Anderson's headquarters. For the next half-hour they continued to arrive two or three at a time and then moved forward. It was too late to close the gap but the Valentines took up a hull down position where they intended to fight it out with the German armour. The Coldstream company and the anti-tank guns never arrived; they had been given the wrong rendezvous.

Some time before noon another group of panzers entered the perimeter and presently about 60 Mark III's and Mark IV's were threatening the vital road junction. The Valentines of the 4th

Royal Tank Regt were all knocked out by their more powerfully armed opponents, and soon the panzers were engaging the guns of the 25th Field Regt. Many of the panzers were knocked out, but one by one the guns were silenced. At last only two of the sixteen 25-pounders were firing. The panzers were now overrunning the batteries, but the last two guns were blown up before the enemy reached them; the gunners under Major Pope had put up a great fight against overwhelming odds, and in the confusion many of them hid up and escaped captivity. Later on four officers and 60 of these gunners marched in a body 400 miles through the enemy to safety—an astonishing feat of endurance, courage and skill worthy of the heroes of Sidi Breghisc.

After silencing the 25th Field Regt the panzers turned on 11th Brigade headquarters by King's Cross. For an hour the 2-pounders held the monsters off, but by 2 p.m. they had reached headquarters. Anderson himself and all ranks, except the anti-tank gunners, managed to hide in a gully and escape capture. Soon afterwards that stout-hearted Highlander established emergency headquarters on the high ground above the harbour north of the Bardia road. The panzers now wheeled east to attack the rear of the 2/7th Gurkha Rifles who, taking advantage of the broken ground, successfully dodged the enemy and gave him an unpleasant time whenever he came up against them. The Bombay Sappers and Miners of the 18th Field Company were captured, but they had the satisfaction of blowing up a number of Germans that rushed in to preserve their fired vehicles without knowing that several of them were loaded with mines.

Later that afternoon the Valentines of the 7th Royal Tank Regt met the panzers round the El Adem road just south of King's Cross and like the rest of the I tanks succumbed to the heavier armament of the Germans. Some of the panzers went round the head of the harbour to reach the town. The shelling and the bombing increased. The Royal Navy had thrown a smoke screen over the harbour in which the masts of the sunken ships looked like a blasted spinney, and small craft were coming in to take off parties from the beaches under a storm of shells and machine-gun fire. The roar of the installations being blown up was continuous.

Anderson tried to get into communication with his Camerons and Gurkhas, and reports came in that the South African 'Beer' Battalion and the Highlanders were still in position and fighting hard. It was impossible to reach the Gurkhas, but they were fighting on dauntlessly under the command of Lieut.-Colonel Orgill.

A Gurkha officer wrote:[1]

> The men were fairly bursting with confidence. Things were a bit chaotic, but it was war and it was fun. They had knocked everything for a six that had come up against them and had received almost perfect battle inoculation. Their overwhelming sense of superiority did not leave them until the end. . . . Battalion Headquarters was in the front line, protected by runners, signallers and one sorry looking South African six-inch howitzer. The Subedar Major and Subedar Marasindu with the aid of the handbook hurriedly unpacked and assembled a recently arrived spigot mortar. The German tanks which approached us were just as afraid of the spigot bombs as we were of firing them. To fire a spigot mortar, one jams the canister onto an instrument which resembles a blunt marline spike. The bomb hits some unpredictable distance away, precipitates itself along the ground like a prehistoric monster, belching fire as it goes, until it finishes its career in an ear-shattering explosion. At least, that is the way they behaved for us. They scared off any tank that looked as though it wished to try conclusions with us.

At 9 p.m. Anderson, who had decided to move his headquarters into the sector still held by his Camerons, was called to a conference at Fortress Headquarters where General Klopper informed him that he had proposed to General Ritchie that he should attempt a break out, but that the Army Commander had asked him to hold Tobruk for another 24 hours. Auchinleck wrote:[2]

> It was not until midday that news of the attack (on Tobruk) was received at the headquarters of the Eighth Army, and General Ritchie at once ordered the 30th Corps to use the 7th Armoured Division to advance on Tobruk. The Division reached Sidi Rezegh just before dark. About an hour later General Klopper reported by wireless to General Ritchie telling him what had befallen and asking to be allowed to fight his way out. He was authorized to do so and was told than an endeavour would be made to hold open a gap between El Adem and Knightsbridge. About an hour later General Klopper again communicated with the Eighth Army to say that, as the greater part of his transport had been cut off in the harbour area, it was impossible to get it to the troops on the perimeter, who had practically no vehicles.

There is an obvious discrepancy here. Auchinleck's account is based on the report of a court of enquiry appointed by him under

[1] Quoted in *Fourth Indian Division*, p. 173.
[2] Despatch of General Sir Claude Auchinleck, p. 88.

the presidency of General Sir Maitland Wilson a few days after the fall of Tobruk, but he says that 'the exact circumstances of the fall of Tobruk are still unknown.'

When Anderson left Klopper that evening it was the intention of the latter to form a smaller perimeter or rather a defensive triangle until an attempt was made to break out during the night of June 21/22nd.

At 4 a.m. on June 21st Major Abbot of the 11th Brigade went to Fortress Headquarters to get the latest situation report before Anderson went off to the Camerons' sector, and soon afterwards he came back with the news that General Klopper had decided to surrender. Anderson at once went off to obtain confirmation of this from the Fortress Commander himself. Klopper said that information had come in during the night that 150 tanks of the 15th Panzer Division were concentrated on the front of the 4th South African Brigade in the Acroma area with the intention of attacking at dawn. The C.R.A. of the division had informed him that the brigade had ammunition to fight for one hour. The Army Commander had told him to use his discretion. No break out before sunrise was now possible, and as he believed the situation to be hopeless he had decided to surrender in order to save unnecessary bloodshed. He had given orders to all units to destroy their equipment, but all who wished to attempt escape had been told that they could keep vehicles for that purpose. The white flag would be raised on the wireless mast at Fortress Headquarters at dawn.

Auchinleck says:[1]

> During the night, the headquarters of the Army were intermittently in touch with General Klopper, and early on the 21st June learned from him that all water and petrol had been destroyed. He also informed the Eighth Army that the whole of his transport had been captured and on that account he had been unable to break out. An order was circulated to all units in the garrison that a capitulation had taken place and that all vehicles, equipment and arms were to be destroyed; the source of this order is not known.

When Brigadier Anderson was informed of General Klopper's decision he and the officers of his tactical headquarters decided to lie low and make an attempt to get through the German forces that night.

Meanwhile, the 2nd Cameron Highlanders and 2/7th Gurkha

[1] Despatch of General Sir Claude Auchinleck, p. 88.

Rifles fought on. The Camerons received General Klopper's orders from the South African battalion next to them. They refused to believe they were genuine. However, Lieut.-Colonel Colin Duncan moved one of his companies to cover the rear of his position. At 8 a.m. three Italian tanks approached from the direction of Tobruk. A 2-pounder held its fire until the tanks were within a couple of hundred yards and then knocked out all three, the crews being shot by snipers as they came out. Three more tanks approached; these were served the same way. A seventh tank appeared with an officer in the turret searching the battlefield with his binoculars. He was shot and his tank was smashed. Then all seven tanks were burnt. The position was mortared and machine-gunned; the Camerons held on. Late afternoon an enemy lorry drove up the El Adem road within 50 yards of the men from Inverness-shire and the Hebrides. That lorry went up in flames. Aircraft now dive-bombed the position, and a Messerschmitt was hit; with smoke pouring from its engine and losing height the German fighter disappeared. When darkness fell on that longest day the Camerons were still fighting.

Germans tried to explain to one of the outposts that Tobruk had surrendered; the answer was given with bullets. Later on that evening a South African soldier from the 'Beer' Battalion came across to say that he had been sent to get into contact with the commander of this resistance. Captain Mackenzie told the South African to bring along the German officer who had sent him. Mackenzie took him to Lieut.-Colonel Duncan who was assured that Tobruk had in fact surrendered hours ago. When his own capitulation was demanded he promised to give a reply next morning at 6 a.m. The German officer said that attacks upon the position would cease if Duncan would parade with his men on the El Adem road at 6 a.m. ready to march to the prison cages. Duncan gave his own parole, but added that he doubted if many of his men would be on parade with him so early in the morning. That night after all weapons, stores and documents had been destroyed 15 officers and about 200 men went east into the darkness in an effort to escape. Alas! few of them managed to survive more than a few miles, and on June 23rd a column of prisoners was directed to the cage on the airfield of Tobruk. The column halted and came to attention. The pipe-major gave the word, and (was it to the tune of *Highland Laddie*?) the Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders were played into captivity by their own pipers. And let it be added with appreciation that the German guard turned out to salute them.

Years afterwards General Bayerlein would say to Brigadier Desmond Young:

> I remember a Scottish battalion which went on fighting long after General Klopper had surrendered:[2]

And away on the left of those Highlanders, far out of touch with them, Highlanders of Nepal went on fighting till food and water and ammunition were spent, while the panzers waited to come in a few hundred yards away. 'It had become very one-sided,' wrote Subadar-Major (afterwards Captain) Sherbahadur Limbu. It certainly had. At 1 p.m. Lieut.-Colonel Orgill ordered resistance to cease. Subadar Balbir did not receive these orders; he and his platoon continued to fight the Axis forces until dark. The 2/7th Gurkha Rifles had taken the place of the 1st Rajputana Rifles in the 11th Indian Brigade and they were true to the comradeship with the Camerons which Wellesley's had so much prized under Wavell. Brigadier Anderson himself was taken prisoner when he was trying to pass through the enemy lines on that night.

That was the end for 18 months of one of the finest brigades in the world; even from the fall of Tobruk it gained an added glory. For Auchinleck that 21st of June brought as bitter a birthday present as soldier ever received; for the Prime Minister it was an equally bitter awakening when early on the morning of June 22nd President Roosevelt was wheeled into his bedroom at the White House to give him the news that Tobruk had fallen.

1 *Rommel*, by Desmond Young, p. 127.

Chapter 45

June–July, 1942. Matruh untenable—withdrawal to Alamein position —battle for Ruweisat Ridge—Eighth Army again on the offensive—the 6-pounder proves itself.

IF Ritchie had gone straight back to the frontier after Bir Hacheim fell, and if Tobruk had then been immediately evacuated, seeing that its defences were in a poor state and the garrison had been hastily improvised, the Eighth Army could probably have stayed on the frontier indefinitely. However, these decisions are all too easy to make on paper years later.

