

One battalion (2 Cambridgeshire) was sent to Batu Pahat and one (5 R. Norfolk) was held in reserve at Ayer Hitam.

352. At about 0200 hrs. 16th January the leading Japanese troops crossed the River Muar at a point a few miles up-stream from the town and by 0900 hrs. had reached the road and established a block 2 miles east of Muar. During the morning some sharp fighting took place in this area. At 1300 hrs. a further collection of barges or landing craft appeared off Muar, some of which were sunk by our artillery fire. Continuous fighting went on throughout the afternoon in the outskirts of the town. By the evening of the 16th all troops of the 45 Brigade south of the river, except for the right forward battalion, were concentrated in the Bakri area and the Brigade Commander was planning a counter-attack to recapture Muar.

Early on the 17th January the Commander Westforce withdrew the 2/29 Bn. A.I.F. from the Segamat front and despatched it to Bakri to meet the threat which was now developing. It arrived in the afternoon.

353. The enemy's attack from Muar, though it had not yet been possible to assess the full strength of it, obviously constituted a very real threat to Westforce's communications in the Yong Peng area, for if the enemy could reach the road there the whole of the Segamat force would be cut off. I discussed the situation with the Commander Westforce and the Commander 11 Indian Division at Rear Headquarters Westforce at 1200 hrs. 17th January. We were loth to order an immediate withdrawal from Segamat which we thought would be damaging to morale and decided to strengthen the Yong Peng-Muar front by every means at our disposal. I arranged to make available immediately the 2/19 Australian Battalion from Jemaluang, relieving it temporarily by the reserve battalion of the 53 Brigade.

354. Early on the morning 18th January the 45 Indian Infantry Brigade, with the 2/29 Australian Battalion attached, was strongly attacked by the enemy in its perimeter position west of Bakri. Nine enemy tanks were destroyed by the Australian anti-tank guns and tank hunting platoons. The enemy cut the road between this force and Brigade Headquarters situated a short distance to the east but with the arrival of the 2/19 Australian Battalion the situation was restored. In the evening the Japanese again attacked heavily but were repulsed.

On the afternoon of the 18th the enemy landed a strong force on the coast a few miles north of Batu Pahat.

355. Our Intelligence Service on this day reported that the Japanese were advancing with two divisions in front line, a Division of the Imperial Guards being in the Muar area and the 5 Division on the main road. The latter was a crack division which was known to have been specially trained in landing operations. The full extent of the threat from Muar now became clear. I felt that our chances of holding up this thrust for any length of time were not great and that a withdrawal from Segamat would sooner or later be forced upon us. I therefore approved a proposal by the Commander Westforce on the evening 18th January for an immediate withdrawal behind the River Segamat as

a preparatory step to a further withdrawal should such become necessary.

356. At the same time, by agreement with the Commander Westforce, I placed the whole of the Muar front temporarily under the Commander 3 Indian Corps. My reasons for this were:—

(a) I thought it difficult for the Commander Westforce with his small staff to give the close attention to the Muar front which the dangerous situation there demanded as well as controlling the operations on the Segamat front some 70 miles distant.

(b) It would obviously be necessary to build up a supporting front west of Yong Peng in order to keep open communications both with the Muar and Segamat forces. This could only be done by troops at that time under command of 3 Indian Corps.

357. On the morning of the 19th January very heavy fighting again developed in the Bakri area. The enemy again struck at our communications destroying some transport which was parked in rear of the defensive position and blocked the road. About midday the right forward battalion of the 45 Brigade (4/9 Jats) which had remained detached was ambushed when rejoining the main force and suffered heavily. Brigade Headquarters was practically wiped out by a bomb.

The Commander 53 British Brigade was now made responsible for the Bukit Payong—Yong Peng area, under 11 Indian Division, having been relieved of his responsibility for Batu Pahat. The 3/16 Punjab Regt of 11 Indian Division was placed under his orders.

358. At 1420 hrs. 19th January I held a conference at Yong Peng at which the Commanders 3 Indian Corps, Westforce, 11 Indian Division and 53 British Infantry Brigade were present. The following orders were issued:—

(a) The 53 Brigade Group to hold a position from the bridge at Parit Sulong to the high ground S.E. of the junction of the Yong Peng—Muar and Yong Peng—Batu Pahat roads.

(b) The 45 Brigade Group to be ordered to withdraw at once through the 53 Brigade Group to a position west of Yong Peng.

(c) The Segamat Force to continue its withdrawal.

(d) The 22 Indian Infantry Brigade, on its arrival at Yong Peng on the night 20th-21st January from the Segamat front, to be at the disposal of 11 Indian Division.

359. Events, however, anticipated the implementation of this plan, for on the afternoon of the 19th January an enemy force attacked and captured the defile east of Bukit Payong and later occupied the bridge at Parit Sulong. An attempt the following morning to recapture the defile by counter-attack was only partially successful, and eventually our troops took up a defensive position at the west end of a causeway which crossed a marshy area a little further east.

360. In accordance with the orders to withdraw, sent by W/T from Westforce which was the only means of communication then open, the Muar Force started to concentrate on the evening of 19th January but was attacked from all sides and suffered heavily. Early on the 20th the withdrawal started, the force being