

was a large gap now between the main road and Kedah peak. East of the road, however, our forward troops were still in position, but they were now moved to block the main road down which the enemy was advancing. By the afternoon the division was again in confusion and the 28 Brigade was the only one which could for the time being be relied upon. The Divisional Commander decided to withdraw his force behind the River Muda during the following night covered by the only fresh troops which were available i.e. the Independent Company which had just arrived from Penang and one squadron of 3 Indian Cavalry. Units of the 28 Brigade and the 2 East Surrey Regt. did some splendid work in covering the withdrawal. As had happened before, the premature demolition of bridges was the cause of losses of many vehicles and carriers.

179. By the morning of 16th December the Division was south of the River Muda and had passed into Province Wellesley. The 12 Indian Brigade Group (less one battalion) had moved into position on its right with one battalion (the 5/2 Punjab Regt.) at Batu Pekaka, an important bridge over the River Muda, and the Argylls at Baling.

180. The Division was in no fit state for further operations. Most of the men were tired and dispirited. They badly needed time to re-organise and refit. There had been a further heavy loss of vehicles and weapons. Some of these it was now impossible to replace. The tanks had again played their part in the battle of Gurun, but the enemy should not have been allowed to penetrate as he did down the main road. Later, lack of communications made it difficult for formation commanders to control the battle. The Divisional Commander courageously tried to control the battle from a carrier, but the thickly wooded country was against him. All the infantry brigade Commanders had become casualties.

181. On the 15th December the R.A.F. evacuated Butterworth aerodrome. The 16 Light A.A. Battery had done some good work in defence of this aerodrome, claiming 4 enemy aircraft certain and 6 other probables brought down.

182. *Penang.*—Although the Island of Penang had been since 1936 (see Part I Section VI) officially a fortress, it was in fact in December, 1941, far from being one. The garrison on the 12th December, 1941, consisted of:—

Fortress Headquarters and Signals.

11 Coast Regt. Hong Kong and Singapore Royal Artillery (two 6-in. batteries).

36 Fortress Company Royal Engineers (manning searchlights).

One Company 5/14 Punjab Regt.

1 Independent Company.

Detachment of 3 Indian Cavalry.

The 3 (Penang and Province Wellesley) Battalion S.S.V.F.

A Mixed Reinforcement Camp.

Administrative Detachments.

There were no anti-aircraft defences as the guns and searchlights had not yet arrived from the U.K. The civil airport was too small for normal R.A.F. requirements. The only fighter defence was provided by five Buffalo Fighters which were able to operate for one day only from the Butterworth aerodrome.

In addition to the Island the Commander Penang Fortress (Brig. Lyon) was responsible also for a part of the Prai-Butterworth area on the mainland and for the Lines of Communication area (North).

183. The original object of fortifying the Island of Penang was to secure the anchorage which lies between the Island and the mainland from sea and air attack, as the Royal Navy contemplated using it both for warships and as a convoy collecting port.

184. The pre-war instructions to the Commander 3 Indian Corps were to the effect that 11 Indian Division, if driven back, would fall back on the axis of the main road and railway communication arteries, leaving on Penang Island, which would be held, up to two additional infantry battalions with supporting troops.

185. The effects of the first air attacks on Penang on the 10th and 11th December have already been described in Section XIX. On the 13th December 50 Naval Ratings, survivors from the "Prince of Wales" and "Repulse" arrived to operate the ferries, the crews of which had disappeared.

On the 12th December at a meeting between the Fortress Commander and the Resident Counsellor it was decided to evacuate on the following night all European Service families and the Resident Counsellor was asked to arrange for the evacuation of all civilian European women and children. This decision was taken as a normal measure to evacuate "bouches inutiles". The evacuation of the sick and wounded from the military hospital was also ordered.

186. On the 13th December the policy as regards the defence of Penang had to be reviewed in the light of the situation on the mainland which has been described earlier in this Section. There was a very real danger that the 11 Indian Division, which at this time was in an exhausted and very disorganized condition, would be overrun and cease to exist as a fighting formation. There was also the danger that the threat from Kroh, which was now much greater than we had anticipated, would cut the communications of the 11 Indian Division in the Kuala Kangsar area. If either of these things had happened, the enemy would have had a clear run down the west coast, for there were no other troops with which to oppose him north of Johore, and by doing so he would have cut the communications of 9 Indian Division on the east coast. That was the situation we had to face and we had the choice of trying to fight the enemy both on the mainland and on Penang Island or of concentrating the whole of our resources for the battle on the mainland. The anchorage was no longer of any use.

187. The matter was of such importance that I brought it before the Far East War Council on the morning of 14th December. The pros. and cons. were discussed and carefully considered. It was decided that our ability to hold Penang must depend upon the result of the battle upon the mainland, and that we should concentrate on averting the calamity which threatened; further, that if we failed to stop the enemy upon the mainland the policy would be to evacuate what remained of the garrison from Penang rather than leave the population exposed to unrestricted air attack against which we could provide them with no defence.