

to render withdrawal impossible. The Divisional Commander was told at the same time not to give up more ground than necessary and that an intermediate position should be occupied.

It appeared afterwards that the attack was not, in fact, nearly so heavy as had been originally reported and there seems little doubt that more seasoned troops could have maintained their position for the time being.

*75. Withdrawal commenced.* On the 22nd January the withdrawal commenced and unfortunately there was a certain amount of confusion.

The Brigade, however, managed to disengage and during the succeeding day withdrew without further molestation from the Japanese to Moulmein not, however, without losing most of its animal transport, its signal equipment, many of its weapons and all its M.T.

Part of the losses in transport etc. was due to the ferry boat being sunk which rendered impracticable a withdrawal by road and necessitated a move across country by a track impassable to vehicles. The operation, as the small number of casualties showed, was not a very happy start to the operations for the defence of Burma. The company of 1/7 G.R. that the enemy attacked in the first instance did especially good work and the 4 Burma Rifles showed up very well.

On the 23rd January in view of the disorganised state of the troops at his disposal and the fact that the enemy were believed to be in considerable strength the Commander of the 17 Indian Division represented the view that he considered it desirable to move his Division right back to the area Bilin—Kyaikto—River Sittang where he could concentrate his troops in a strong position and establish a secure base from which to deliver a counter stroke.

*76. Decision to hold Moulmein.* In my opinion a withdrawal on this scale was quite unjustified and I decided that at any rate Moulmein should be held and if time permitted I proposed to move up the 2 K.O.Y.L.I. from 1 Burma Division to reinforce it. I did not, however, intend to have a brigade closely invested in that place. Arrangements for a withdrawal were therefore to be planned. The first requirement was to regain touch with the enemy, which had been entirely lost as a result of the withdrawal and was not really regained until the enemy attacked Moulmein on 30th January.

By the 25th, H.Q. 16 Indian Infantry Brigade was established at Martaban with 1/7 G.R. less two companies, one of which was still missing from the Kawkaik position, two companies of the 4 Burma Rifles and the 1/9 R. Jats. The 46 Indian Brigade was ordered up to the area about Bilin. This Brigade which consisted of 7/10 Baluch, 5/17 Dogras, 3/7 Gurkhas had arrived in Burma on the 16th but without its transport which did not arrive till 30th. It was, as already explained in Part I, by no means fully trained.

On the following day 100 men of the 1/7 G.R. turned up having marched across country to the Salween.

The enemy did not press forward his advance with any great speed and it was evident that

he was bringing forward more troops and probably deploying on a wider front. Reports were received to the effect that they were in some strength just east of Paan and this was confirmed the following day.

*77. Attack on Moulmein.* Early on the morning of the 30th January the Japanese started an attack on the aerodrome situated about four miles beyond Moulmein and held by the detachment of the Kokine Battalion The Burma Frontier Force. This detachment fought well and continued to hold on to the aerodrome until ordered to withdraw at midnight.

Moulmein itself was held by the four Battalions of the 2 Burma Brigade, 3 Burma Rifles, 4 Burma Rifles, 7 Burma Rifles and 8 Burma Rifles, with the 12 Mountain Battery R.A.; extended along a seven mile perimeter. 4/12 F.F.R. less one company was in reserve. At noon Brigadier Ekin took over the command and at that time found the situation to be in hand, but having visited the units and seen something of the position he came to the conclusion that in the face of a heavy enemy attack it would be very doubtful whether this extended line could be held. Orders were therefore issued by the Brigadier for the line to be withdrawn towards Moulmein in order to form a "Box" which it was hoped would be proof against penetration.

During this operation a battalion of the Burma Rifles failed to take up their allotted position with the result that there was a gap between the 8 Burma Rifles and the 4/12 F.F.R. and this latter unit was soon at close grips with the enemy and had a difficult time.

At 1900 hours the situation was certainly serious and as no reinforcements were yet available for sending into Moulmein it looked as though it would be necessary to withdraw from the town. As he estimated that there were probably not more than a thousand Japanese attacking, the Brigadier thought that there was still a possibility of holding the town and told the Divisional Commander on the telephone that he would make a final decision later.

The Brigade Commander, however, made preparations for withdrawing if necessary and sent Major Ward, R.E., commanding the 1 Field Company Burma Sappers and Miners, to collect all available launches alongside the jetties. He managed to collect fifteen and to keep them there until they were required. These boats were manned by local crews and in charge of serangs and they worked extremely well under very trying conditions.

*78. Decision to Withdraw.* During the night it became increasingly obvious that a withdrawal would be necessary and on this being reported to the Divisional Commander he agreed and considered that it should be carried out as soon as possible.

At about 0730 hours on the 31st January the embarkation began and by 1000 hours eleven ships had left with troops. Throughout this time the Japanese were closing in round the jetties and considerable fighting was in progress. However, the bulk of the troops got away although the ships in their passage over to Martaban were subject to machine gun fire and shelling.