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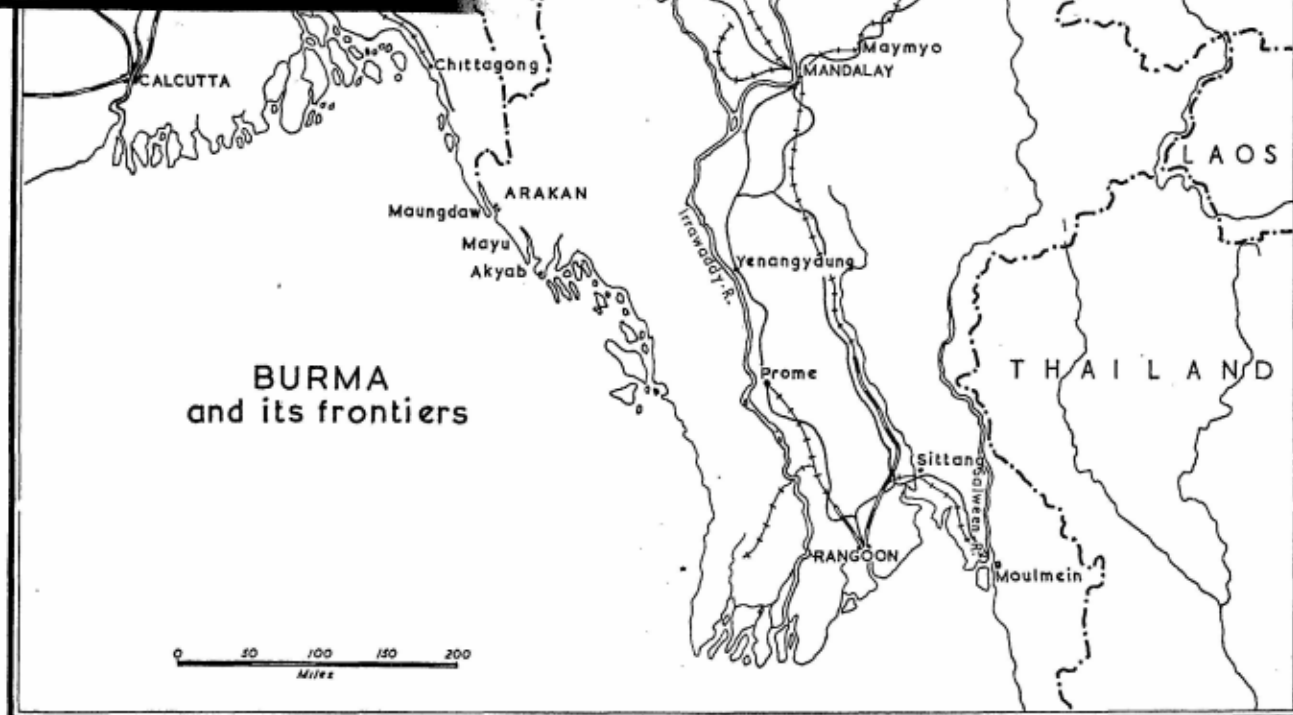
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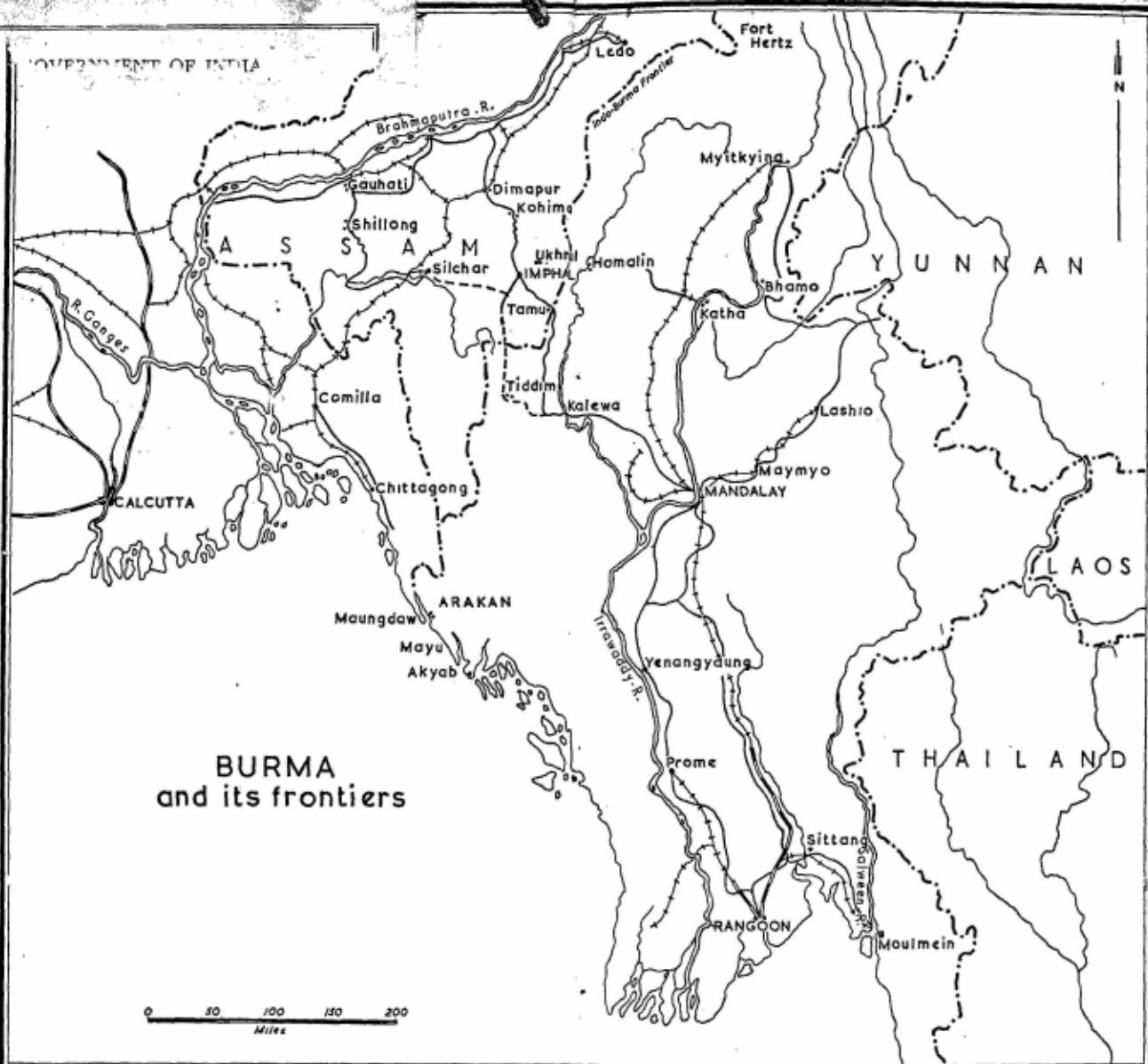
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GOVERNMENT OF INDIA



