

communicate with higher authority owing to a breakdown in W/T, commenced to withdraw to Senggarang but later, communications having been restored, he was instructed to make a further effort to hold Batu Pahat with the aid of 5 R. Norfolks due to arrive the following morning. Throughout the 24th fighting continued in the town, but efforts to clear Hill 127 S.E. of Batu Pahat the following morning were only partially successful. On the morning of the 25th the enemy attacking the town were reinforced by fresh troops who arrived in lorries. The Commander Batu Pahat Force reported the situation, expressing a doubt as to his ability to hold the town much longer.

378. On the same day a determined attempt was made by the Commander 11 Indian Division to support the Batu Pahat Force with the 53 Brigade Group, now released from Yong Peng. The Group, which now included two weak infantry battalions only, was ordered to occupy Benut, Rengit and Senggarang and pass through a supply column to Batu Pahat. As the Group moved forward enemy troops, who had obviously moved down east of the road, occupied the road at various points. Some of the leading troops got through to join the Batu Pahat Force but by the evening the road between Senggarang and Rengit was held by the enemy while further south the road was under fire at several different places.

379. Before the war the Japanese held large commercial interests in the Batu Pahat area and had a complete and detailed knowledge of the country. They put this knowledge to good use during the operations. There were also demonstrations of pro-Japanese sympathies in Batu Pahat itself.

380. At 1515 hours 25th January I held a conference at Rear Headquarters Westforce near Kulai. The Commanders 3 Indian Corps, Westforce and 11 Indian Division were present. The only matter discussed at this conference was the immediate policy for the conduct of operations. All were agreed that an immediate withdrawal from Batu Pahat was necessary and that, as a result of this, the other columns should be withdrawn from the line Jemaluang — Kluang — Ayer Hitam. I instructed the Commander 3 Indian Corps, who was responsible for the whole of these operations, to issue orders accordingly and to co-ordinate the action of the various columns. A copy of the Minutes of this conference are attached as Appendix "G" to this Despatch.

381. The Batu Pahat Force withdrew during the night 25th/26th January and reached Senggarang at dawn on the 26th where it found the road blocked. Repeated attempts made throughout the day to force the block and open the road were unsuccessful. Here again as elsewhere the exhaustion of the troops after several days and nights continuous operations in conditions to which they were not acclimatized told its tale.

In the meantime, the Commander 11 Indian Division had organized a mechanized column, including armoured cars and carriers, at Benut and ordered it forward to the relief of the Batu Pahat Force. Many road blocks and ambushes were encountered and the column was broken up into small parties each fighting on its own. Only one carrier, that of the column commander, eventually got through.

In the evening the Commander Batu Pahat Force decided that there was no longer any possibility of the brigade fighting its way out as a formation and adhering to the time-table which he had been given. He therefore gave orders for units to make their way to Benut on foot by a route on the coastal flank of the road. A chaplain and personnel of the Royal Army Medical Corps voluntarily remained behind with the wounded who on this occasion were not molested by the Japanese.

382. Looked at in retrospect, it seems that, owing largely to the uncertainty of the communications, the authority to withdraw from Batu Pahat was delayed for 24 hours too long. When the authority was given, the Force was given a task which, in the existing circumstances, was beyond its powers.

383. *The Kluang—Ayer Hitam Operations* — Early on the morning of the 24th January the leading Japanese troops were approaching the aerodrome and town of Kluang, which were then being held by the 22 Indian Brigade Group with the 8 Brigade Group in reserve at Rengam. The Commander 9 Indian Division ordered the 8 Brigade Group to move up and relieve the 22 Brigade Group so as to free the latter for a counter-attack. In accordance with this plan the 5/11 Sikhs moved by a circuitous route on the left flank, bivouacked for the night, and the following day fought a highly successful action in the course of which they routed the enemy at the point of the bayonet and killed and wounded several hundreds of them.

During the night 25th/26th January, in accordance with the general plan of withdrawal, the 22 Brigade Group fell back to a position covering Rengam while the 8 Brigade Group remained in the Kluang area.

On the front north of Ayer Hitam the enemy made contact again on the 25th and fighting went on throughout the day. Our leading troops (2 Loyals) held their ground and inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy who again proved their ability to cross what had seemed impassable ground and again offered exceptional targets to our troops by disregarding normal field precautions.

During the following night our troops on this front fell back through the 2 Gordons who were in position at milestone 49. I had relieved this battalion from garrison duties at Penggerang and placed it under orders of the Commander Westforce in replacement of 2 Loyals who were now withdrawn to Singapore.

384. *The East Coast Operations.*—Mersing, 100 miles from Singapore on the N.E. Coast of Johore, had long been regarded as the back-door to Singapore Fortress, particularly since the completion of the road Kota Tinggi—Jemaluang. The beaches in the Mersing area are suitable for landings, though not ideal, since sandbanks and shoals extend for about 3 miles from the coast. The swampy and tortuous courses of the Endau River and its tributaries are navigable by shallow draught vessels as far as the Jemaluang—Kluang road in the vicinity of Kahang, where was situated the modern landing-ground prepared by the R.A.F. Plans for the defence of Mersing, therefore, had to take into account the possibility of being outflanked by enemy penetration up this river system from Endau.