As long back as February 2nd 1942 Auchinleck had sent these instructions to Ritchie:

> You will hold enemy as far to west as possible but will avoid irretrievably committing your troops to the risk of being destroyed or cut off west of line Sollum-Jarabub.
>
> You will prepare and hold delaying positions on following lines:
>
> (a) Lamluda-Mechili-Tengeder.
> (b) Gazala-Bir Hacheim.
> (c) Tobruk-Bir el Gubi.
>
> You will prepare for defence line Sollum-Maddelena-Jarabub and prevent any enemy advance eastward of this line.
>
> You will retain use of Tobruk for as long as possible, but will not hold it if in danger of investment.

The need to hold Tobruk, however, obsessed the War Cabinet more and more insistently after the fall of Singapore and Rangoon because they were haunted by the nightmare of losing Malta, and Tobruk seemed vital to the security of Malta. Moreover, Tobruk itself had become a kind of mascot to them, the safe keeping of which continued to alleviate any pangs of remorse they may have felt over Singapore and Rangoon.

When on June 26th the Middle East Defence Committee telegraphed to the Defence Committee in London an appreciation of the situation created by the impending fall of Tobruk (it had in fact already fallen when the telegram was sent) and indicated the proba-

bility of having to fall back beyond the frontier to Mersa Matruh, the Deputy Prime Minister sent the following reply:

June 22nd 1942.

The War Cabinet . . . feel . . . that sufficient emphasis has not been placed on the difficulties which confront the enemy in staging a successful attack on the frontier defences. If the fighting on the frontier is to be merely a rearguard action, we feel that the Matruh position may be quickly overrun, but if a resolute and determined defence is offered by the troops detailed for frontier defence, you may arrest his advance altogether or, at the worst, gain time to build up an armoured striking force to operate offensively from Matruh.

To the Deputy Prime Minister the Middle East Defence Committee, with the Prime Minister still in Washington, replied next day with an unwonted sharpness:

We realise only too well the desirability of holding the enemy on the frontier position, and it will not be given up lightly.

It is necessary, however, to realise the true value of these defences in present circumstances. They consist of two main defended areas designed to be held by infantry and artillery assisted by a mobile reserve of armoured troops of sufficient strength to deal with an attack by enemy tanks either round the southern flank or through the gap between the two main defended localities which are thirty miles apart. We have *not* now got the minimum armoured troops essential for this purpose. In their absence there is nothing to prevent the enemy isolating the troops in these defences and destroying them piecemeal. The result would be that there would be insufficient troops for the Matruh position, and these would consequently be speedily overrun. The Matruh position requires an armoured mobile reserve equally with the frontier position.

We need time to reorganize an armoured striking force and meanwhile to conserve our strength and ensure the safety of Egypt. This time we can get only by increasing the distance the enemy has to cover before he comes to grips with our main forces.

The telegram went on to outline the proposed action to be taken and wound up with this trenchant paragraph:

We suggest that you invite Major-General Galloway,[1] General Staff, War Office, to explain to you the effect on strategy and tactics of the almost complete lack in the Western Desert of obstacles to mechanized movement, and the resulting freedom of action conferred on the side which has the superiority in armour,

[1] Lieut.-General Sir Alexander Galloway, K.C.B., C.B.E., D.S.O., M.C.

no matter how strong in infantry or *however* well entrenched the other side may be.

Auchinleck did not like the notion of the frontier positions. He knew that the armoured reserve rightly believed to be essential to their defence held good equally for the Mersa Matruh position which could be isolated all too easily by a movement round its southern flank. However, he did not feel that he could interfere with Ritchie's decision on the spot, although he warned him that Matruh would be no more easily defended.

Ritchie's decision to withdraw to Mersa Matruh was approved by the Middle East Defence Committee and he was instructed to be ready to fight a decisive action round it after delaying the enemy as far west as possible with a covering force. This job was given to XIII Corps, and Headquarters of XXX Corps was sent to organise the defence of Matruh until X Corps Headquarters arrived from Syria, when XXX Corps was to move 120 miles farther east and control the preparation, completion and occupation of the El Alamein position.

On the evening of June 21st Major-General Nicholls took over the command of the 10th Indian Division. There was some resentment among the Indian soldiers when they heard that Sollum and Halfaya were to be evacuated by the following night. Russell's 5th Brigade of the Red Eagles which had been fetched from Palestine in a hurry and placed under command of the 5th Indian Division now passed under command of the 10th Division to take the place of the 20th Brigade, the residue of which was on its way back to the Delta to re-form and re-fit.

Rommel wasted no time in gloating over the fall of Tobruk and the capture of 25,000 British and Imperial troops. By the evening of June 22nd the Afrika Korps was in full cry: the mirage of a triumphal entry into Cairo danced upon the desert air. That same evening the three brigades of the 10th Division, each leaving a battalion as a rearguard to cover the retirement, moved down over the escarpment on the way to Mersa Matruh 125 miles away. The battalions that remained to cover the withdrawal were the 4th Rajputana Rifles (Outram's) from the 5th Brigade, the 4th Frontier Force Rifles from the 21st Brigade and the 3rd Mahratta Light Infantry from the 25th Brigade.

The Mahratta patrols were in touch with the enemy advancing along the main coastal road west of the Sollum box, and the carriers were able to annoy him. By midday on June 23rd panzers were on the flat ground west of Capuzzo, and at 9.5 p.m. the

Mahrattas withdrew over the Sollum Pass to the coastal plain, the Indian sappers and miners blowing the road behind them with full effect.

Outram's withdrew that same night. The plan was to descend the escarpment along the railway near Halfway House. After passing through a gap in the frontier minefield the riflemen saw the flares of enemy leaguers eastward and heard the sound of firing northward, which seemed to indicate that the enemy had broken through somewhere south of Sollum. It was decided to wait until dawn and meanwhile send out patrols from whose reports it was obvious that the road east was cut. So Outram's turned south to reach Conference Cairn where the British armour was moving. The riflemen followed the armour and arrived at Mersa Matruh with very slight losses in spite of encounters with panzers and armoured cars.

Farther south still the 4th Frontier Force Rifles (Wilde's) continued south along the escarpment, and at dawn began to move east, shadowed by panzers and armoured cars with occasional brushes, one of which nearly cost them a couple of their carriers.

The Matruh position consisted of a fortified perimeter round the watering-place, the shimmering blue lagoons of which were an attraction to Egyptian holiday makers in times of peace. There was a more recently constructed covering position west of the town, and the inevitable 'cowpat' about 20 miles to the south on the high ground at Sidi Hamza. A deep minefield ran south in front of the covering position as far as Charing Cross where it turned east and two other minefields ran north from Sidi Hamza to the coast. The gap between these groups of minefields was six miles, the closure of which was entrusted to the 29th Indian Brigade.

Auchinleck had never been much enamoured of the Matruh position and now with insufficient troops to watch the whole length of the minefields and an open southern flank he decided not to stand at Mersa Matruh, but to keep the Eighth Army mobile and stop the enemy's advance in the area between Matruh, El Alamein and the providential Qattara Depression. Matruh itself was to be abandoned rather than allow any part of the Eighth Army to be shut up in it. X and XIII Corps were to remain mobile; XXX Corps was to occupy the Alamein position.

At 2 a.m. on June 25th the 5th Indian Brigade relieved the 2nd New Zealand Brigade along the southern face of the Matruh perimeter, Outram's having the left sector, the 1/4th Essex Regt the centre, and the 3rd Baluch Regt the right. The 21st Indian Brigade held the coastal sector among the sand-dunes. The 25th Indian Brigade was

holding the escarpment and the airfield. Beyond the 5th Indian Brigade the 5th Indian Division consisting of the now very weak 9th and 29th Brigades held the Sidi Hamza box. The 29th Brigade operated two columns—Gleecol under the command of Lieut.-Colonel Gleeson with two platoons of the Highland Light Infantry and a battery of 25-pounders and Leathercol under the command of Major Leatherdale with two platoons of the 3/2nd Punjab Regt and a battery of 25-pounders; these columns were to impede the enemy as much as possible north-west of the Siwa road. Sappers of the 20th and 21st Field Companies helped by others from the 2nd New Zealand Division worked all day and all night to close the gaps between the two minefields.

That evening General Auchinleck took over the command of the Eighth Army from General Ritchie.

In doing this Auchinleck was not actuated by the conviction that he would handle the Eighth Army better than Ritchie; he wanted to accept full personal responsibility for anything that might happen now—even the worst. His mood reveals itself in a telegram to the Prime Minister, now back from Washington, on June 24th:[1]

> I deeply regret that you should have received this severe blow at so critical a time as a result of the heavy defeat suffered by the forces under my command. I fear that the position is now much what it was a year ago when I took over command, except that the enemy now has Tobruk which may be of considerable advantage to him, not only from the supply point of view, but because he has no need to detach troops to contain it as was the case last year.

In another paragraph of this telegram Auchinleck reveals his anxiety about his northern front:

> I am prepared to take great risks, but I must remind you of what occurred in Syria and Iraq and very nearly in Persia early in 1941 when the enemy began infiltrating by air into these countries. Not one of these countries is stable or yet sure of ultimate victory. Quite apart from any question of resisting enemy attack there is always present a grave risk of internal trouble which might well lead to incalculable damage to our bases and oil supplies, unless we have troops at hand to deal with it.

The War Cabinet gambled on the Russian ability to preoccupy the Germans for the next few months; through the breakdown of Hitler's mental communications the gamble came off. Gambles so

[1] Despatch of General Sir Claude Auchinleck, p. 172.

often seem like foregone conclusions when they succeed; but at this date the future in the Middle East was far from being a foregone conclusion to the man who bore the military responsibility for Iraq and Syria besides the immediate emergency in the Western Desert.

And then Auchinleck sent this telegram, evidently in answer to something the Prime Minister had observed to him but not given in his Despatch:

> I believe that practically without exception the troops in the Eighth Army are as determined to beat the enemy as ever they were, which is saying much, and that their spirit is unimpaired. As to accepting decisions brought about by enemy action, we do all we can by improving our tactics and leadership to prevent their recurrence; but as you know we are trying to train an army and use it on the battlefield at the same time. We are catching up, but have not caught up yet. As to using all my manpower, I hope I am doing this, but infantry cannot win battles in the desert so long as the enemy has superiority in armour, and nothing can be said or done to change this fact. Guns and armour and just enough infantry to give them and their supply organization local protection are what is needed. Masses of infantry are no use without guns and armour. We cannot have too many guns or too many tanks, and the tanks must be American medium tanks which can stand up to German tanks and not Crusaders with only two-pounder guns in them, though Crusaders with six-pounder guns should be all right.
>
> I thank you personally most sincerely for all your help and support during the past year and deeply regret the failures and setbacks of the past month for which I accept the fullest responsibility.