IMPHAL

Also by Lieutenant-General Sir Geoffrey Evans

THE DESERT AND THE JUNGLE

Also by Antony Brett-James

REPORT MY SIGNALS

BALL OF FIRE

The Fifth Indian Division, 1939-46

THE TRIPLE STREAM

Four Centuries of English, French and German
Literature, 1531-1930

GENERAL GRAHAM, LORD LYNEDOCH

WELLINGTON AT WAR 1794-1815

IMPHAL

A Flower on Lofty Heights

37377

By

Lieutenant-General

SIR GEOFFREY EVANS

K.B.E., C.B., D.S.O.

and

ANTONY BRETT-JAMES

高嶺の花

is a Japanese proverb, pronounced
TAKANE NO HANA, which means literally
'A Flower on Lofty Heights', but proverbially
'Something which, though very tempting, is, after
all, beyond one's reach.'

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Evans

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Maps and sketches specially drawn by
Lieutenant-Colonel J. H. Trim, O.B.E.

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PREFACE

THE Battle for Imphal. The greatest defeat on land ever suffered by the Japanese in the course of their history — a defeat inflicted upon them by British and Indian soldiers and airmen and the United States Army Air Force, after four months of the most violent fighting amid the tangled mass of mountains and jungle in Assam and Burma.

Much was at stake. A British reverse at Imphal would have caused a débâcle of the greatest magnitude. How serious would have been the repercussions, both in India itself and on the Allied cause world wide, is difficult to calculate. And yet because of the very remoteness of this part of the world, it is not surprising that, except for those who fought there or who had near relations or friends in the battle area, comparatively few people know in any detail what went on during those momentous months between March and July 1944.

