

346. *Our Own Course of Action.*—In order to attain our object it was necessary that we should continue to fight the enemy on the mainland. In view of the disparity in strength between the Japanese and ourselves the safe arrival of our expected reinforcements remained of primary importance. We estimated that the most important formation, the 18 British Division, could not be disembarked and deployed on the mainland before the end of the first week in February at the earliest, i.e., more than three weeks ahead.

Our problem was greatly influenced by the fact that the road Jemaluang—Kluang—Batu Pahat is the only direct lateral communication in Johore and also by the fact that the newly constructed aerodromes of Kahang and Kluang were situated on this road. It was obviously necessary to fight as long as we could north of this vitally important road.

It was therefore decided to deny to the enemy the line Mersing—Segamat—Muar. An outline of the plan to put this decision into effect has already been given in Section XXXIV.

SECTION XXXVIII.—THE JOHORE OPERATIONS, 14TH-26TH JANUARY, 1942.

347. *The Gemas Ambush.*—North of Segamat the Commander Westforce had disposed the 27 Australian Brigade Group and the 8 Indian Brigade Group astride the main road and railway with one battalion (the 2/30 Australian Bn.) forward in an ambush position west of Gemas. The 22 Indian Brigade Group was similarly disposed in depth astride the Malacca-Segamat road with the forward battalion about the Jementah cross roads. The 2 Loyals, withdrawn from the Singapore garrison, was in reserve and responsible for the local defence of Segamat. Major-General Barstow, the Commander 9 Indian Division, was senior officer on the Segamat front and, under his influence, an excellent spirit of co-operation quickly grew up between British, Australian and Indian troops.

The ambush laid by the 2/30 Bn. (Lieut.-Colonel Gallagher) was very carefully prepared. The forward company covered 700 yards of road immediately east of the River Gemencheh and was 3 miles in front of the main battalion position. The troops were concealed in thick jungle bordering the road. At 1600 hrs on the 14th January the leading enemy troops appeared. By 1620 hrs. about 250 cyclists had passed through towards the main position, 500 cyclists were in the ambush and another 500 were seen approaching. At this moment the bridge was blown and fire opened. Some 400/500 of the enemy were killed before the company withdrew. More would have been killed had not the enemy cut the artillery telephone line.

By 1000 hrs. the following morning the enemy were in contact with the main battalion position. Attack and counter-attack went on throughout the day in the course of which more of the enemy troops were killed and 8 or 9 tanks destroyed. Our own losses were under 70. During the night the battalion fell back on to the main position.

The R.A.F. co-operated gallantly in this action. A scratch force—all that was available—of Glen Martins, Wirraways, Vildebeeste and Buffalos attacked enemy columns approaching Gemas and headquarters at Tampin and did some damage.

The ambush of Gemas provides an excellent example of the success that will often attend such tactics in jungle country. But fresh and reasonably well trained troops are required and these in the Malayan campaign were seldom available.

348. *The Battle of Muar.*—The town of Muar (Bandar Maharani on some maps) is situated on the south bank of the Muar River a short distance from its mouth. The River Muar is here about 600 yards wide and is unbridged below the main North/South trunk road. In its long course between the main road and the sea the river is extremely tortuous, especially in its lower reaches in which it winds through low-lying and swampy country. Along the south bank of the river for some 20 miles inland from Muar there stretches a belt of estates with fairly numerous roads and tracks.

The defence of this sector was entrusted to the newly arrived 45 Indian Infantry Brigade, to which was attached a battery of Australian field artillery. The Brigade was disposed with two battalions forward on the line of the river, one between the sea and Jorak and the other between Jorak and Lenga, and one battalion in reserve in the Bakri area with patrols watching the coast at Parit Jawa. The plan envisaged a mobile defence using fighting patrols to attack the enemy. Unfortunately each of the forward battalions was ordered to push forward two companies north of the river to harass and delay the enemy. In view of the weakness of the force available this was undoubtedly a tactical error which resulted in a great dispersion of force.

349. The enemy's air offensive against Muar started on the 11th January. The bombing of the town, as in other places, started a general exodus and among those who left were the ferrymen. Nearly all the Asiatic employees of the waterworks and power station also deserted.

350. By the morning of the 15th the enemy had reached the north bank of the river, though no information of their approach had been received from the forward troops. In the afternoon a number of boats were seen off the mouth of the River Muar and a small party landed on the coast between Muar and Batu Pahat. Early the following morning another small force landed at the lighthouse west of Batu Pahat where it was engaged by our troops.

351. In order to meet this threat to Westforce communications the boundary between Westforce and 3 Indian Corps was amended to read as follows:—

“all inclusive 3 Indian Corps Road Kluang—Ayer Hitam—Yong Peng—Batu Pahat”

thus making the task of protecting Westforce communications the responsibility of the Commander 3 Indian Corps.

At 1655 hrs. on the 16th January after visiting commanders in the forward area, I placed the 53 British Infantry Brigade under orders of the Commander 3 Indian Corps and ordered it to move during the following night to the Ayer Hitam area. The Commander 3 Indian Corps placed this brigade under the 11 Indian Division. One battalion (6 R. Norfolk) was immediately sent to hold the defile East of Bukit Payong, a dominating feature some 11 miles west of Yong Peng, with a detachment at Parit Sulong Bridge some 5 miles further on.