And it was to show how profoundly he felt the responsibility that rested upon him that Auchinleck believed it was his duty to assume command in the field at an hour when complete disaster was too easily imaginable and the very Pyramids seemed to be wobbling.

The Axis forces had reached Bardia on June 22nd and next day were south of Sidi Omar. Two columns thrust towards Halfaya, a third moved on Maddalena. On June 25th armoured car patrols came in with the news that 65 enemy tanks with 2,000 motor transport were approaching Mersa Matruh. That afternoon the last train left Mersa Matruh. Early next morning it was known that the 21st Panzer Division and the 90th Light Division were in the coastal area and that the 15th Panzer Division with headquarters of the Afrika Korps was no more than 15 miles behind them. Later on that day the enemy with 100 tanks and 3,000 motor transport had reached Charing Cross, seven miles south-west of Mersa Matruh.

The Sabrata and Trentino Divisions were closing up behind the German spearhead.

At 3.30 p.m. the two columns of panzers nosed round the minefield to find gaps in it, and the 29th Brigade's position was attacked after being shelled. At 6.45 p.m. the transport was withdrawn from the Sidi Hamza box; a quarter of an hour later Gleecol reported that 100 enemy tanks had broken through the mines in the north-west corner and were advancing with German engineers riding on them to tackle the mines. Then communication with brigade headquarters stopped. Leathercol was overrun, but Leatherdale with a few of his Punjabis and guns got away. Gleeson's column was also badly knocked about. At 8 p.m. the 3/2nd Punjab Regt was ordered to withdraw with brigade headquarters to a rendezvous seven miles north-east from Sidi Hamza, one company of the Punjabis and one company of the Highland Light Infantry being left to cover the withdrawal. The box was overrun next day. Many of the men in twos and threes after long perilous hours of walking reached our lines, and all the guns had been spiked when the enemy captured them. About midnight the 29th Brigade was again in communication with Briggs' headquarters to report that a few scattered formations had been collected and were now in action with enemy armour 20 miles east of the minefields.

That evening Russell's 5th Brigade went into the gap between the 25th Indian Brigade and the remains of the 29th Indian Brigade. A patrol of the 3rd Baluch Regt was ambushed, and next morning when the 5th Brigade moved forward to take up positions on the escarpment the 1/4th Essex and the Baluchis were heavily shelled, which made the crest impossible to hold. That afternoon of June 27th 20 tanks broke through the 3rd Mahratta L.I. of the 25th Indian Brigade and crashed on into the position held by the 2nd Sikh Regt before they were stopped. About the same time five tanks with tommy-gunners riding on them overran a company of the 4th Frontier Force Rifles of the 21st Brigade and captured Lieut.-Colonel Morris. Rommel who had been made a Field-Marshal that day by Hitler happened to be in the immediate neighbourhood and the captured Piffers were produced for his inspection. Morris asked leave of Rommel to bid good-bye to his men. This was granted and speaking to them in Urdu he gave them instructions about escaping. As the prisoners were being marched off under an Italian escort a British armoured car suddenly appeared, its machine-guns firing. The Italian guards took cover and the prisoners scattered. Quite a few of them including their colonel were picked up by

a New Zealand patrol and presently Morris was interviewing Auchinleck.

It was on June 27th that Denys Reid was ordered to take up a rearguard position on the Fuka escarpment with what was left of the 29th Brigade, which meant two platoons of the Highland Light Infantry, two companies of the 3/2nd Punjab Regt, one company of the 1st Mahratta L.I., a part of the 21st Field Company turned into infantry, three medium machine-guns, five 25-pounders of the 32nd Field Regt, and brigade headquarters. The orders were to hold this position until it was impossible to hold it without being cut off, when this rearguard was to withdraw to Naqb Abu Dweiss on the edge of the Qattara Depression, that waste below the level of the sea believed by both sides impassable for vehicles, although the Guides Cavalry managed to get their armoured cars across it from Siwa.

On the afternoon of June 28th the code word *Benghazi* was given to headquarters of the 5th Indian Division in Mersa Matruh. This meant that the 10th Indian Division was to attempt to emulate the feat of Briggs with the 7th Indian Brigade five months earlier. The effort of Russell's 5th Brigade to open a way out south had failed. The 10th Division must somehow find a path eastward through four enemy divisions. At 9 p.m., the smoke of demolitions hanging thick over Mersa Matruh, the moon almost full shining over the desert, the midsummer nightmare of that desperate retreat began, westward bound at first where not a leaguer flare was visible and all was still. After a few miles the formations split up in groups and the vehicles turned east to spread out over a hundred miles of desert over which sprawled the enemy, himself near exhaustion. After a night and a day of hairbreadth adventures three-fifths of the 10th Indian Division reached safety.

Reid had divided his diminished 29th Brigade holding the Fuka Pass as a rearguard into three little groups—Gleecol under Lieut.-Colonel Gleeson with a company of the H.L.I. and eight guns of the 32nd Field Regt, Scotcol under Lieut.-Colonel Scott of the 1st Field Regt made up of two companies of the 1st Mahratta L.I. and 12 guns of Scott's own regiment; and Reserve force consisting of brigade headquarters, two platoons of the H.L.I., a company of the 1st Mahratta L.I. and a company of the 3/2nd Punjab Regt.

Fuka was a difficult position to hold because the escarpment could be descended with ease at many points. The only unit between the 29th Brigade and the enemy was the 12th Lancers which was watching the 15th Panzer Division east of Mersa Matruh; Reid could hope that he would have due notice of the enemy's approach.

At 7.30 p.m. of June 28th the 3/2nd Punjab Regt from a position on the escarpment sighted a large number of armoured vehicles approaching. It was thought at first that they were our own transport, but a few minutes later the force was identified as hostile; it was in fact the 15th Panzer Division with 60 tanks.

Sweeping on past the Punjabis the German force divided. Some of it moved west along the escarpment; some moved east; some tanks deployed along the top of the escarpment; some tanks began to descend the pass.

Soon shells were falling among the B Echelon trucks of the 29th Brigade; Reid sent them back along the railway 27 miles. Now 20 panzers came down the escarpment line ahead to overrun brigade headquarters and the Mahratta company near Fuka railway station.

Two guns of the 32nd Field Regt hidden behind a low ridge knocked out four tanks, but machine-gun fire silenced them, and Reserve force was rounded up. Denys Reid and two of his staff lay low, hoping to escape when it was full dark. Unfortunately a German patrol spotted them in the brigadier's truck, and so Reid was taken prisoner. In November 1943 he escaped, and was shortly afterwards given command of the 10th Indian Division then fighting in Italy where we shall meet that tough soldier again.

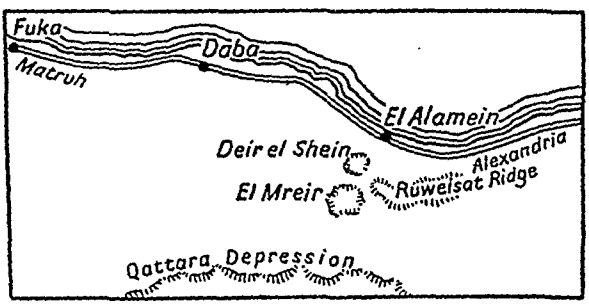
Elements of Gleecol and Scotcol managed to get back to El Alamein, but Fuka was the end of a great brigade and it was never re-formed. When the column of Briggs' divisional headquarters approached Fuka the German guns were shelling the positions of the 25th Brigade. The guns paid no attention to the column, which wheeled away and halted below the escarpment west of Fuka. At 8 p.m. the brigade wireless stopped, and Major J. N. Chaudhuri,[1] a staff officer, was sent to find out what had happened. He returned to inform divisional headquarters that the 29th Indian Brigade was no longer in existence. Being now alone, Briggs asked permission from XIII Corps to withdraw south and then eastwards. Gott was not at hand; his chief of staff refused to let Briggs move.

Briggs waited till 1 a.m. without any news from XIII Corps. He then decided that a divisional headquarters was unlikely to be able to stop the 15th Panzer Division and would be more useful if it lived to fight another day. Closing down communication with XIII Corps, he chose his course and set out by the light of the low summer moon. The column travelled south for 30 miles and then turned east. An hour before dawn a mist came down over the desert

[1] Major-General J. N. Chaudhuri, O.B.E.

and tanks were heard ahead. Brigadier 'Bob' Mansergh,[1] who had just become C.R.A. to the 5th Indian Division and who was to command it three years hence, jumped out to investigate. He overheard one member of a tank crew ask in Afrikaans who they were in front. It was fortunate that Mansergh had spent his early years in South Africa. Any other officer of divisional headquarters would have supposed that German was being spoken, with unfortunate results. The four tanks of the 1st South African Division went on: Briggs and his headquarters column went on too, and safely reached the southern end of the Alamein Line and the 9th Indian Brigade, all that was now left of the Ball of Fire.

Within a fortnight after its great fight at Point 171 the 3rd Indian Motor Brigade had been reorganised and was able to take an active



part again in the operations. On June 11th, much reduced in strength, the brigade had moved up from Buq Buq to the escarpment at Sollum under command of the 7th Armoured Divison. Three columns were formed to operate as part of the Eighth Army's outpost line, one of them consisting of detachments of the Rifle Brigade. The brigade was joined by the 13th Duke of Connaught's Own Lancers, an armoured car regiment. This was one of the two first Indian cavalry regiments chosen for mechanisation.

After the fall of Tobruk the brigade formed part of the rearguard. On the evening of June 23rd when it was clear that the frontier line was no longer tenable the brigade was ordered back to Sofafi. The columns consisting of the remnants of the 18th Cavalry and the detachments of the Rifle Brigade reached the new line without incident. The third column with what was left of the P.A.V.O. Cavalry ran on to an uncharted minefield and in getting out met an

[1] Lieut.-General Sir Robert Mansergh, K.B.E., C.B., M.C.

enemy force by which it was heavily engaged. After breaking off from this encounter the column was bogged in soft sand, but the sowars and gunners managed to extricate the vehicles before dawn. Then the column ran into a strong enemy concentration which opened fire at close range. The column withdrew north-east only to find itself on the wrong side of minefields the gaps in which were held by the enemy. The column came under heavy fire from both sides. Some of the P.A.V.O. managed to discover a way through the mines, but most of the column was captured. The 13th Lancers that morning found themselves between enemy forces north and a minefield south, the gaps guarded. Brigadier Filose ordered the 13th Lancers to shoot their way out in a tricky manoeuvre first west and then south-west through the enemy's forces. In making this wide detour the armoured cars met a hostile column, charged it, destroyed four guns and captured a large bag of prisoners.