At the time that these events took place, people in Britain were naturally far too concerned with the enemy on their doorstep, the Normandy landings and the bombing of their homes, to take full account of a battle being fought thousands of miles away in the jungle.

It is primarily with the object of giving all who are interested an opportunity to read of the achievements of our soldiers and airmen in this out-of-the-way place that this book has been written.

We have tried to tell the story of what happened — a story which needs no military background to understand it. To describe Manipur, the inhabitants and the surroundings; and to indicate how Imphal, seemingly isolated from any possible battlefield, bore the impact of war and became a centre of great importance. To tell of the Commanders, both British and Japanese, who planned the various stages of the battle; of their thoughts and reactions; of a fanatical enemy, undoubtedly the toughest and probably the most formidable individual soldier in the world, whose powers of endurance were almost beyond belief and whose great aim was to die for the Emperor on the field of battle.

We have described some of the extraordinary acts of heroism

and self-sacrifice on both sides; the appalling conditions of country, weather and disease in which the fighting took place; the magnificent efforts of the pilots of the Royal Air Force, the Indian Air Force and United States Army Air Force, who flew in all kinds of weather to support the troops on the ground and without whose contribution the outcome might well have been very different.

Here too is some account of those who sifted the information, translated the captured documents and interrogated the prisoners, thereby helping to complete the final Intelligence jigsaw puzzle; of the Staffs and of those responsible for providing the food and ammunition, of the American Field Service, the doctors and nurses and members of the Women's Services, all of whom played such an important part in keeping 4th Corps fit to fight.

Lastly, and most important of all, we have tried to tell of the regimental officers and men who, by their courage, good humour and acceptance of much hardship, had the final say in winning a victory as decisive as any in the Second World War.

Even war has its humorous moments, and some of these too have been included.

We have made no attempt, nor is it within our province, to analyse the battle — to say why this or that went wrong and who was to blame or to point out the lessons to be learnt from master strokes of strategy and tactics. That is the business of official historians.

We would make clear that we have purposely concentrated on the events around Imphal and referred little to the grim fighting at Kohima, although it was closely connected. Our main problem has been not what to include but what to omit so as to keep the book within reasonable limits.

This problem derives largely from the great amount of information both verbal and written which we have acquired through the co-operation of the many people who have generously given us so much of their time. Their keen interest and enthusiasm have been a great encouragement.

The larger proportion of the book originates from interviews with those who were present at the time. Senior Commanders and Staff Officers have told us of their anxieties and problems. Regimental Officers and other ranks, men and women, have described to us incidents and actions in which they took part or which they witnessed. Members of the Indian Civil Service who lived in the

country have recounted events which took place both before and during the battle.

To all of them, and to those who have made available to us many useful books and documents, we are most grateful. If we have left out anything which should have been included we apologise and plead lack of space.

We are greatly indebted to General Sir Geoffrey Scoones, K.C.B., K.B.E., C.S.I., D.S.O., M.C., the Commander of 4th Corps in 1944, for the detailed information he has provided of his thoughts and plans as the battle progressed.

We wish to extend our warmest appreciation and thanks to Mr. K. Gardner, Keeper of the Oriental Printed Books and Manuscripts, British Museum, for his painstaking and invaluable translations.

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London, 1961

G. C. E., A. B.-J.

PART ONE
EARLY DAYS AT IMPHAL



CHAPTER I
MANIPUR

'What do we find when we get there?'
'You'll find a little paradise on earth.'

E. M. Somerville

THE North-West Frontier — for generations the British had known and talked of it and had no need to specify which two countries it divided, for 'the Frontier' meant tribal territory from Quetta to the Khyber Pass and on northwards to Gilgit. The Indian Army served there, year in, year out, and many a British regiment too, as they guarded the mountain passes, manned the forts and sparred with the fierce and wily tribesmen. Amid harsh scenery of grim and jagged hill-crests were fought the pinpricking, hit-and-run engagements or, less often, the full-scale military campaigns. Mules were sniped, convoys ambushed, prisoners mutilated, rearguards cut off, roads booby-trapped and mined. Sometimes stray shots echoed over this wilderness of scrub and rock, sometimes an all-out operation was needed to restore order.

How different, and how unknown, was India's north-east frontier! That, too, had its mountains, but they wore close-woven cloaks of jungle. That, too, had its tribesmen, but they were rarely at war with the Government's armed forces.

