

their reconnaissance and ground-strafting aircraft often flying as low as 100 feet. At midnight 23rd/24th January the rearguards from both the Segamat and Muar fronts passed through Yong Peng.

369. The extrication of the Segamat Force from its perilous position was a matter for considerable satisfaction. The whole of the Segamat—Muar operations required the most careful handling by all commanders and quick compliance with orders by all formations and units. They imposed a great strain on commanders and staffs, in illustration of which I may mention that during the twenty-five days ending 23rd January I motored over 2,500 miles and held numerous conferences in the forward areas besides attending War Council meetings and working late into the night at my Headquarters at Singapore.

370. *Plans for the Defence of Central Johore.*—At the Conference held south of Yong Peng at 12.30 hrs. 21st January (see above) it was decided that, after withdrawal from Yong Peng, our forces would be re-organized as under:—

Eastforce.—All troops in the Mersing and Kahang area under command of an officer to be detailed by the Commander 3 Indian Corps.

Role.—To hold Jemaluang with detachments forward in the Mersing area.

Westforce.—9 Indian Division and A.I.F. less 22 Australian Brigade Group under command of Major-General Gordon Bennett.

Role.—To hold the area exclusive Yong Peng—inclusive Kluang—Ayer Hitam.

11 Indian Division.—53 British Brigade Group when released from Westforce).

6/15 Brigade Group of two battalions etc.
28 Indian Brigade Group,

under command of Major-General Key.

Role.—To hold the Batu Pahat area and operate on the West Coast road.

371. At a conference held at Rengam on the morning of the 23rd January I decided that Westforce would come under command of 3 Indian Corps as soon as the last troops had been withdrawn south of the Yong Peng road junction. The Commander 3 Indian Corps would then command all troops in Johore except those anti-aircraft defences and administrative units under Headquarters Malaya command and the Pengerang Defences under Comdr. Singapore Fortress.

I directed that the general line Jemaluang—Kluang—Ayer Hitam—Batu Pahat would be held and that there would be no withdrawal from this line without my permission.

372. In this connection I cabled to the Supreme Commander South-West Pacific on the 24th January as under:—

"I want to be able to hold line of road Kluang—Batu Pahat for another 24 hours at least as positions further south are NOT good Hope you will press for continuous attacks by Fortress bombers on Kuala Lumpur and Kuantan aerodromes. I feel that if we can drive back his fighters we can then deal with his bombers."

On the 25th January I received the following telegram from the Supreme Commander South-West Pacific:—

"Recent reports of heavy fighting on the Muar front show what determined resistance your troops are making against odds. You

have not much ground behind you and this resistance is necessary and well timed. I have no doubt that troops have inflicted severe casualties on the enemy. Well done."

373. The denial of the line of aerodromes in Central Johore to the enemy until the 18 British Division had safely arrived was now of primary importance. It was clear that the crisis of the campaign had arrived.

A copy of Malaya Command Operation Instruction No. 35 issued on the 23rd January, 1942 is attached as Appendix F to this dispatch.

374. *The Batu Pahat Operations.*—Batu Pahat was a small coastal port of the same type as Muar. The town lies on the south bank of an estuary some seven miles from the coast. The estuary was crossed by a road ferry. Batu Pahat is also linked by good roads with Yong Peng to the North, Ayer Hitam (20 miles away) to the East, and Pontian Kechil (46 miles away) to the South. The Air landing-ground was at Koris, 7 miles south of Batu Pahat. South of that the road runs within 2 or 3 miles of the sea. The country bordering the road and between it and the sea consists mostly of mangrove and cocoanut plantations. To an enemy possessing command of the sea this route was accessible at any point and indicated the necessity for holding both Batu Pahat and Pontian Kechil for the protection of the main L. of C. 20 miles inland.

Batu Pahat is dominated by the jungle-covered Bukit Banang which lies to the south of the town. Into this area the Japanese troops who had landed at the lighthouse on the 16th January (see above) had disappeared.

375. By the evening of the 19th January the 6/15 Infantry Brigade (Brigadier Challen) had taken over responsibility for the Batu Pahat area with the following troops under command:—

The British Battalion

2 Cambridgeshire

One Company 2 Malay Battalion

One battery 155 Field Regt. (4 guns)

11 Heavy Anti-Aircraft Battery.

Administrative Units.

Batu Pahat was now also used as a base for the Royal Naval West Coast Flotilla.

The task allotted to the Commander Batu Pahat Force was to hold the town and to keep open the road to Ayer Hitam. To assist in the latter task the 5 R. Norfolk Regt., whose withdrawal from Jemaluang I had authorised, was to co-operate, working from the Ayer Hitam end.

376. During the 22nd and 23rd January skirmishes took place with enemy detachments on the Batu Pahat—Ayer Hitam road, as a result of which the road was finally closed on the evening of the 23rd January. 5 R. Norfolks were then despatched to Batu Pahat by M.T. moving south via Pontian Kechil. They arrived on the morning of the 24th January and came under orders of the Commander Batu Pahat Force.

In the Bukit Banang area also the enemy had become active and fighting developed in the gun position area. The enemy troops here were supplied with food and ammunition from the air.

377. On the evening 23rd January the Commander Batu Pahat Force, being unable to