After falling back to Mersa Matruh the brigade was relieved and sent back to the Delta to refit. It harboured in Fuka on the night of June 27th, but went on early next day and thus did not share the fate of the 29th Brigade. In February 1943 the 3rd Indian Motor Brigade would be renamed the 43rd Indian Lorried Infantry Brigade. We shall follow its deeds again when we go to Italy.

Between El Alamein on the coast and the dark cliffs of the Qattara Depression lie 30 miles of desert in the middle of which about 10 miles from the sea and a few miles west of El Alamein a narrow tongue of land rises very gradually for about 12 miles almost due east to a peninsula of high ground ending suddenly in a bluff which is a feature of the landscape for many miles round. This bluff lay behind the El Alamein position and was about 55 miles from Alexandria: it was known as the Ruweisat Ridge. El Alamein itself was held by the 1st South African Division; the 2nd New Zealand Division was near the edge of the Depression. Between these two divisions was a gap of about 15 miles commanded on either side by the Ruweisat Ridge. If the enemy could sweep up to the crest of the Ruweisat Ridge that was the end of the Alamein position.

The 18th Brigade of the 8th Indian Division had been summoned post haste from Iraq. It was given most of the divisional transport to travel across the desert to the railway. It entrained for Alamein on June 27th, travelled all night, being severely bombed on the way with heavy casualties, and reached Alamein on the morning of June 28th. Such transport as was available began to move the brigade to the Deir el Shein which was a series of low sharp ridges about four miles to the north-west of the western end of the Ruweisat Ridge

overlooking the narrow depression from which it starts. The 18th Brigade now consisted of the 2/5th Essex Regt, the 4th Sikh Regt and the 2/3rd Gurkha Rifles. The Sikhs were desert veterans of the 7th Brigade. Artillery support was forwarded by the guns left to the 97th and 121st Field Regts which had been fighting all the way back from Tobruk. For two days after its arrival in this arid inferno the infantry of the 18th Brigade dug, wired and mined 24 hours out of the 24 on dry rations and three-quarters of a gallon of water a day. The heat was savage and the ground was very stony. Compressors did not arrive in time to dig emplacements; most of the mines came too late to be laid.

On June 30th the South Africans were attacked in the Alamein box, but the enemy was repulsed. Early on the morning of July 1st the Guides Cavalry, now an armoured car regiment, which had been acting as a screen, reported that large forces of tanks and lorried infantry were approaching the Deir el Shein. The 18th Brigade took up battle positions on a semicircle of about 6,000 yards, the 4th Sikh Regt on the west and south, the 2/5th Essex Regt on the west and north, the 2/3rd Gurkha Rifles covering the rear.

Soon after 9 a.m. the enemy began to range on the Deir el Shein from the south-west, and presently a captured British officer was sent with a demand for surrender. This was refused. An hour later the 2/5th Essex Regt was heavily shelled, and half an hour later 15 tanks with sappers started to open a gap in the all too meagre minefield between the 2/5th Essex Regt and the 2/3rd Gurkha Rifles, and then to help the enemy and handicap our men a dense dust storm annihilated visibility. Under cover of this storm the enemy penetrated the minefield during the afternoon, allowing the panzers to surge through and overwhelm the Essex position. Then they turned on the 4th Sikh Regt; a pair of the tanks were knocked out by the 2-pounders but the arms available could not halt such strength. Four of our 25-pounders were still in action when the panzers overran the guns. Many of the gunners were able to escape because the German tank crews found some beer in the mess tent and stopped to drink it. Many of the Sikhs also got away but seven officers and 500 men were captured. When darkness came the panzers and lorried infantry attacked the 2/3rd Gurkha Rifles which was severely pressed until by good fortune a heavy air bombardment close by gave the rest of the battalion a chance to get out, and make its way across the valley to the South African lines. Six officers and 255 riflemen were missing.

The 18th Indian Brigade was never re-formed, but during its brief life the resistance it made at Deir el Shein may have saved the

line by the time it gained for the organisation of the defence under Auchinleck's unruffled direction.

When what was left of the 10th Indian Division reached Alamein most of the formations with the divisional and brigade headquarters had to be sent right through to the Delta to reorganise and refit as speedily as possible. At the same time, it was vital to form a battle organisation at once. So a composite company of the 1/4th Essex Regt, a light anti-aircraft regiment, and the 11th Field Regt which had received orders to leave Northern Iraq on June 15th and was at Mersa Matruh 11 days later after travelling 1,500 miles and had now picked up enough straggler guns to be at full strength were hastily put together under the command of Brigadier R. P. Waller, the C.R.A. of the 10th Division, and as Robcol hurried toward the western end of the Ruweisat Ridge on the morning of July 1st. In those precious hours gained by the 18th Brigade Robcol was able to become a cohesive formation, throw out lines of communication, and establish a good position on the ridge with well-sited guns. At 10 a.m. the enemy started his attempt to seize the Ruweisat Ridge. For six hours the panzers tried to mount the high ground only to be driven back every time by the 25-pounders.

By nightfall seven guns had been silenced, and ammunition was almost exhausted, but it was the panzers which broke off the action to retire westward. This had not happened since the fall of Tobruk. The Essex company in its covering positions had never flinched under continuous bombardment all through that day.

Early on July 3rd Robcol was reinforced by Colonel Noble with another company of the Essex and the battalion's carrier platoon. Guns of the Royal Horse Artillery joined Robcol that afternoon. Robcol was now being reinforced all the while and presently became Walgroup. The Ruweisat Ridge was held.

Auchinleck, anxious that what had happened at Mersa Matruh should not be repeated with the Alamein box, decided on July 2nd when Rommel seemed to be massing his troops for an attack on the 1st South African Division, to counter-attack from the south. It was a bold decision with the forces and armour at his disposal. XIII Corps was ordered to swing north and attack the enemy on his flank and rear. XXX Corps in the north was to hold its ground and prevent any easterly penetration.

For three days the New Zealand Division with what was left of the 5th Indian Division and the 7th Motor Brigade drove northward almost as far as Deir el Shein. During these days of hard fighting the R.A.F. gave invaluable support with bombers and fighters. The

enemy was now hastily entrenching on his new southern front which was being extended westward to foil any thrust to his communications with Daba and reinforcing this front with tanks and infantry from his northern wing. There were moments of optimism when Auchinleck hoped to 'succeed in rolling up the enemy and destroy him,' but reserves were lacking and all that this bold counter-attack effected was to relieve the pressure 'on our right and centre' and 'give us time to consolidate these important sectors.' By July 4th that splendid 9th Australian Division, worthy comrades-in-arms for that equally splendid 2nd New Zealand Division, was concentrating on the coast behind the Alamein box or, as it may now be called without a rueful smile, 'fortress.' One brigade was temporarily detached to provide infantry for the Ruweisat Ridge.

Russell's 5th Indian Brigade returned to the front line under command of the 1st Armoured Division; it was reinforced by the Rajputana Rifles Machine-Gun Battalion which began a long career of glory with the 4th Indian Division. On July 9th the 5th Brigade with the 4th Field Regt and 149th Anti-tank Regt relieved the 24th Australian Brigade on the Ruweisat Ridge. The 1/4th Essex Regt rejoined its own brigade. The 5th Indian Division now received the 161st Indian Brigade. This had originally reached the Middle East Command as an Essex Brigade; it now consisted of the 1st Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, the 4th Rajputana Rifles and the 1/1st Punjab Regt. It was commanded by Brigadier F. E. C. Hughes (4th Gurkha Rifles).

Auchinleck was convinced of the necessity of retaining the tactical initiative. In the heat and flies of that savage July he imposed a severe strain upon the Eighth Army, but the answer to critics of that 'often abortive aggression' is that the enemy did not succeed in breaking through.

The atmosphere of that time has been well preserved by Captain Antony Brett-James in his admirable history of the 5th Indian Division:[1]

> July saw the transposition from mobile warfare to static, costly, and often abortive aggression in the interests of holding the line of defence. . . . This was a time when the Eighth Army fought desperately to defeat Rommel's forces before they were properly consolidated and in a position to launch a further offensive into the heart of Egypt. Our attacks during this period were hurried and unrehearsed, and became more and more costly in proportion as the enemy dug himself in. Brigades were often set difficult tasks,

[1] *The Ball of Fire*, p. 223.

with little opportunity to ensure that the operation would be successful. . . . During one period of four weeks the Fifth Indian Division had no less than twenty-three changes in brigades, and these involved eleven different brigades, attached often for a few hours, for a night, for a week.

. . . . . .

Failures and casualties, minor successes and minor casualties, confusion and frustration were the order of one day after another. At times the commanders were gripped with the sense of helplessness and uncertainty, the battalion strengths were low, and the general feeling one of alternating depression, elation, cynicism, hope, anger, and pride.

The background at what is called a high level emerges from three telegrams.

On July 8th the Middle East Defence Committee sent a long appreciation of the situation to London in which they pointed out that almost the whole of M.E.F. land and air forces were concentrated in the west, that the German offensive in Russia if it proceeded as successfully as it had begun might mean a threat to Northern Persia by October 15th or if the enemy changed his plans and came through Anatolia a threat to Syria and Iraq by September 10th. To meet these threats there were in Persia, Iraq and Syria portions of two infantry divisions, some partially equipped Allied contingents, and no air forces of any consequence. In present circumstances unless we were prepared to accept the loss of the Delta it would be unpractical to transfer land and air forces to the Northern Front.

In our view the issues before us are extremely grave. If the campaign in Russia goes badly for the Russians and you find it impossible to send us necessary reinforcements in time, we shall be faced with a situation in which it will be necessary to decide:—

(a) Whether our forces and as much of our base installations as possible should be deliberately transferred from Egypt to the Northern Front to secure the Persian oilfields with the consequential loss of Egypt, or

(b) Whether we should continue our present policy and risk the loss of the Persian oilfields.

We have not got the forces to do both, and if we try to do both we may fail to achieve either. We request your guidance and instructions on this issue.

On July 12th the Prime Minister telegraphed to Auchinleck:

We are only too well aware that the Japanese threat to India and our defeats in the Western Desert have stripped the Northern

Fronts bare. You also no doubt realise that it is practically impossible to send six or even four additional divisions from Home or from the United States to the northern theatre before the end of October. The only way in which a sufficient army can be gathered in the northern theatre is by your defeating or destroying General Rommel and driving him at least to a safe distance. If this were accomplished before the middle of September, the Australian and New Zealand Divisions could return to their stations in Palestine and Syria and the 41st Division could be sent to the northern theatre direct. We will send the 56th Division in the August convoy and are preparing yet another division for the East. One British division might perhaps have to be withdrawn from India, if the Russian southern flank showed signs of breaking.