To the British living in Calcutta, the provinces of Assam, made up of a warm, densely populated valley with rich tea-gardens and of the surrounding hill tracts and their varied peoples, lay remote and inaccessible beyond the curving, unbridged Brahmaputra. And from its distant isolation civil servants and tea-planters would talk of 'going down into India' when they travelled to Calcutta. Still more difficult of access was the Native State of Manipur, and its chief town, Imphal, barely fifty miles from the Burmese frontier but divided from the central plain of that country not only by a long skein of parallel mountain ranges with few footpaths winding along their wooded flanks to shaggy thatched villages but also by rivers

like the Chindwin. Across the contours of a map, Manipur is four hundred miles to Calcutta, but before 1900 the mere distance meant little, for the journey was extremely arduous and prolonged. No roads capable of bearing wheeled traffic led into Manipur, and only three bridle-paths linked the State with the outside world. The shortest track running south-east to Tamu on the frontier with Burma was little used except by the police and, in the dry season, by petty Manipuri traders; the second track ran into Imphal from Dimapur and Kohima to the north; most important was the path that crossed river and mountain passes for a hundred and thirty miles westwards till it reached Silchar, the headquarters station of Cachar, a neighbouring district of British India.

When Mr. Frank Grimwood, a new Political Agent, went to Imphal with his wife in 1888 the journey from Sylhet took them sixteen days, first by boat up the Surma River, then from Silchar over the hills on horseback. Whereas the heavy baggage was loaded on elephants, a cohort of local coolies carried their lighter baggage and even a tin bath tub which they liked to feel cool on their sweating bare backs. Escorted by Manipuri sepoy who could sport only one uniform to every four men, the Grimwoods travelled from one police post to the next, and crossed rivers by tenuous bridges suspended on cane ropes. On a second journey, Mrs. Grimwood was carried backwards in a cane basket on a strong man's back, much as the bath tub had been carried before.

Mrs. Grimwood left Imphal for the last time in very different circumstances. During the rising of 1891, when rebellious Manipuri troops repelled the attacks on their citadel by heavily outnumbered Gurkhas, she had to watch the shattering of her home — the thatched Residency — and garden by bullets and shellfire. She did her best to make the wounded comfortable in the cellar, where a field hospital had been established, and while the doctor went round working by the light of one dim lantern, she heated soup and mixed condensed milk and water for the casualties.

The British-Gurkha force was obliged to retreat, and Mrs. Grimwood had to travel in white silk blouse, ankle-length blue serge skirt, and most inappropriate thin patent leather slippers. Through a thorn hedge, over a mud wall, slithering down the muddy river bank, wading through the water, and so out on to the rice fields she went. Soon her hands were scratched, her stockings torn, her skirts dripping and heavy with mud. Not for a week after

she had reached safety at Silchar did she learn the fate of her husband, who, with four other British officials, had gone to parley and been treacherously murdered by the Manipuris.

Mrs. Grimwood herself was personally decorated with the Royal Red Cross by Queen Victoria and was hailed by the Press as 'the heroine of Manipur'.

A civil surgeon who went to Imphal in 1891 travelled two hundred and fifty miles on foot from Gauhati on the Brahmaputra through high jungle, in which his cart was often held up by wild elephants until these had been diverted from the narrow forest track by the noisy rattling of kerosene tins. *En route* he found that the flimsy dak¹ bungalows made of grass and bamboo often lacked half the roof, so he was obliged to sleep beneath the protection of an umbrella.

With the turn of the century and the building of the railway to Dimapur (also called Manipur Road — the station for Manipur), most people travelled by rail. Having crossed by river ferry at Gauhati, they sat in a train until the evening, when the welcome shout of 'Manipur Road!' greeted weary passengers, who were only too glad to dismount at the tiny wayside station and sleep in a rest house instead of jolting north-eastwards for a second night up the Brahmaputra valley towards the great tea-gardens of Jorhat and Dibrugarh. In the years soon after the First World War they went to Kohima, and even to Imphal, by pony trap, with baggage following slowly in a squeaking bullock cart; but gradually these ramshackle carts were replaced by lorries, the hire of which was a good deal more expensive. The road² was single track all the way, a good dry weather surface without tarmac except for one short stretch that was tarred as an experiment by the Burma Oil Company, who were also persuaded to lay down a hard tennis court for the Deputy Commissioner of the Naga Hills at Kohima.

