

for this task. The arrival of reinforcements now made it possible, however, for more effective steps to be taken, and on the 18th February, the Pegu Force was formed. This Force consisted of the 1 W. Yorks, F.F.6 and detachments of the Burma Military Police, and was given the role of protecting Pegu from the south east linking up with the 17 Division at the Sittang Bridge. An armoured train was provided to operate in the Delta area. A similar organisation consisting of a company of the 1st Glosters, F.F.7 and some Military Police were responsible for the approaches to Syriam from the sea.

92. *7 Armoured Brigade.* In anticipation of the arrival of the 7 Armoured Brigade every effort had been made to strengthen bridges, and to convert railway bridges for the passage of tanks in order to give them as large an area in which to operate as possible.

All possible steps were also taken to ensure that the disembarkation of the Brigade could be carried out as quickly as possible after its arrival, and that there would be no delay in moving the units to their concentration areas. It was obviously doubtful whether the Brigade would be in time to assist in the defence of the area east of the River Sittang, but the Brigade arrived in Rangoon on the 21st and, thanks to the excellent work of all concerned, it was got forward in time to impose considerable delay on the enemy west of the River Sittang and to relieve the pressure on the tired troops in the Pegu area.

93 *Bilin Position.* It is now necessary to turn back to the operations on the Front of the 17 Indian Division which was occupying the Bilin position.

During the 18th the enemy definitely increased his pressure against our troops and succeeded in crossing the river to the south of the village of Bilin.

In this area a counter attack was delivered by the 48 Indian Infantry Brigade which, while succeeding in holding up the enemy advance, did not succeed in pushing him back over the river. Further to the north the enemy were working round the flank of the 16 Indian Infantry Brigade. The 2 K.O.Y.L.I. which had put in a gallant counter attack, had suffered heavy casualties, but was holding its own. It should also be mentioned that on this date some very effective bombing was carried out by the R.A.F. on enemy troops south of the Bilin River. The night passed with our troops in close contact with the enemy along the north bank of the River.

On the 18th a wide turning movement was initiated by 4/12 F.F.R. with the object of attacking the enemy's right flank. The operation achieved considerable success and heavy fighting ensued. It left the Division, however, without any reserves and weak along the coast. The troops were becoming very weak and exhausted. The enemy also established himself in the rear of the right flank—presumably by landing from the sea. In view of the situation, I ordered up the 2 D.W.R., the only unit I had in hand, to protect the rear of the Division.

94. *Question of Withdrawal.* During the morning of the 19th I visited the Division. A counter attack by 2/5 R.G.R. had not altogether succeeded in driving the enemy out of Thattkyon in rear of the right flank. The

enemy was well established in the centre of the position and there was every indication that he was bringing up strong forces against the left flank. The situation was, therefore, such that there appeared to be grave risk of not being able to disengage the troops unless a further withdrawal was ordered.

In view of the strong position on the River Sittang in rear, the anticipated arrival of reinforcements and especially tanks, a decision "to fight it out" on the River Bilin had little to recommend it. In view of subsequent events there is little doubt that had the withdrawal been further deferred the Division would have been practically destroyed and Rangoon left open to the enemy.

I, therefore, told the Divisional Commander to make all necessary preparation for withdrawal and to judge for himself when the necessity for doing so had arrived. Subsequent orders were issued to the effect that all transport should be got across the River Sittang at an early stage of the withdrawal, and that the 2 D.W.R. should be sent back to guard the bridgehead as early as possible. I myself had personally ordered the retention of one company at that place, in view of the weakness of the garrison.

On 18th February, I sent to A.B.D.A. Command and the War Office an appreciation which after referring to the severe check that had been inflicted on the enemy on the Bilin River indicated that if, as appeared probable, he was able to renew his attack with fresh troops, it might not be possible to continue to hold the position. It also pointed out that if the battle went badly, the enemy might succeed in crossing the River Sittang without much difficulty which would render the evacuation of Rangoon an imminent possibility. After reviewing the meagre resources of troops available, and future reinforcements, it is stated that probably the best that could be hoped for was that it would be possible to hold up the enemy on the line of the River Sittang. This would, however, involve an immediate threat to the main road and railway from Rangoon to Mandalay which was the main route of supply of China and for the evacuation of civilians, stores and base installations from Rangoon. After referring to the difficult problem of whether to start evacuation of non-essential personnel at once, with its obviously bad effect on morale, or risk congestion and confusion at a later stage, it concluded by stating that five divisions in all were essential to the defence of Burma of which two would be required for the defence of the River Sittang. It expressed doubts, however, as to whether sufficient troops could arrive in time to save Rangoon and said that unless they could do so more quickly than was at the time visualised, the risk of losing Rangoon within the next few weeks was considerable. The accuracy of this was very fully borne out by events. On the 20th February, after the decision to withdraw to the River Sittang, a further telegram was sent which, after describing the condition of the troops, dealt in some detail with the necessity for taking preliminary measures for the evacuation of Rangoon. It stated that after consultation with the Governor and Combined Commanders, it had been decided to commence certain measures under the evacuation scheme which would not, however,