It must be recognized, however, that if you do not succeed in defeating and destroying Rommel, then there is no possibility whatever of making a sufficient transference to the north, and we shall continue to be entirely dependent on the Russian Front holding.

There is no need to assume that the Russian Front will break or that, if it does, any substantial forces could operate in Persia as early as October. Indeed the General Staff's picture was that the advent of winter might prevent any serious threat before the spring of 1943 and even then it would be in terms of a maximum of seven divisions. The Germans would be running serious risks in advancing south-east while the main mass of the Russian armies is undefeated on their front and on the flank of their advancing spearhead.

On July 15th Auchinleck replied as follows:

I quite understand the situation and will, as I think you know, do my utmost to defeat the enemy in the west or drive him back sufficiently far to lessen the threat to Egypt. My aim is to destroy him as far east as possible. Even if driven back, substantial forces must remain in the Western Desert or Cyrenaica to watch the enemy and, if this happens, it would be unwise to look for large reinforcements from the west for the north. In any event the time taken to transfer troops from Egypt to Persia must be considerable. I know you are aware of these factors and I mention them only to make it clear that I understand the implications of your telegram, which appear to me to be that, unless we can destroy the German forces here and so be enabled to transfer troops to Persia, we stand to lose Iraq and the oil, should the Russian front break. Whether this is a justifiable risk is not within my competence to say, but I understand that you have accepted it and that therefore I am to continue to apply all my available resources to destroying the German forces opposing me as soon as possible.

On the night of July 14/15th Russell's 5th Brigade attacked westward toward a point on the Ruweisat Ridge that overlooked Deir el Shein: there was a strong desire to tempt the panzers to try conclusions with the new 6-pounder which at long last had been issued to the infantry. Could those deadly guns have been available two months earlier, many chapters of military history might have been different.

Soon after midnight the 3rd Baluch Regt moved forward toward Point 64 on the right, Outram's on the left. By dawn the Baluchis were on the ridge, but the riflemen who had run into nests of machine guns and wire in the darkness, were held up for some time. Gallant work was done by Captain Mian Khan when the Rajputana Rifles were reorganising in the open. At 9.30 a.m. the Baluchis with tanks in support had overrun a battalion of the Brescia Division. Two hours later Outram's advanced again. Bengal Sappers of the 4th Field Company blew gaps in the wire; the riflemen swept through and stormed the redoubt to overwhelm another Italian battalion and capture Point 64. A thousand prisoners were taken by the 4th Rajputana Rifles and the 3rd Baluch Regt. The New Zealanders came up into alignment and a long thin salient like a poniard was pricking the Axis line. The panzers struck back that evening and overrunning the New Zealand companies next to the 5th Indian Brigade isolated it. Outram's, two companies of the 1/4th Essex Regt and an anti-tank battery were on Point 64; farther east were the Baluchis and the rest of the Essex.

That night the German plans for the next day were intercepted on the wireless. The 21st Panzer Regt would attack the New Zealand positions at 5.30 a.m. on July 16th, and that evening the 8th Panzer Regt and 155th Lorried Infantry Regt were to assault the Baluch positions; this would leave the garrison of Point 64 an easy victim. At once the guns of the 11th Field Regt which had been covering an Australian brigade were swung round to cover the front of the 5th Brigade. A British armoured brigade with 6-pounders from the Royal Northumberland Fusiliers and the Buffs joined the garrison of Point 64. The machine-gunners of the Rajputana Rifles and Northumberland Fusiliers and the 149th Anti-tank Regt deployed in support of Russell's brigade. All through the afternoon of July 16th dive-bombing by Stukas and artillery fire were intensified. At 6 p.m. when the sun was pouring a dazzle of gold into the eyes of the defenders the attack was launched unexpectedly from the Deir el Shein depression on the south-west and west of the salient and at 6.30 p.m. the dust of the panzers rose above a low ridge hardly a mile from the forward positions of the 5th Brigade. The

6-pounders were ready for them and while the infantry lay low in their trenches the furious battle was fought out. Two hours later the enemy had had enough, and he withdrew. When daylight came the battlefield was an encouraging spectacle, strewn as it was with wrecked panzers within 800 yards of the 5th Brigade's position as far as the edge of the Deir el Shein. In fact there were so many wrecks that 'Pasha' Russell became suspicious and rang up the 11th Field Regt to ask for a searching fire. When this started a number of panzers which had been playing 'possum came to life and rumbled hastily away. However, the genuinely dead tanks made a good bag by the time the Bengal Sappers had dealt with them. 24 tanks including a captured Stuart would never move again, six armoured cars had been destroyed; one storm gun, five 20 mm. anti-tank guns, five 37 mm. anti-tank guns, eight 75 mm. field-guns, and six 88 mm. guns had been knocked out. For most of this havoc the 6-pounder was responsible. If only those 6-pounders had rounded the Cape of Good Hope earlier than they did!

At dawn on that July 17th an Australian force raided the enemy positions along the Alamein-Qattara trail and brought back several hundred prisoners in spite of being pursued by panzers. While this operation was in progress Lieut. Nand Lal Kapur led a company of Outram's from Point 64 to destroy an enemy machine-gun post about a mile in front of the position. Half-way to its objective the company came under fire. Lieut. Kapur went forward with one platoon until a number of panzers appeared over the ridge half a mile away. Kapur ordered his men to lie down and with complete sang-froid walked up and down in front of them to the manifest disquiet of the panzers evidently smelling a trap. They opened fire at 500 yards but would not come closer; when darkness fell they retired, leaving Lieut. Kapur to take his company back, having suffered 15 casualties.

That evening the 9th Indian Brigade passed through the positions of the 4th Rajputana Rifles, probing to the west, and on the following afternoon the 2nd West Yorkshires gained 3,000 yards before the panzers could stop them; it may be added that until the 3/14th Punjab Regt joined the brigade on July 21st the 2nd West Yorkshire Regt was the sole battalion.

The 5th Indian Brigade took over the patrolling of the gap between the South Africans on the right and the West Yorkshires, and on the night of July 20th the 1/4th Essex Regt relieved the forward troops of the 9th Brigade as a preliminary to the next phase of what was planned as an ambitious operation. The South Africans and

Australians were to attack in the north, the 69th Brigade of the Northumbrian Division and the 161st Indian Brigade along the Ruweisat Ridge, and the New Zealanders in the south. These infantry assaults were to open the way for the armour, and in the event of a break through the 5th Indian Brigade was to exploit as far as Daba 25 miles west along the coast; there was no break through.

Just before dark Hughes' 161st Indian Brigade and the 5th and 6th New Zealand Brigades preceded by a very heavy artillery and air bombardment advanced along the Ruweisat Ridge and south to open a way for the armour. The advance went well at first, most of the objectives having been gained by dawn of the 22nd. Then the enemy counter-attacked; the 6th New Zealand Brigade was overrun and many prisoners fell into his hands.

An attack by the 5th Indian Division had been ordered by XIII Corps for dawn of the 23rd on Deir el Shein held by the 15th Panzer Division. Briggs questioned the possibility of so large an attack's being carried out at such short notice, and it was modified by confining the attack to an attempt to seize the end of the Ruweisat Ridge, and thus allow the 161st Indian Brigade to widen its base and command the El Mreir depression. The 1/1st Punjab Regt advanced along the Ridge but not so far as was hoped. The sappers and miners of the 2nd Field Company began to clear the minefield under continuous fire and the Valentines of the 23rd Armoured Brigade newly arrived and lacking experience of the desert passed through the gaps in the minefield to strike another minefield. Many tanks were lost and the brigade withdrew. The 9th Indian Brigade was now given the task of gaining objectives beyond those gained by the 161st Brigade. It was already dark when the attack was due to start, and Brigadier Fletcher pressed for a postponement until the following night to give the company commanders of the 3/14th Punjab Regt an opportunity to see their objectives, digging in in front of the 161st Brigade. However, he was told that the attack was urgent and the 3/14th Punjab Regt moved up to the start line at 2 a.m. before moonset. The area through which the battalion had to advance was confused by vehicles, telephone wires, and odd sections of the 161st Brigade. Added to this was a minefield ahead, and by 2 a.m. the Punjabis were not ready. Then a dense mist came down in which the companies vanished, and contact with them was lost. In the end it was 9 a.m. before the attack could be launched. The 3/14th Punjab Regt attacked resolutely to gain Point 63, but the men could not dig themselves in on account of the stony ground. Panzers low in the sand beyond raked the battalion. Lieut.-Colonel Putnam and his

leading company commander were killed. The Germans counter-attacked and the 3/14th Punjab Regt fell back through the positions of the 161st Brigade. The 9th Indian Brigade passed into reserve again and the command of it was taken over by Lieut.-Colonel Longran of the 2nd West Yorkshire Regt.

Auchinleck tried to achieve in the north what had not been achieved in the centre and south; the attempt ended in the leading battalions of the 69th Northumbrian Brigade being cut off, and the brigade's being taken out of the line.

> The immediate cause of the failure of this operation, was the delay in getting the tanks forward to support the 69th Brigade, but the fundamental cause was as before, the lack of enough fresh well-trained troops to keep up the impetus of the attack and to take full advantage of the large concentration of artillery which had been built up in support.[1]

The casualties of the Eighth Army during that critical July were about 750 officers and 12,500 men of whom 4,000 belonged to the 2nd New Zealand Division and 3,000 to the 5th Indian Division. It had captured over 7,000 prisoners of whom more than 1,000 were German, and it had inflicted severe casualties on the enemy in men and armour.

The Eighth Army had done more than that; after a rapid and confused retreat of over 300 miles it had turned to stand upon a tenuous line against an enemy weary but still exultant and headed for victory; it had resisted desperate onslaughts, and it had made possible the victory three months hence of an Eighth Army with fresh divisions, unlimited ammunition, better tanks and unhurried preparation.