From Dimapur the twelve-foot road, which seemed to dominate the lives of people serving in the region, ran east across the plain between forest and paddy fields to a gate at Nichuguard, where strict one-way traffic control was in force. The next four miles lay through a gloomy gorge, with the road cut out of the cliff face, and overhanging the river which flowed two hundred feet below in

¹ The dak is a post for the conveyance of letters; also a relay of horses.

² During the heavy monsoon rains whole sections of the road used to slip, and for weeks on end there might be no through traffic.

a series of rapids and fishermen's pools. Amid prodigal vegetation the road twisted and turned like the river. Then it climbed up the southern flank of a mountain range, whence one obtained an almost aerial view of the Assam plains. Over a saddle went the road and then along the side of a hill for a dozen miles before mounting sharply nearly two thousand feet to the town of Kohima, forty-seven miles from Dimapur.

The next stretch was tortuous, again along the slopes of a mountain, again along a rock ledge, again with a precipice on one side and, on the other, the towering rock face. And so to Mao, nearly six thousand feet up and the highest point on the road. Here was the halting place where up and down traffic changed over, and where drivers waited none too patiently till a policeman opened the gates to the sound of a horn. Otherwise there were no dispersal areas for transport *en route*, and it was almost impossible to get off the road except over the precipice! One drove forward along spurs and re-entrants and round blind corners, over another saddle at Maram and then down into undulating country between mountain ranges covered with scrub and trees, past hillocks of bright green, and through deep gorges. Sixty miles from Kohima lies Kangpokpi, where the scenery is hilly and well wooded, almost reminiscent of Scotland. Then the road, passing through another gorge and between lines of silvery oaks, debouches into the Imphal plain.

When, on the second day of 1942, an Army matron who had spent her leave with relatives in Imphal left to go back into India, she met during the customary traffic halt a group of Royal Engineers who had arrived from the north.

'Where have you come from?' was their first question.

'I've come from Imphal,' she replied.

'Oh! Wherever is it? We'd never heard of the place, and we've already been on the way from Bangalore for ten days.'

'Well, you're not far away now.'

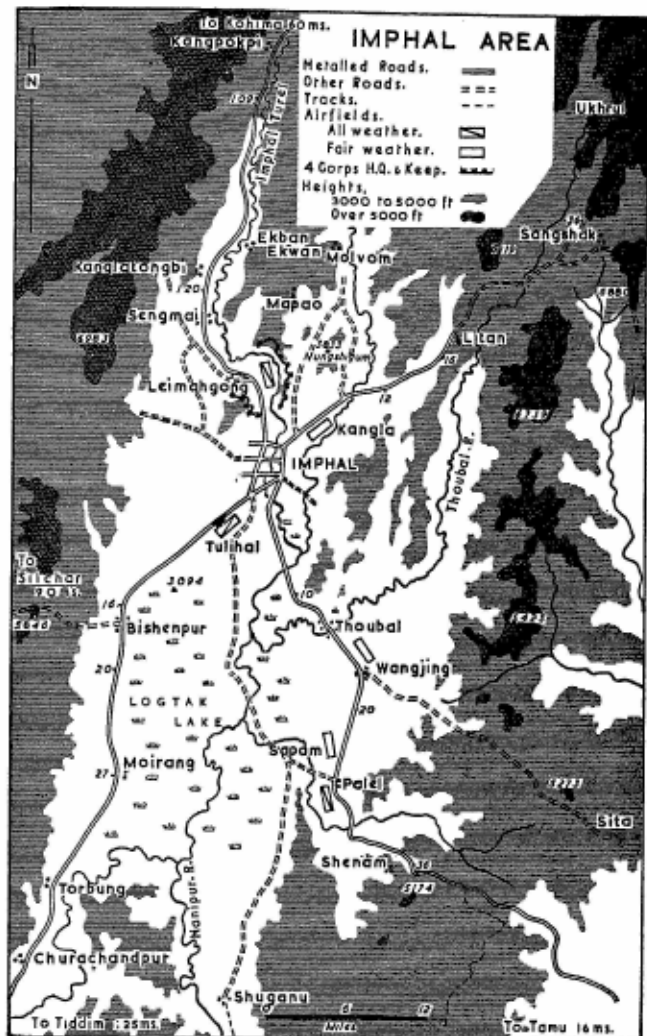
'Good! That's a relief. But where is it? What is it? What do we find when we get there?'

