

Brigade as a motorised regiment and the 1 W. Yorks were still watching the coastal area to the south of Pegu.

104. *Fighting in front of Pegu.* On 26th February and succeeding days there was considerable fighting about Waw where for the first time Burma Traitor forces took an active part in operations. The enemy, unwilling to meet our tanks in the open now attempted to work across the plains by night with the object of infiltrating into the jungle to the west of the main road from Pegu to Toungoo. This road was cut at Pyinbon on the 25th but the situation was restored by the Armoured Brigade. Unfortunately there were not sufficient troops available to close the gap between 17 Indian Division and the Burma Brigade at Nyaunglebin so that this gap of some 30 miles remained open to enemy penetration.

In view of the convincing reports of enemy infiltration through the Yomas with the object of cutting the Prome road and also the bad reports about the internal situation in that area, one squadron of tanks and a company of 1 W. Yorks were sent back to Tharrawaddy on 27th February. This place held a very important dump of supplies and petrol which at this time was quite unguarded. In view of subsequent events it was fortunate that this move was carried out. About the same time the remnants of 16 Indian Infantry Brigade, which was very weak, was withdrawn to Hlegu, the location of Divisional H.Q. A further appreciation dealing with the probable course of enemy action was despatched on the 27th February. This dealt with the probable future action of the enemy and foretold the probability of his infiltrating across the open country west of the Sittang by night into the close jungle of the Pegu Yomas, and eventually cutting the Rangoon-Prome road. It went on to describe the action taken or proposed to be taken and finished up by stating that the prospects of the successful defence of Rangoon in the absence of the early arrival of the 7 Australian Division (which was at that time expected) were not good.

In view of the general situation at this time the question of carrying out the demolition and evacuation of Rangoon had to be kept under constant review. This was especially necessary as the 1 W. Yorks which had been covering Syriam refineries from the sea had had to be withdrawn to assist in the defence of Pegu. The coast line was therefore undefended and except for some small detachments close to Syriam there was nothing to prevent the enemy landing a force to seize the refineries. A final decision was, however, postponed in view of the anticipated arrival of reinforcements and the probability of a visit from General Wavell to discuss future policy. He arrived on 1st March.

On 1st March, Brigadier Cowan assumed command of 17 Indian Division. On 2nd and 3rd March the enemy occupied Waw in some strength and an attack by the Armoured Brigade and Cameronians, though partially successful, failed to clear it completely.

On 4th March I flew to Toungoo where H.Q. 1 Burma Division had just arrived. 2 Burma Brigade was still in Nyaunglebin and a successful little operation had recently been carried out by Brigadier Bourke against Shwegyin where there was a considerable number of

Burmans led by Japanese officers. In accordance with my instructions, the Divisional Commander was to concentrate as many of his troops as possible south of Toungoo but it must be remarked that in addition to two battalions of the Burma Rifles and some Frontier Force columns he had only a total of three Indian battalions in his Division. Some of the Burma Rifles had already deserted with their arms (under an officer) and others were known to be shaky.

On 3/4th March the enemy had occupied Kyaikhla (south-west of Waw) and Payagyi 12 miles north of Pegu on the Toungoo road. An attack by tanks and infantry was launched in the late afternoon of the 4th against the latter. Considerable casualties were inflicted and a gun and mortar were captured, but the force available was insufficient to prevent further penetration in this area. Meanwhile the enemy had occupied Tandawgyi close to Payagyi.

105. *Pegu Road cut.* On the 5th I visited H.Q. 17 Indian Division at Hlegu intending to go on to see 48 Indian Infantry Brigade at Pegu but the road was cut by the enemy and I was unable to proceed. The position at that time was that the 48 Brigade was holding the outskirts of Pegu while the Armoured Brigade with the Cameronians and 1 W. Yorks were acting in a mobile role in the open country to the east. Owing to the presence of many water courses and the fact that the small bunds surrounding the rice fields proved an unexpectedly serious obstacle to the tanks, their operations were much restricted.

106. *Enemy Infiltration.* The enemy, under cover of darkness, had now succeeded in passing a considerable number of troops across the open country to the north of Pegu whence he was able to cross the Pegu River and enter the thick jungle. It was no doubt his advanced troops which had cut the road west of Pegu at a place where there is thick jungle on both sides of the road. Attempts to drive back the enemy had failed and the 48 Brigade was still in no condition for offensive action.

107. *Landings on the Coast.* Meanwhile landings had been reported on the Coast west of the Rangoon River and although one ship-load of 55 well-armed "Free Burmans" under a Japanese officer had been intercepted by the Navy it was known that several hundreds of armed men, Japanese or Burmans, had landed successfully. In these circumstances there was very considerable danger that the demolition of the oil refineries might be interfered with. There were absolutely no reserves available to deal with this incursion but fortunately these forces did not show very much enterprise.

In these circumstances I ordered Major-General Cowan, who had just assumed command of 17 Indian Division, to clear the road and withdraw the 48 Brigade to Hlegu, the 16 Brigade at that place being brought back to cover Taukkyan cross roads. The action was necessitated as much by the situation at Pegu as by the fact that another enemy column stated to include tanks, which had also crossed the Pegu River, was proceeding west by a jungle track and had already passed through Paunggyi, north of Hlegu. It was obviously only a matter of hours before it would cut the Prome road north of Rangoon. The 63