Early in August General Auchinleck handed over the Middle East Command to General Alexander. Lieut.-General Gott had been appointed to command the Eighth Army, but he was killed in an air accident within 24 hours of his appointment and the command of the Eighth Army was given to Lieut.-General B. L. Montgomery.[2] To that Army General Auchinleck addressed this parting Order of the Day:

> It has been a great honour to have held direct command of the Eighth Army for nearly two months, and it is with great personal regret that I now leave you on the arrival of your new Army Commander. During these weeks you have stopped the enemy;

[1] Despatch of General Sir Claude Auchinleck, p. 96.
[2] Field-Marshal Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, K.G., G.C.B., D.S.O.

and, in spite of your heavy losses and the inevitable disorganization consequent on a rapid withdrawal from the frontier, you have forced him on the defensive, taken ten thousand prisoners from him and destroyed or captured many of his guns, vehicles and other equipment. You will, I know, join me in acknowledging the great and glorious part our air forces have played in helping us to achieve these results. Without their aid the story would have been very different. I thank you with all my heart for the magnificent way in which you have responded to the heavy calls I have made on you and for your unfailing cheerfulness and tenacity in the worst circumstances. I know you will continue in the same fine spirit and determination to win under your new Commander. I wish you luck and speedy and complete victory.

It was now decided to separate the command of the true Middle East from the pseudo-Middle East, and the command of the Ninth and Tenth Armies; the latter to be known as Paiforce, was offered to General Auchinleck.

After due consideration Auchinleck decided that he could not accept this command:

> I have studied the report of the Committee on the implication of setting up an independent command in Iraq-Persia and I consider it makes the best of a bad case. Its conclusions and recommendations make it very obvious that the working of the scheme in practice must depend on compromise in practically every sphere of activity to an excessive degree. It is also clear that the Commander-in-Chief in Iraq-Persia will have to depend on the machinery at the disposal of his colleague in Cairo to an extent which cannot fail to place him in a subordinate position to the latter and so bring about again the situation which I understand the scheme is expressly designed to avoid.
>
> I do not myself think that the scheme is workable in practice, and I feel that there is a grave risk of its breaking down under the stress of active operations. I do not therefore feel able to accept the responsibility of this new Command, and I have informed the Minister of State accordingly.

In the event the resistance of Stalingrad foiled German hopes in Iraq and Persia, and after being unemployed for nearly a year Auchinleck went back to become Commander-in-Chief in India and in that capacity to forge the weapon which Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten and General Slim were to plunge into the heart of Japan.

Chapter 46

1942–1944. Organisation of Paiforce in Persia and Iraq—disposition of forces to counter possible German invasion—progress in building up bases—achievements of Indian units.

THE decision to make Persia and Iraq a separate command was taken after the visit of the Prime Minister and General Sir Alan Brooke,[1] the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, to Cairo in August 1942. When General Sir Claude Auchinleck felt unable to accept that command it was offered to General Sir H. Maitland Wilson[2] who assumed his appointment on August 21st 1942 and on September 15th opened his General Headquarters in Baghdad as G.O.C.-in-C. of what was now called Paiforce or P.A.I.C. If the whole strategic conception of the Near East and the Middle East had not been blurred in 1939 by calling them both the Middle East Wilson's Command could have been given its right name of Middle East. Auchinleck may or may not have been right to refuse that command, but it is permissible to speculate that if the Cairo Command had been called as it should have been the Mediterranean or the Levant Command he would not have become so much imbued with the notion that the true Middle East was inseparable from the Middle East Command.

The task entrusted to Wilson was to secure at all costs, from land and air attack, the oilfields and oil installations in Persia and Iraq upon which the Allied war effort everywhere outside the United Kingdom and the United States depended, and furthermore to ensure the transport from the Persian Gulf ports of supplies to Russia to the maximum extent possible without jeopardising the fulfilment of his primary task.

To carry out that primary task Wilson had in September 1942 the 6th and 8th Indian Divisions and the 31st Armoured Division.

The two infantry divisions were each a brigade shy and also deficient in artillery, engineers and signals. The armoured division had no medium tanks. All three were short of transport. Corps artillery, anti-aircraft and administrative units lacked almost

[1] Field-Marshal Viscount Alanbrooke of Brookeborough, K.G., G.C.B., O.M. D.S.O.

[2] Field-Marshal Lord Wilson of Libya and Stowlangtoft, G.C.B., G.B.E., D.S.O.

entirely what they required. The vital network of signal lines for the control and maintenance of operations over so large an area had been planned and started by Tenth Army Headquarters which under the selfless, energetic and skilful leadership of General Quinan had tackled that and many another formidable task. It was not the fault of anybody in that difficult Middle East Command that this network was still incomplete; nor that there was a grave shortage of second- and third-line vehicles and that many of those in existence were crocks. One company of the Indian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers whose recognised job was to maintain 600 vehicles was in the event maintaining 2,000 vehicles over 850 miles of road. The rich flow of Lend-Lease vehicles in the future was as yet hardly a trickle.

The 5th British Division and the 7th Armoured Brigade of Burma fame were released by India in spite of the menacing situation there, and by September the 5th British Division was beginning to arrive. The 56th London Division was diverted to Paiforce; the 5th Indian Division and the 3rd Carpathian Polish Division were promised from Middle East Command. Polish troops at long last released from Russia were being organised, equipped and trained, but many were still suffering from the strain of their bitter experience.

Meanwhile, Wilson had to make the best use of the two Indian infantry divisions and the Indian motor brigade at his immediate disposal. His first job was to stop a rapid German penetration of Persia as far as Tehran and Hamadan which would allow the enemy to attack the oilfields from the air. He lacked sufficient forces to fight a successful battle if the Germans invaded Persia in strength, and it was planned to delay their advance as long as possible, south and east of a defensive line based on taking the best advantage of the ground. Wilson's first step was to send forward to the River Araxes such mobile forces as he would be able to maintain out of his extremely limited resources.

It was essential to carry out a comprehensive reconnaissance of the country in North Persia, but unfortunately owing to the suspicious obstructiveness of the Soviet authorities, unprepared for concerted planning or mutual co-operation, this was impossible. However, on what information was available, it was judged that the mountain passes of Chalus and Manjil leading from the coast of the Caspian Sea to Tehran and Kazvin respectively would offer the best chance of defence. The mountainous country about Mianeh astride the Tabriz-Tehran road was also suitable for defence. If the enemy avoided these routes or extended his advance to the west the moun-

tains south of Senna and the passes leading from Lake Urmia to Northern Iraq would provide a suitable terrain for resistance. Farther south and west General Quinan had chosen a final line of defence which had been prepared by troops of the Tenth Army; this had been another urgent and intricate task.

There were hardly any localities in Northern Persia where the enemy could construct airfields quickly, but there was an awkwardly level area in the valley between Ardebil and Tabriz and another round Denkoran on the Caspian coast. Moreover, south of this the country about Kazvin, Tehran and Hamadan was dangerously accommodating for airfields. This country would have to be held at all costs to allow the R.A.F. to provide fighter cover for the troops in action in the north and bombers to attack the enemy's communications. If the airfields were lost the enemy would enjoy what might well prove a fatal advantage.

In these circumstances the only feasible plan was to hold a defensive line north and east across the enemy's lines of approach and maintain a mobile force on the Araxes.

By the end of September the toughening of the Russian resistance to the German advance made a winter campaign in North Persia appear improbable, and the earliest conceivable date by which the Germans could reach the Araxes was estimated to be November 15th. Wilson was able to move the troops in the Persian highlands round Hamadan and Kermanshah to the milder climate of Iraq and thus by lightening the strain on the transport not to interfere with the flow of supplies to Russia. So the force in Persia was reduced to one division and one motor brigade stationed at Qum and Andimishk respectively; the rest of Paiforce were sent to winter training locations on the Iraq railway.

The successful Second Battle of Alamein disposed of any winter campaign by the Germans in North Persia, and after that the earliest date for the possible thrust was put at April 15th 1943, while the maximum force it was estimated that the Germans could deploy south of the Araxes was five or six divisions.

Wilson received the 5th Indian Division as reinforcement before the end of the year, and by agreement with the Government of Iraq the divisions of the Iraqi Army were to be used for the defence of the country against a German threat.

Wilson formed two British and two Indian Divisions into two Corps—III Corps and XXI Indian Corps—the latter being commanded by Lieut.-General Sir Mosley Mayne. Both these corps, together with the 31st Indian Armoured Division commanded by

Major-General R. H. Wordsworth (6th Duke of Connaught's Own Lancers) and the 10th Indian Motor Brigade were placed under command of the Tenth Army. The 5th Indian Division (9th and 161st Brigades) and the Polish Corps with the 7th British Armoured Brigade were held in general reserve. The possibility of a German thrust through Anatolia had already been foreseen by Auchinleck and the plan to counter it provided for the use of the Tenth Army in North Iraq.

It could be claimed that on paper planning had done all that was possible to meet a German invasion of Persia, Iraq or Anatolia. Nevertheless, the whole comprehensive plan had to be based on the assumption that troops could be moved to the area of operations whenever an emergency demanded them and that when they had been moved it would be possible to supply and maintain them. In grim fact the existing administrative organisation was inadequate and must have collapsed under the strain it was proposed to place upon it. Wilson concentrated on the task of having his base and lines of communication ready by the end of March 1943: it was a Herculean labour. As matters were, supplies for the Tenth Army if it were operating in North Persia would mean that 2,000 tons of supplies daily would have to be unloaded at Basra, carried by barges across the Shatt-el-Arab and reloaded on rail in the Persian ports. Auchinleck, anticipating this contingency, had authorised the construction at Tanuma opposite Basra of a lighter quay linked to the Persian railway, and he had also ordered materials from India for a bridge of boats. However, when Paiforce was constituted the lighter quay was still being constructed and the prospect of materials from India arriving in time for the bridge of boats was not encouraging. Therefore Wilson put in hand the construction of a wooden pile bridge across the Shatt-el-Arab which would provide rail and road access from the depôts in Iraq to the Persian railway system and as he hoped enable him to maintain operations in North Persia from base depôts in South Iraq.

We may feel grateful that the Germans never reached Persia. The ports of Khurramshah and Bandar Sharpur were not near completion. The Army bases were at the very beginning of their development. The aerodromes for the R.A.F. were still rudimentary. The railway lacked locomotives and rolling stock. Skilled labour for the repair of vehicles and weapons was far from nearly enough. Plants and materials were always about to arrive but seldom arrived. Supplies for Russia were considered top priority and the Army's needs were starved to feed the flow. The long communications of the Tenth

Army demanded the establishment forward of advanced workshops for the repair of tanks, guns and vehicles, the provision of hospitals, convalescent depôts, reinforcement camps and much besides. In the event all these were held back in Iraq to allow the supplies to go to Russia.

Wilson's construction programme included over 250,000 square feet of workshop space, but after all available local resources had been tapped the supply of skilled labour fell short of the Army's requirements by 15,000 men. What could have been achieved without the efforts of the Indian Pioneers and the Indian Army Service Corps puts no strain upon the mind to imagine; it would have been as little more than nothing as does not matter.