'You'll find a little paradise on earth.'

Imphal — the name is a corruption of *yum*, the Manipuri word for a house; and *phal*, 'to gather' — is a conglomeration of villages almost buried in groves of plantain trees and bamboo which, growing in the garden of every thatched house, cast shadows into dank ponds. Through this green labyrinth the muddy Manipur

IMPHAL AREA

- Metalled Roads. ———
- Other Roads. - - - -
- Tracks.
- Airfields. [Symbol]
- All weather. [Symbol]
- Fair weather. [Symbol]
- 4 Corps H.Q. & Keep. [Symbol]
- Heights, 3000 to 5000 ft. [Symbol]
- Over 5000 ft. [Symbol]



River courses sluggishly south past the loop-holed masonry walls of the old citadel, past the former palace of the rajas, under one iron and three timber bridges and so out into rice fields, swamps, lakes and the Chin Hills beyond. When viewed from aircraft or hilltop, only the glittering gold-leaved temple domes and the white palace strike the eye amid so much lush greenery.

Bamboo hedges enclose the villages of the plain, half hidden among mango trees and groves of bamboo, in rectangles which are cut by one or two tracks. Inside are the thatched huts, generally built of wattle and daub or of bamboo matting covered with mud, and with a hard earth floor raised a foot to reduce the risk of flooding.

Beside the ragged huts stand a few superior buildings of wood and plaster. From their midst rise thin spirals of bluish smoke against the dark trees and the lighter, rustling bamboo leaves. Drawn by a pair of drowsy beasts, some white, some brown like Jersey cattle, bullock carts, made of wood and bamboo and usually roofed over with matting, lurch along the roads grinding and squeaking noisily, laden with wood or sacks of grain or other produce for the market or homestead.

In February a purple iris flowers abundantly on marshy ground, while white jasmine splashes the hedgerows and white dog-roses bloom along the river banks. Bunds and dry nullahs intersect the green hill-framed plain and criss-cross the rice fields. The earth, waiting for the monsoon in May, is parched and hard and yellow with stubble. Furrows of dust puff up along the roads, such as they are, so that peasants trudging to market cover nose and mouth to avoid being choked when vehicles pass. Later, when torrential rain slashes down each day for an hour or two at a time, the ground is soon inches deep in mud, the puddles widen, the streams rush faster, and stretches of paddy field lie out under water. No longer can the Manipur River be forded near Imphal. Within a week of the monsoon's advent the cattle swell like great drums, and one can see the grass growing taller overnight.

From afar the near hills resemble the Sussex Downs, though the grass is long and coarse, often almost impenetrable to a walker. and they tower as high and steep above the valley as parts of the Lake District. Trees grow on the ridges and in every narrow gully. Bushes, floppy-leaved banana trees and a few huts dot the bare hillsides, across which curl ochre footpaths.

Imphal and its environs abound in a great variety of fauna: flying foxes; exquisite birds — and some less alluring, like the 'brain-fever bird' with its exasperating call, which pitches higher and higher until one thinks it will burst; leeches as thick as one's finger, reputed to bite at both ends; barking deer; and, of course, snakes such as cobras, kraits and rat snakes.

The story is told of a Signals corporal who, while on line duty, met a cobra which reared up at him out of the grass. He pulled out his revolver and with the first shot blew the cobra's head off, a very remarkable feat, since the corporal was well known to be an exceptionally poor shot. Some wag put forward the theory that cobras had unusually quick eyesight, and that this one must have seen the bullet coming and struck at it as it passed!

Drenching and relentless, the monsoon rain gives way only to the sun, which in its turn draws steam from the earth and foliage. The skies change from azure to heavy-laden grey, from wispy white to the diluted indigo tones of storm clouds. When the sun shines the whole land glistens; but the darkening lights across the green hills are also impressive in their sudden force and transitory effects.

The slopes and summits of the surrounding mountains that rise to eight thousand feet and more are covered with dense evergreen forest, and with the ranges nowhere more than a dozen miles away on three sides, it is hard to realise that the Manipur plain itself is two thousand six hundred feet above sea-level.

