

on the 16 Indian Brigade near Kawkaik. These engagements are described in General Hutton's report. It is quite clear that the enemy were allowed to gain cheap initial successes through bad handling by local Commanders, lack of training and in some instances lack of fighting spirit on the part of our troops. It was an unfortunate beginning to the campaign and had serious results in raising the morale of the enemy and depressing that of our own troops. It became clear that the battalions of Burma Rifles, which formed so large a proportion of the army in Burma, were undependable.

From my point of view I received in Java telegrams indicating that the threat to Rangoon was considered to be imminent and that without additional and earlier reinforcement the G.O.C. did not think that Rangoon could be held. I knew that General Hutton was prepared for the loss of Mergui and Tavoy, but I had not received any information indicating the probable appearance of a Japanese force large enough to imperil Rangoon.

I flew from Java to Burma during the night 24th-25th January, spent the 25th at Rangoon and returned during the night 25th-26th January. I found the situation better than I had expected and, after discussing the situation with the G.O.C. I reported to the Chiefs of Staff that I did not consider the situation immediately serious, provided that the reinforcement of Burma with land and air forces proceeded without delay, and that some naval force was provided to prevent a landing near Rangoon from the Tenasserim coast. I had already on 19th January authorised General Hutton to accept any Chinese troops available. It may be remarked that those I had originally accepted on 22nd December, the 93 and 49 Divisions, had not by this date yet reached Burma.

17. On the night of 4th-5th February, I again flew to Rangoon and spent two days there. My purpose was partly to meet the Generalissimo who, I had been informed, was passing through Rangoon on his way to India. He went, however, straight from Lashio to Calcutta, and I did not see him. General Hutton had a very cordial and satisfactory interview with him.

I visited the troops, who were then holding a front west of the Salween River opposite Moulmein, and all commanders expressed themselves to me as confident of their ability to deal with the Japanese advance. I was impressed with the suitability of the dry paddy fields for armoured troops and decided to divert to Burma the 7 Armoured Brigade which was on its way from the Middle East to Malaya. By this time the troops in Malaya had been driven into Singapore Island and the Armoured Brigade was obviously of no use there, while Java also offered little scope for armoured troops, I therefore ordered the Brigade to be diverted to Rangoon. It played a very prominent part in all the fighting in Burma after its arrival in Rangoon on 21st February. The air situation over Rangoon was satisfactory, Hurricanes had begun to arrive and these, with the A.V.G. P.40s, had established and were maintaining air superiority over the enemy.

18. The battle at the Sittang River bridge-head on 22nd and 23rd February, which is

described in General Hutton's report, really sealed the fate of Rangoon and Lower Burma. In the withdrawal from the Bilin River to the Sittang and the action east of that River almost the whole of two brigades were lost.

BURMA RETURNED TO INDIA COMMAND.

19. By the time the Sittang River battle took place, two changes of importance in the control of the operations in Burma had been decided. I had ceased temporarily to be responsible for Burma, and the War Cabinet, in view of the proposed expansion of the forces in Burma, decided to place Lieut.-General Alexander in command of the troops in Burma. Lieut.-General Hutton remained as Chief of the General Staff to General Alexander.

The Chiefs of Staff had telegraphed me on 18th February asking my views on the desirability, in view of the loss of Singapore and Sumatra, of Burma reverting to the control of Commander-in-Chief, India. I replied that I had never varied in my recommendation that Burma should be under Commander-in-Chief, India, for defence. On 21st February I received orders that Burma was to come again under the command of Commander-in-Chief, India.

20. Soon after the middle of February I realised that it was most unlikely that Java could be held against the impending Japanese attack and that in view of the enemy command of the air it would be impossible to land the Australian Corps, which was on its way from the Middle East, in Java. I considered it absolutely essential that Rangoon and Burma should be held and recommended that the Australian Corps, or at least the leading Division of it, should be sent to Burma. My recommendation was supported by the Prime Minister but was not accepted by the Australian Government.* When this convoy changed course for Australia, the last hope of holding Rangoon practically vanished.

21. On 23rd February I was ordered to close down A.B.D.A. Command Headquarters and to reassume my appointment as Commander-in-Chief, India. I thus again became responsible for the defence of Burma within a few days of having handed it over. I left Java on the night of 25th-26th February. Realising that the situation in Lower Burma must be critical I wished to fly direct from Java to Rangoon. In view of the prevailing weather conditions, however, it was doubtful whether even a Liberator could make the distance direct, and the aerodromes in Southern Sumatra were in enemy hands. I had therefore to fly to Ceylon. I arrived at Colombo on the morning of 26th February, intending to take a flying boat on to Rangoon. I found, however, a cable from General Hartley advising that I should first go to Delhi. I arrived in Delhi on the evening of 27th February and was informed that there was a proposal in Burma, if no instructions were received to the contrary, to evacuate Rangoon. Since from the information available this proposal appeared to me premature, I cabled that action should be suspended till I could reach

* War Office footnote —The Commonwealth Government at that time considered that diversion of their Force would have exposed Australia to great risk at a time when the Japanese were advancing Southwards rapidly and when the invasion of Java was imminent