

covered by this section of the Despatch, it may be recorded here that 19 Indian Division, who were responsible for a large area, held 15 Japanese Division with one brigade, the 98th. At this stage (early May), troops were not available to evict the enemy from the strong positions which they had prepared in the hills some five miles east of Toungoo, and this enemy force, which continued to be reinforced by scattered detachments escaping from the north, continued to be some menace to our communications.

250. The armoured column, which on the night 25th-26th April was 29 miles north of Nyaunglebin, made a further rapid advance on the 26th, capturing Nyaunglebin and driving forward a further 19 miles; that is, to within 80 miles of Rangoon. The resistance encountered was reported as "increasingly disorganized" and many casualties were inflicted; also three locomotives were captured, together with rolling stock loaded with rations. On the 27th April, the armoured column met determined opposition at a village near Milestone 68 and fighting continued throughout the day. Japanese suicide parties, who attempted to destroy our tanks with pole-charges, having to be eliminated. 17 Indian Division had passed through 5 Indian Division on the 26th and was busy mopping up and repairing crossings behind the armoured column. Five bridges south of Nyaunglebin had been destroyed by the enemy and another washed away by a flooded chāung. Valentine bridge-layer tanks had enabled our armour to cross, but our lorried infantry was temporarily held up pending the arrival of Bailey bridging.

251. By the morning of the 28th, the armoured column had pushed forward another six miles, but again met strong resistance at Milestone 62, twelve miles north of Pegu. This was cleared by nightfall, the Japanese losing 300 killed. Difficult country now lay ahead with reservoirs and marshy ground. Both the main road and the side-tracks were mined and booby trapped, and these obstacles were strongly covered by fire. Nevertheless, by the 29th April, 63 Brigade, supported by tanks, had fought its way through Payagyi and reached the outskirts of Pegu, despite stiff opposition, both ground and air. To the north of Pegu, an armoured detachment moved east, just south of the Moyingyi Reservoir, and cut the Pegu—Mokpalin road at Waw, 15 miles north-east of Pegu.

252. 4 Corps was now straining every nerve to get to Rangoon before 15 Indian Corps could reach the city through the sea-gate. In the present campaign they had captured or destroyed 299 guns and killed over 16,000 Japanese, over 6,500 of whom had been accounted for between the 1st and 28th April. They had cheerfully advanced and fought on reduced rations to make room for more ammunition and petrol. 17 Indian Division was now only some 50 miles from its goal, and, it must be remembered, it was this Division which had carried out such a gallant withdrawal from Burma three years earlier, and, only the previous year, had fought so magnificently in the defence of Imphal. 17 Indian Division had an old score to settle, and, if it was humanly possible, it was going to be settled. But the obstacles to be overcome were serious. Between 4 Corps and Rangoon

lay the wide Pegu River, forming a very strong defensive position. In this position was concentrated every available man that General Kimura could raise, including, as we afterwards found out, the whole of the Rangoon garrison. They had orders "To hold to the last", and the fanatical courage of the Japanese soldier has never been questioned.

253. The Pegu River, astride our line of advance, was bridged in three places; the main road bridge west of Pegu, the railway bridge (branch line) about a mile to the north, and the main railway bridge about three miles further north. The enemy had prepared strong positions on both banks of the river, including Pegu itself, through which the river flows. I do not believe, however, that these defences, strong as they were, would have delayed 4 Corps—animated as it was by a fierce determination to reach its objective—for very long, had not a catastrophe intervened. A violent tropical storm broke on the afternoon of the 29th April and continued throughout the night. All movement of tanks or wheeled vehicles off the road became impossible; no aircraft could land or take off; the Pegu River rose in full flood. It was a foretaste of the coming monsoon, and I was indeed thankful that the early capture of Rangoon was not dependent on our land advance alone.

254. Despite the deep mud, 48 Brigade advanced on the 30th, stormed the Japanese position at Milestone 51 at the point of the bayonet and, by nightfall, that part of Pegu which lies north of the river was in our hands. North of Pegu, we had an even more important success. On the 30th, as our attack progressed, the enemy blew all the three bridges, but at both the railway bridges, our infantry, crawling under heavy fire over the wrecked girders, seized and held a small bridgehead. This most gallant feat was the turning point of the battle; an attack on Pegu from the north-west had been planned, but the ford eight miles up river was found to be impracticable. The crossings at the railway bridges, however, gave us what we wanted—a bridgehead on the west bank. Meanwhile, another infantry column drove the enemy from a village six miles east of Pegu.

255. On this date also (the 30th April), we rescued 350 British, American and Indian prisoners of war. Their escort, on finding the road to Moulmein cut at Waw, abandoned their charges, but only to be destroyed by our advancing troops. It was fitting that this rescue should have been made by 17 Indian Division, to which some of these prisoners had belonged when they were captured in 1942.

256. The attack on Pegu progressed throughout the 1st May, in a deluge of rain. 99 Brigade attacked from the north, west of the river, supported by 255 Indian Tank Brigade firing from among the ruins of the northern part of the town on the opposite bank. The Japanese A.A. artillery had its hands full, both in its normal and anti-tank rôles, and we captured twelve guns. By nightfall, the town had been practically cleared and the same night the indomitable 17 Indian Division resumed its advance south. It was a gallant effort. Since our airstrips had been put out of action, the troops had had to be further reduced to half rations. They were hungry and soaked to the skin, but their magnificent spirit was undimmed, and Rangoon lay ahead. But they were not to