

The Mersing area was strongly defended. It was covered by a large number of anti-tank and anti-personnel mines, though the effective life of these in the humid climate of Malaya is limited.

385. On the 14th January, when contact was first made on this front, Eastforce (Brigadier Taylor) was composed of:—

22 Australian Brigade Group.

2/17 Dogras (released from the Singapore Garrison).

Detachments of the Johore Military Forces. Administrative Units.

It was disposed with two battalions holding the Mersing area with detachments forward at Endau, one battalion at Jemaluang, and one (2/17 Dogras) watching the long and vulnerable communications back to Kota Tinggi. On the night 17th/18th January, as has been recorded, the Jemaluang battalion was transferred to the Muar area, but later a weak Indian battalion was placed under command for defence of the Kahang aerodrome, and also an anti-aircraft and an anti-tank troop.

386. On the 14th January contact was made with an enemy force moving down the coast from Kuantan at Pontian north of the River Endau. After some patrol encounters our troops fell back behind the River Endau. The loss of the battalion from Jemaluang on the 17th/18th January caused some re-adjustment of the defences as a result of which the Endau detachment was withdrawn and the road between Endau and Mersing heavily cratered.

387. On the 21st January an enemy force approaching Mersing from the North was ambushed by our fighting patrols and suffered heavy casualties. On that day, in accordance with decisions taken at the Yong Peng Conference (see above) the Commander Eastforce was given the role of holding Jemaluang with detachments forward in the Mersing area. On the 22nd a Japanese attempt to cross the river at Mersing was repulsed with heavy loss. During the night 22nd/23rd January one battalion (2/18 Battalion A.I.F.) with supporting arms was withdrawn to the Nithsdale Estate between Mersing and Jemaluang, the forward troops remaining in the Mersing area.

On the 23rd a naval convoy was sighted between Singgora and Mersing moving south.

388. At 0745 hours on the 26th January our air reconnaissances reported two transports and some smaller craft escorted by two cruisers and twelve destroyers closing the shore at Endau. This convoy was twice attacked during the day by Hudson, Albacores and Vickers Vildebeeste aircraft escorted by Hurricanes and Buffalos. Each time a large force of Japanese Navy Zero fighters operating from Kuantan was met and there was much air fighting. A minimum of 13 enemy fighters were destroyed while we lost 11 Vickers Vildebeeste, 2 Hurricanes and 1 Buffalo. Both enemy transports were hit, but the landing was not prevented. Our Air Striking Force in Malaya, even such as it was, had now vanished. On the night 26th/27th January H.M. Australian destroyer "Vampire" and H.M.S. "Thanet" were sent to sweep up the coast and attack the Japanese transports. Off Endau they fell in with and engaged three destroyers and a cruiser. The "Thanet" was sunk and a Japanese destroyer severely damaged.

389. The fresh enemy troops advanced rapidly from Endau and at midnight 26th/27th January their leading battalion marched into an ambush which had been prepared for them in the Nithsdale Estate. There was confused and bitter hand-to-hand fighting during the night, in the course of which over 300 of the enemy were killed while our losses in killed, wounded and missing were less than 100. Our ambush troops then fell back through the Jemaluang position.

SECTION XXXIX.—THE WITHDRAWAL TO SINGAPORE ISLAND 27TH-31ST JANUARY, 1942.

390. *The Plan.*—On the 27th January I received a telegram from the Supreme Commander South West Pacific giving me discretion to withdraw to Singapore Island if I considered it advisable. On that day the full significance of the dispersal of the Batu Pahat Force and the opening to the enemy of the West Coast road became apparent. Our remaining troops on that road were not strong enough to stop the enemy's advance for long and there were no reserves available. The 18 British Division had not yet arrived. I felt that any further delay might result in the loss of the whole of our forces on the mainland. I therefore decided to authorise a withdrawal to Singapore Island, even though this meant failure to achieve our object of protecting the Naval Base. I accordingly approved a plan which was already being worked out by the Commander 3 Indian Corps for this withdrawal.

391. In anticipation of such a withdrawal certain preliminary steps had already been taken, among which were the following:—

(a) An outline withdrawal plan had been issued on the 24th January.

(b) Orders had been given to begin thinning out the Anti-Aircraft guns and searchlights from South Johore.

(c) The Rear-Admiral Malaya had been requested to arrange for all craft on the north shores of the Straits of Johore to be either sunk or removed to the south shores of Singapore Island.

(d) Arrangements had been made to insert explosives under the Causeway and to destroy the lock at the north end of the Causeway.

(e) The organization of the defences of Singapore Island had been planned.

392. The Plan, which was approved at a conference held at Headquarters 3 Indian Corps at Johore Bahru on the 28th January, was in outline as under:—

(a) A co-ordinated withdrawal to take place simultaneously on all four routes.

(b) The final withdrawal to the Island to be on the night 30th-31st January.

(c) The final withdrawal through the Johore Bahru area to be carried out rapidly in M.T.

(d) All withdrawals to be carried out by night in accordance with a pre-arranged programme.

(e) Anti-aircraft defence to be arranged for the protection of all bottle-necks. In particular, the maximum anti-aircraft defence to be concentrated for the protection of troops moving over the Causeway.