The original Expeditionary Force to Persia and Iraq having been drawn from India was Indian in character and organisation. With the arrival of many units of the British Army the organisation had to change to fit in with the British system.

In view of the fact that the Germans never did succeed in testing the preparations made for their reception in the true Middle East no further space will be given up to recounting the details of them. The 5th Indian Division would in due course go eastward to win much glory in Arakan, Burma and Java. The 8th Indian Division and the 10th Indian Division would in due course go westward to win equal glory in Italy. Only the 6th Indian Division would remain for the rest of the war in Iraq and Persia. Its badge was an elephant, and the job done by the officers, V.C.O.'s, N.C.O.'s and men of that division was an elephant's job. The fortunes of war treated them hardly, but the value of their service was inestimable, and although no battles were fought over the area they guarded that 6th Indian Division can claim that the enemy's failure to put them to the test of action was the major failure of his strategy which led inevitably to the ultimate failure of Germany to win the Second World War. This is not to ignore Stalingrad and the two battles of Alamein or not to recognise that without the sublime defence of Stalingrad, without the thin line that never broke from Alamein to the Qattara Depression, and without the mighty onslaught that thin line rendered possible to a reinforced and well-equipped Eighth Army the Germans might have invaded Iraq and Persia all too successfully. Such recognition does not detract from the achievement of Paiforce and no man that served in Paiforce should feel that the part he played in history was a less important part than that played by others.

Let the following very brief record of what was done by the 16th Lines of Communications Column in operating Aid to Russia from

December 1942 to March 1944 serve as typical of India's effort in that theatre of war.

The 16th Transport Column consisted of one general transport company of the Royal Army Service Corps, the Mysore General Purposes Transport Company of the Royal Indian Army Service Corps, the Jodhpur G.P.T. Company R.I.A.S.C. and eight more G.P.T. companies of the Royal Indian Army Service Corps.

The convoys worked from Andimeshk in South Persia at first, but afterwards from Khanaquin in Iraq. The loads they carried were handed over at the Russian railhead at Tabriz in North Persia. The route from Khanaquin to Tabriz was 700 miles in length, and included four major mountain passes—the Paitak Pass (3,300 feet), the Shah Pass (7,200 feet), the Avey Pass (7,700 feet) and the Shibli Pass (6,400 feet). The total mileage run by the 16th Transport Column was something over 16,000,000 miles. Some platoon convoys made 15 road trips—that is to say over 20,000 miles—without any break except the normal turn-round time at each end of the route. The temperature varied from 125° F. in the south during summer to 10° F. in the north during winter. In December 1942 one convoy during the first four days of the northward journey experienced a fall in temperature from 106° F. to 19° F.

Eighty-seven degrees in four days, and a high proportion of those drivers were South Indians.

Yet in spite of feats of endurance like this it was impossible to maintain the rate of supplies promised to Russia and in the autumn of 1942 Major-General D. H. Connolly arrived from America to assume his appointment as Commanding General, United States Persian Gulf Service Command, entrusted with the operation of the ports and railways in Persia and a great fleet of vehicles to supplement the road transport services. It is unnecessary to add that the Americans carried out the job with a generosity and efficiency that roused the admiration of all.

But the Indian sappers and miners were not overshadowed. After the Americans had built a great road from Khorramshahr to Andimishk to carry the oil supplies the Karun was still an obstacle to the trucks. Pontoons were brought from Basra, and a field company of Indian sappers and miners in four days built what was then the longest boat bridge in the world. It was 950 feet long and those Indian sappers had never seen this kind of equipment until they set to work with it to construct a bridge that, day in day out, for two years carried a thousand vehicles across it.

Chapter 47

October, 1942–March, 1943. Second Battle of Alamein—dispersal of Indian formations—Rommel stands at Mareth—4th Indian Division re-united and again poised for the attack.

ON the Ruweisat Ridge during that August the 5th Indian Brigade had a most unpleasant time. It has been well described by Lieut.-Colonel G. R. Stevens:[1]

> Except in a few sandy hollows, there was no cover. A slit trench could only be cut with an air drill out of solid stone, or blasted with high explosives. A shallow saucer-shaped sangar preserved the appearance rather than the reality of protection. The sun beat upon the solid rock and the glare struck the eyes like a knife. Every passing vehicle ploughed dust into the air, to choke mouth and nostrils and to reveal movement to the enemy. Water and fuel were precious and were issued sparingly. Labour, on the other hand, was unsparing; always there were loads to carry, mines to lay, wires to string. At the rocky tip of the ridge, where stony pimples gave the enemy spy-ground, there was always bickering, always shellfire or panzers threatening, always Stukas swimming out of the west, with the rhythmic pumping of the Bofors as prelude and the monstrous blast and leaping cloud as they struck. Yet these dangers and discomforts were less than the horror of the clotted masses of flies which maintained their filthy siege as long as warmth was in the air. This living carrion pestered men to the limits of their endurance.

Toward the end of the month Rommel, as Auchinleck had foreseen, was compelled to make a last desperate attempt to break through to the Delta. He had been reinforced by German formations from Crete and the Italian Folgore Division which was as good as Italy could produce. The main thrust of the offensive struck at the Alam el Halfa position which was held by the newly arrived 44th Division, with the Free French and the Greek Brigade. This had been prepared for defence by Auchinleck as far as his resources allowed, and Montgomery had immediately realised its importance. Behind the infantry were four almost complete armoured divisions and a wealth of 6-pounders. Rommel's thrust was blunted immediately. In a diversionary attack the Bologna Division penetrated the

[1] *Fourth Indian Division*, p. 186.

console ourselves with the thought of the great days ahead for the Red Eagles in Tunis and Italy, for the Ball of Fire in Arakan, Assam and Burma. Tuker and Briggs were still in the discouraging present.

Two days after the 7th Brigade arrived in Egypt from Cyprus Headquarters Company of the 1/2nd Gurkha Rifles was being instructed in live mines when an instructor pressed a plunger and exploded a charge of mines in the middle of his pupils, 65 of whom were killed and 85 seriously wounded. This catastrophe meant that the specialist sections of the battalion were no more. Yet when the 7th Indian Brigade relieved the 9th Indian Brigade on September 1st the 1/2nd Gurkha Rifles had already improvised mortar, carrier and anti-tank platoons.

On October 14th Brigadier A. W. Holworthy (7th Gurkha Rifles) took over the command of the 7th Brigade from Brigadier J. A. Finlay (Sikh Regiment) who himself took over Holworthy's 10th Indian Brigade which was now with the 10th Indian Division in Iraq commanded by Major-General Blaxland.

Tuker worked off his feelings about the splitting up of his division in an Order of the Day:[1]

> Fourth Division has taken the field again. We have much to avenge on the enemy—the losses inflicted on 7 Brigade about Benghazi and our comrades lost in Tobruk. Every single fighting NCO and man will not rest until he knows that he has killed or captured six of the enemy. Each platoon must destroy its tank, each field and anti-tank gun must have its four tanks, each light AA gun its aircraft.
>
> The eyes of the Army are upon us. Dominion and American troops are closely watching us. Let us show the Italians that it is of no avail to struggle against us; the Germans that they can never hope to stand against our fury in battle.

However, when early in October the plan for the Second Battle of Alamein was confided to divisional commanders it transpired that the 4th Indian Division had been given a subsidiary part; it was disappointing that they who had had such a long and bitter experience of fighting with inadequate arms should be sidetracked for divisions who were comparatively late arrivals on the scene.

Neither for operation *Crusader* in November 1941 nor for the offensive in June 1942 had Auchinleck been as ready as he would have liked to be. In both cases the War Cabinet urged upon him the vital necessity of speed. Alexander had to resist the same demand for a premature start, and that he was able to resist it can be attributed

[1] *Fourth Indian Division*, p. 188.

at any rate in part to the resolute prudence of Montgomery. It is worth comparing what Auchinleck and Cunningham had for *Crusader* in November 1941 with what Alexander and Montgomery had just upon a year later.

Cunningham's Eighth Army was 118,000 strong; Montgomery's Eighth Army was 150,000. Rommel could pit 100,000 Germans and Italians against Cunningham: to face Montgomery he had 96,000. *Crusader* by the time it finished, with Ritchie commanding the Eighth Army, had disposed of 60,000 Germans and Italians of whom 21,000 were Germans, for a loss of 18,000 officers and men. At the Second Battle of Alamein Montgomery disposed of 59,000 Germans and Italians, of whom 34,000 were Germans, for a loss of 13,500 officers and men. For *Crusader* Auchinleck and Cunningham had 455 tanks against Rommel's 415, but the reader will remember the inferiority of the British tanks in every respect to the Mark III's and Mark IV's. Readers will also remember that Auchinleck and Cunningham had no anti-tank guns firing more than a 2-pounder. At Alamein Montgomery had 1,114 tanks, including 128 new General Grants and 267 new General Shermans with 75 mm. guns in revolving turrets. Against these Rommel could not muster as many as 600 tanks half of which were Italian. The weight of Montgomery's artillery was at least twice as great as Rommel's.

At 9.40 p.m. on the night of October 23rd 1942, the moon being full, those 1,200 guns on the Alamein front told Stumme, the German commander, who died of heart-failure 24 hours later, that the hour had come. Rommel was away sick in Germany, and when he reached the battlefield on October 26th it was too late. Not that his presence earlier could have affected the result. There was nothing for him to do except get his Germans out by once again sacrificing most of the Italians and that he did.

The 7th Indian Brigade and the 161st Indian Brigade were given the job of holding the enemy's forces in the south by demonstrations of offensive intentions on the Ruweisat Ridge; the 5th Indian Brigade passed into XXX Corps reserve on the first night as a preliminary to an attack which had been planned for the 2nd New Zealand Division. When this was cancelled the 5th Brigade relieved two South African brigades on the right of the Ruweisat Ridge. The 161st Brigade now occupied the centre of the 4th Division's section with the 7th Brigade on its left flank. The divisional front was well over 12 miles.

'Our part is to hold a huge front and make noises to keep the Boche interested. A poor sort of business, but someone has to do it.

I don't think he has moved a man from our front,' 'Gertie' Tuker noted.

Operation *Supercharge* which was planned to give the *coup de grâce* to Rommel after the bulk of his forces had been lured into the coastal area began at 1 a.m. on November 2nd. X Armoured Corps consisting of the 1st, 7th and 10th Armoured Divisions with the 9th Armoured Brigade was to break through south-west and roll up the Italian divisions. Holworthy's 7th Brigade put in a feint attack on the southern flank while northward the armour went through the enemy's minefields. Unluckily the 9th Armoured Brigade in the van struck a well-planted hedge of anti-tank guns and lost 87 tanks—three-quarters of its runners. Montgomery at once ordered a second thrust to outflank this hedge. On the evening of November 2nd Holworthy's 7th Brigade relieved Russell's 5th Brigade which was on the right of the Ruweisat Ridge and next morning the 5th Indian Brigade passed into the reserve of XXX Corps.

