

On completion of the withdrawal on the 22nd December the 8 Indian Infantry Brigade concentrated in the Kuala Lipis/Jerantut area except for the 2/12 Frontier Force Regt. which rejoined its brigade at Kuantan.

164. The casualties suffered in the Kelantan fighting had been fairly heavy but not excessive. The conduct of the operations generally and especially of the withdrawal reflected great credit on the Commander of the Force (Brigadier B. W. Key) and his staff.

SECTION XXII.—WEST COAST OPERATIONS 12-17TH DECEMBER, 1941.

165. *The Battle of Jitra.*—In the absence of the commander of the 15 Indian Infantry Brigade who had, as stated in Section XIX, been cut off as a result of the action in the out-post position, the commander of the 28 Indian Infantry Brigade (Brigadier Carpendale) temporarily took over command of the 15 Brigade as well as his own and held it until the return of Brigadier Garrett, the following day.

166. Shortly after midnight 11/12th December the Japanese attacked the left forward company of the 2/9 Jats east of the Singora road. Two hours later the frontage had been extended to involve the right forward companies of the 2/9 Jats and the 1 Leicesters. By 0400 hrs. the right rear company of the Jats had also been attacked but had repulsed the enemy. At dawn the Japanese infantry made a determined frontal attack on the Jats and Leicesters and suffered heavy losses but by mid-day had penetrated deep into the area held by the Jats. The Leicesters formed a defensive flank to their right. In the meantime the Commander 15 Brigade had called upon the Commander 6 Brigade for assistance and had been given 1½ battalions which he used to protect his right flank.

167. At about 0830 hrs. the Commander 11 Indian Division asked Headquarters 3 Indian Corps for permission to withdraw his division to Gurun, some 30 miles to the south, and possibly later to the Krian River. The Commander 3 Indian Corps was at that time on his way to Singapore to confer on the Kelantan policy (see Section XXI), so the message was telephoned direct to me. Such a long withdrawal had not been considered in our pre-war discussions of war plans and it would immediately have prejudiced our chances of denying the west coast aerodromes to the enemy. Moreover I felt that such a withdrawal would have a most demoralising effect on both the troops and on the civil population. This view was endorsed by the War Council which was sitting at the time. I therefore replied to the effect that pending further orders the battle was to be fought out on the Jitra position. At that time the Jats were, in point of fact, the only battalion which had incurred serious losses although two battalions had, as already recorded, been rendered ineffective on the previous day.

168. During the morning two counter-attacks were made by the 1/8 Punjab Regt. on the enemy who had penetrated east of the road and, although unsuccessful in re-capturing the lost ground, were effective in stopping the enemy's advance for the time being.

In the early afternoon the enemy infantry resumed their advance on the right and attacked

the 2/2 Gurkha Rifles holding the line of the Bata River. The left of this battalion was at the iron bridge on the main road and between it and the right of the Leicesters further north was a gap of 1½ miles. The Leicesters were now ordered to withdraw from their prepared position and to take up a new position with their right on the iron bridge, their centre on Jitra village and their left at Rimba. This gave them a front of over two miles with a pronounced salient in the middle.

Later in the afternoon the road south of Jitra came under close range enemy fire. The traffic on it at the time was heavy and some confusion developed. The Divisional Commander, fearing the enemy would move round our right flank, ordered two companies of the East Surreys to move back by rail to guard the vital bridges at Kepala Batas.

169. At about 1930 hrs. the Commander 11 Indian Division again asked for permission to withdraw. The request was telephoned to me at Headquarters Malaya Command where I was still in conference with the Commander 3 Indian Corps. After consultation I authorised the latter to despatch the following message to the Commander 11 Indian Division:—

"After consultation it is decided that your task is to fight for the security of North Kedah. Estimated that you are only opposed by one Japanese division at most. Consider best solution may be to hold up advance enemy tanks on good obstacle and dispose your forces to obtain considerable depth on both roads and to obtain scope for your superior artillery. Reserves for employment in divisional area are being expedited."

170. The divisional orders for the withdrawal were sent out at 2100 hrs. The plan in outline was that the 28 Brigade, reconstituted under Brigadier Carpendale and with one battalion of the 15 Brigade under its command, should hold a position between Langgar and the south bank of the River Kedah at Alor Star. This meant a withdrawal of some 10 miles. The remainder of 15 Brigade was to be in reserve. The 6 Brigade was to occupy a position 7 miles further back at Simpang Empat. A small composite force was to hold the line of the River Padang Terap until the 15 Brigade had passed through.

This withdrawal would have been difficult under the most favourable conditions. With units mixed as a result of the day's fighting, communications broken and the night dark, it was inevitable that orders would be delayed and in some cases would not reach the addressees. This was what in fact occurred. Some units and sub-units withdrew without incident. Others, finding themselves unable to use the only road, had to make their way as best they could across country. Some parties reached the coast and, taking boats, rejoined further south. Some again were still in position the following morning.

171. On the day after the battle the strength of the 15 Brigade was only about 600 and it was temporarily unfit for further fighting. The 6 Brigade, though still a fighting formation, had also had serious losses. In the 28 Brigade the 2/1 Gurkha Rifles, except for one intact company, had been almost wiped out. The other two battalions had suffered about