

292. As a result of this conference, orders were issued for the withdrawal to and defence of Johore, the main points of which were as under:—

(a) *Intention*.—The intention was to continue to ensure the security of the Singapore Naval Base.

(b) *Policy*.—The broad policy was to continue opposition on the mainland to cover the arrival of reinforcements.

(c) There was to be no withdrawal without my permission south of the line Endau (later amended to read Mersing)—Batu Anam (N.W. of Segamat)—Muar.

(d) North of the line given above the 3 Indian Corps would continue to fight the enemy in areas selected by the Corps Commander. No withdrawal from one area to another would take place until necessitated by enemy action. The enemy should be attacked in flank and rear. It was of the utmost importance for strategical reasons to deny to the enemy the use of the Kuala Lumpur and Port Swettenham aerodromes for as long as possible, but at least until the 14th January.

(e) In view of possible enemy attempts to land on the west coast of Singapore Island, the Commander Singapore Fortress should pay particular attention to the defence of that area.

(f) After withdrawal the 3 Indian Corps would be responsible for the defence of the West area of Johore and the A.I.F. for that of the East area.

(g) The Main Line of resistance to be on the general line Mersing—Batu Anam—Muar.

(h) The 45 Indian Infantry Brigade with attached troops to come under orders 3 Indian Corps at once and the Pioneer Battalion from midday 7th January.

(i) 3 Indian Corps to take over immediately from A.I.F. Malaya operational control of the area north of the line G. Besar—Labis—Semarah all inclusive to 3 Indian Corps.

(k) The State of Johore and Settlement of Malacca to be formed at once into an administrative area to be known as Johore/Malacca area.

293. *The Slim River Battle*.—At dawn on 4th Jan. the 12 Brigade Group was moving into the Trolak sector and the 28 Brigade Group into harbours near Slim River Village ready to man its positions in that area when ordered. No battalion could now muster more than the equivalent in men of three poorly armed companies. No battalion had more than two anti-tank rifles. Some had none.

The Trolak sector of the Slim River position extended for three miles forward from Trolak village and was divided into three battalion sub-sectors. The terrain in the two forward sub-sectors consisted of thick jungle through which the road and railway ran in narrow parallel corridors about 400 yards apart. This jungle was impassable for A.F.Vs. It was also a poor country for artillery support. To block the road against tanks a supply of large concrete cylinders had been sent up. Owing to the constant presence of enemy aircraft which flew up and down the road bombing and machine-gunning all day, work on the defences had to be done under cover of darkness. On

the afternoon of the 5th Jan. an enemy attack down the railway was repulsed with heavy loss.

294. At 0345 hours 7th Jan. the enemy attacked the forward troops frontally in bright moonlight. They succeeded in clearing the tank blocks and 15 tanks followed by infantry advanced down the road. On reaching the second sub-sector the leading tank struck a mine and some 30 tanks piled up behind it in close formation. The attack was held up for some two hours in this sub-sector during which seven tanks were destroyed. Then they cleared the obstacles and continued their advance closely followed by infantry. The news of this tank break-through had, partly owing to lack of telephone cable, not reached the troops in rear who were in turn taken completely by surprise. Two battalions were overtaken by the tanks while marching along the road to occupy their position and were badly cut up. Artillery units were similarly surprised. It was not until the tanks had reached a point two miles south of Slim and 15 miles from their starting point that they were stopped by a 4.5-in. howitzer of the 155 Field Regt. There was practically nothing between them and Kuala Lumpur.

The effect of this break-through was disastrous. The enemy tanks were now in control of the bridge at Slim and all our wheeled transport was on the further side of it. The enemy infantry had followed up quickly and there was considerable fighting during the day in the forward areas. In the afternoon the brigade commanders issued orders for a withdrawal down the railway line to Tanjong Malim 17 miles away.

295. Our losses from this battle were very heavy. The three battalions of the 12 Brigade mustered only the equivalent of about a company each. One battalion of the 28 Brigade had been obliterated while the remaining two had a total strength of less than one battalion. In the artillery, the engineers and the administrative units, the losses were on the same scale. A large number of guns and wheeled vehicles had been lost. The 11 Indian Division had temporarily ceased to exist as an effective fighting formation.

296. On the 8th January the Supreme Commander South-West Pacific, who had visited 3 Corps area on taking over command, initiated a plan to withdraw what remained of 3 Indian Corps into Johore without delay.

297. It would be easy, but unprofitable, to attribute the defeat at the Slim River Battle to the inadequacy of the anti-tank defences, the failure to blow the bridges or to a variety of other causes. The real cause lay in the utter weariness of the troops, both officers and men. They had been fighting and moving by day and by night for a month, and few of them had had any proper rest or relief. In the exhausting and enervating climatic and topographical conditions of Malaya this is far too long. The enemy's troops also no doubt suffered from the local conditions which were no more natural to them than to the majority of ours. But the enemy, with the initiative conferred by the offensive and by the freedom of the sea and air and with the ability to concentrate the whole of their forces against portions of ours in detail,