At noon on November 3rd Russell was ordered to lead this new attack under command of the 152nd Brigade of the 51st Highland Division on a narrow front behind a powerful barrage. A gap was to be opened in the enemy's minefields two miles north-east of Tel-el Aqqaqir where the 9th Armoured Brigade was immobilised by the anti-tank defences. Through this gap the Armoured Divisions were to drive on followed by the 2nd New Zealand Division to clear up the mess they would have made of the enemy.

The 5th Indian Brigade was required to march 12 miles over unreconnoitred tracks. This would be followed by a night march of five miles to the battle positions. By 4 p.m. Russell's men were on their way, the columns being dive-bombed at intervals. When darkness came the units were moving by these tracks in the soft sand. The transport of the 3rd Baluch Regt was stuck, but the battalion continued on foot, leaving the 4th Rajputana Rifles to take the lead. By midnight brigade headquarters column guided by V's cut in lanterns made of petrol tins had reached the starting line, but by 1 a.m. it was clear that the 5th Brigade would not be deployed in time. Russell asked for the barrage to be postponed for an hour. By 2 a.m. the 1/4th Essex and Outram's had formed up and half an hour later with detachments of Bengal and Madras Sappers and Miners the two battalions advanced behind a barrage of 400 guns on a front of 800 yards.

This devastating wedge of steel moved like a shield before the Essex and Rajputana Rifles. It poured down a cataract which cleansed the ground of every deadly device. One officer said that

it was so precise that his men could have leaned against it; another, that his only casualties were those who followed the wall too closely and became queasy from the fumes of explosives. Lines of tracer shell marked the borders of the corridor which the guns cut. A few short savage fights occurred as enemies, who had escaped the torrent of metal, sought to sell their lives dearly.[1]

At 5 a.m. the barrage stopped for half an hour for the infantry to re-form behind it after mopping up. At 7.10 in the grey of dawn it ceased. The enemy tried to get away; a charge of the Essex carriers stopped the attempt. The 5th Indian Brigade had penetrated the enemy's lines to a depth of over four miles. At 9 a.m. of November 4th the armour went through, the golden sun of the morning behind it.

The Second Battle of Alamein was won.

The Red Eagles began to flap their wings to take off in pursuit, and one flying column with a rifle company, the carrier and anti-tank guns of the 1/2nd Gurkha Rifles with a company of the Rajputana Rifles Machine-Gun Battalion and detachments of gunners and sappers rounded up over 2,000 of the Brescia Division in a day. That was on November 5th. The next day rain fell very heavily and the armoured divisions leading the pursuit were held up just east of Mersa Matruh by the condition of the ground.

Undue caution has been attributed to Montgomery's pursuit, but this unfortunate downpour was probably responsible for the failure to cut off Rommel's retreat. The depressing part of that pursuit for the 4th Indian Division was that on November 7th it was withdrawn from offensive operations and given the job of turning in salvage from the battlefield. The quota laid down was 250 tons daily; the division, hoping to be the sooner in action again, salvaged 1,500 tons every day. There was a lack of imagination in giving this task to the infantry of Sidi Barrani; it strengthened a suspicion that General Montgomery had a prejudice against the Indian Army.

Early in December the 161st Indian Brigade left the division in order to join its own 5th Indian Division in Baghdad, after a spell of garrison duty in Egypt.

On December 10th the 4th Indian Division moved to the Tobruk area with divisional headquarters at El Adem. Here Brigadier Russell gave up the command of the 5th Brigade he had led so wisely and so well to take over the command of the 8th Indian Division. He was succeeded by Brigadier Bateman[2] who had been

[1] *The Tiger Kills*, p. 157.

[2] Major-General D. R. E. R. Bateman, C.I.E., D.S.O., O.B.E. (Baluch Regiment).

brigade major of the 5th Brigade in December 1929 and became G.S.O.I. to the 4th Division at Keren.

The Red Eagles felt themselves in moult as the Eighth Army with all the arms and equipment they had never had moved westward to join the First Army and the Americans in putting the Germans out of Africa; the feeling of resentment grew.

That brilliant gunner, Brigadier H. K. Dimoline, the C.R.A. of the division, who had been lent to XXX Corps for the pursuit and who was not himself an Indian Army officer, wrote:

> The Army Commander's intention is, I think, to employ the Fourth Indian Division in the same manner as the rest of the Indian units in Palestine, Cyprus, and Egypt, *i.e.* as garrison troops, useful fatigue parties for salvage, and as police: namely in the same manner as the Libyan Arab irregulars and the other second line troops are employed.

Tuker was not standing for this. He wrote to his Corps Commander:[1]

> Everyone in this Division is feeling most apprehensive as to its future. We know that this theatre of war—the Mediterranean—is becoming a theatre of United Kingdom and American armies. We feel that there is a good chance that we may thus be relegated to some peaceful theatre of war. We feel most strongly that this Division does not deserve such a fate.
>
> Its standard of training and its fighting spirit are probably higher to-day than they have ever been. I do not think anyone would deny that it is the most experienced Division in the Empire, having been the only formation that has fought at Sidi Barrani, has fought all through the desert and mountain campaign of Eritrea, in the Syrian campaign, in the summer attacks last year in Western Desert, throughout the Tobruk operations a year ago to Agedabia and through the withdrawal from there, as well as having had considerable elements fighting successfully in the Gazala-Alamein operations, and now having been engaged in this recent battle.
>
> Further it looks as though mountain fighting may yet develop. I think we have more experience than most in this sort of warfare. Our men, British and Indian, are tough. The Indians come from the high Himalayas and the Punjab and are used to extremes of cold. The Division is a very seasoned one. Among its Indian troops it has more than 1400 who have been on active service continuously for two years and over. About 75 per cent. of all its Indian troops have been on continuous active service for over a year.

[1] Quoted in *Fourth Indian Division.*

Its British troops have if anything a higher proportion of men who have seen similar periods of continuous active service.

Lastly, perhaps I am allowed to say that Fourth Division has represented India in active operations in the Middle East for two and a half years, not without success. Should it not continue so to represent her in the Middle East.

I do hope that these considerations will favourably influence anyone who might consider sending Fourth Division to some peaceful area. Can we be assured that this will not happen? I should find it hard to explain to my officers and men that they are no longer needed, after all they have achieved and in view of the high spirit and expectations with which they entered these present operations.

General Horrocks[2] forwarded this letter to General Montgomery with this comment:

> Although this Division has only been under my command for a short time I have had the opportunity of going round a good many units. I concur with the remarks in the attached letter. There is no doubt that this is an experienced Division, more experienced probably than any other Division in the Middle East. It is imbued with a fine fighting spirit and in my opinion it would be a tragedy if this fine Division was not given a further opportunity of representing India alongside United Kingdom and Dominion forces.

Neither the letter nor the comment apparently made the slightest impression on General Montgomery.

Toward the end of December the plan *Fire Eater* by which Rommel was to be ejected from his Sirte-Buerat position in Tripolitania was circulated, but no part in it was provided for the 4th Indian Division. Then it began to look as if the wretched habit of scattering an Indian division like confetti was to be resumed. The 5th Brigade was moved to Benghazi where under the command of X Corps it was set to work on garrison duties which included turning 800 men into dockers every day to unload stores at the port.

The bulk of the divisional transport was handed over to the 50th Northumbrian Division. Brigadier Holworthy was taken away from the 7th Brigade to command the Middle East Mountain Warfare School in the Lebanon.

Tuker kept on. When the 3rd Baluch Regt was given a rest he succeeded in extracting the 1/9th Gurkha Rifles from Cairo to replace it. He asked for the re-formation of the 2/4th Gurkha Rifles

[2] Lieut.-General Sir Brian Horrocks, K.B.E., C.B., D.S.O., M.C.

and the 3/7th Gurkha Rifles which had been destroyed at Knightsbridge and Tobruk. He urged the advantage of brigading Indian formations, including many State Force units, which were now scattered all over the Middle East.

Meanwhile, the Eighth Army was moving on toward Tunis, and by an act of kindly condescension a platoon of Outram's and a platoon of the 3rd Baluch Regt which had been acting as guards at Army Headquarters were allowed to march in the triumphal procession when Tripoli was entered without resistance.

In due course the Red Eagles were caged in Tripoli to garrison it, and then in February Rommel stood upon the Mareth Line waiting for Montgomery, having at the Battle of Kisserine just dealt a smashing blow at the U.S. 1st Armoured Division and made something of a mess of the south sector of the British First Army on February 14th.

Alexander was sent hurriedly to take command. The situation looked so ominous that he ordered Montgomery to make a diversion as soon as possible, and Montgomery closed up on the Mareth Line. The 1/2nd Gurkha Rifles had been brought forward by Corps to test the enemy's defences in the Matmata Mountains where they covered more ground in a day than many units would cover in a week; it looked as if the 4th Indian Division was going to be suitably employed again at last. Tuker arrived at XXX Corps Headquarters, only to be told that his division was once more to be used as confetti.

The 5th Brigade was to join XXX Corps; the 7th Brigade was to remain with X Corps; Divisional Headquarters would be under Army Headquarters. Tuker said that if this was to be the way of it he had no option but to ask to be relieved of his command.

Montgomery had preached the following little sermon in an order issued a month before the Second Battle of Alamein:

> A cardinal point in my policy is that divisions shall retain their identity and esprit de corps and that they shall not be split up into bits and pieces which never see their parent formations. Divisions must fight as divisions and under their own commanders.

At the beginning of March 1943 Montgomery at last practised with an Indian division what he had preached for British divisions just over five months earlier. The physician had healed himself.

The Red Eagles were to fly again: they were to be used as Rhode Island Reds no longer.

And here poised for flight in front of those grim Matmata Mountains we take leave of them for a while.

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By 1947 the 4th Bombay Grenadiers, 5th Mahratta Light Infantry, 6th Rajputana Rifles, 7th Rajput Regiment, 9th Jat Regiment, 10th Baluch Regiment, 11th Sikh Regiment, 12th Frontier Force Regiment, 13th Frontier Force Rifles, 17th Dogra Regiment, 18th Royal Garhwal Rifles, and 19th Hyderabad Regiment had all abandoned the numbers given them in 1922. I have taken advantage of this to use only their battalion numbers. The six Punjab Regiments, of course, must be given both battalion and regimental numbers.

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