This plain, a former lake-bed now intensively cultivated, extends for over seven hundred square miles, and is splodged with lakes and marshes in the southern part. Some of these, thick with reeds and water-hyacinth, dry up in hot weather and can be traversed on foot; but several of the largest, in particular the Logtak Lake, have water all the year round and islands protruding like floating hillocks, on each of which a village has been built. Here fly the wild duck and geese, the teal and snipe. Here, too, are the haunts of brown antlered deer, while sometimes a tiger or leopard lurks in the foothill foliage.

The duck-shooting has long been famous, and the birds are so numerous that they darken the sky as they rise with a whirring roar. At Christmas, the great season for shooting parties, officers and officials, visitors and members of the ruling house would drive south to the Logtak Lake and be taken by boat to hide-out butts

devised by local *shikaris*. There, concealed by reeds, the guns awaited the dawn rising of the birds.¹

Sport was easy in peacetime Imphal. First of all came Manipuri hockey on horseback, otherwise known as polo. In the long period of warfare with Burma, the game probably served as a training for the Manipuri cavalry, who, once they could get down into the Burmese plains, had a better chance of worsting their enemies than ever the State infantry had. One Manipuri king even invaded Cachar to avenge the theft of his favourite polo pony. When British tea-planters first took up the game in Cachar during the nineteenth century it was from Manipuris that they learnt to play, and their polo club at Silchar was the first of its kind in the world. Soon the Indian Army followed their example.

The President of the Manipur Darbar, a junior member of the Indian Civil Service nominated by the Chief Commissioner of Assam, had on his staff seven local professional players, so that if he, or the Maharaja, the Political Agent, the officers of the Assam Rifles or any important visitor wanted to play, two teams could easily be mustered on the field. At one time the chief Manipuri professional was serving a long term of imprisonment for rape, but every Friday he was let out of Imphal Jail to play polo, returning after the game to his cell. Dressed in plush jacket, coloured turban, dhoti² and bright red leggings, a Manipuri player would ride barefoot, grasping the stirrup iron between his big and second toes. The local ponies, ridden on a double-ringed snaffle and protected from the impact of the polo ball by rosettes fastened here and there and by soft cotton balls hanging from the saddle or strung on cords, were so small — usually eleven or twelve hands — that if a player dropped his stick he could bend down and pick it up again without dismounting. Their polo sticks, cut from special canes growing by the Logtak Lake, were unusually long, so that if the ball was just out of reach, a player merely let out more stick, whereas if the ball lay inconveniently near the riding line, he reversed the process and shortened his grip.

¹ When a Governor of Assam visited Manipur, everyone was so anxious to give him a good shoot that all shooting was stopped for a month beforehand. Unfortunately the Governor was a poor shot and was reported to have bagged one snipe only. At dinner that night one lady asked him in fun if it was his snipe she was eating. He looked at her over his glasses and said: 'Why, isn't it dead yet?'

² A cloth, usually white, worn round the waist passing between the legs and fastened behind.

It would be wrong to assume that in Manipur the game was reserved for professionals and potentates. On the contrary, the villagers enjoyed many a rough but excellent game, played mostly on the village's own grazing ground — and on communal ponies which had little to eat except paddy and what they could graze. Sometimes there might be as many as two dozen players on each side, and, with no rules about crossing or crooking sticks, hard knocks and even harder falls were frequent.



Sreela Sree Astottara Satajukta Manipureswar His Highness Maharaja Sir Churachand Singhjee Bahadur, K.C.S.I., C.B.E., Bhakta Rajarshi Sree Kunda Seva Binoda Dharma Palaka Beerchuramani Dampingamba Huyen Langsaiphaba Goura Bhakti Rasarnaba, who as a six-year-old boy had been selected as ruler in 1891 and installed in 1907, had six wives, and from them six daughters and five sons and one son adopted by the Maharani. Like his predecessors, he was presumed to be descended from Pakhangba, the mythical sacred snake which is said to have reigned for two hundred and twenty years: his notepaper proclaimed the fact, and so did his coat of arms.¹ Pakhangba lived in a hole, over which at 'coronations' the Maharaja was seated in a chair. Water poured over him would then splash and drip down on to the head and shoulders of his personal 'sin-bearer', a Manipuri who, in consideration of a reward of tax-free land, received the sins washed from the new occupant of the *gadi*, or cushioned throne.

In the white wedding-cake of a pseudo-Rajput palace, designed by a British engineer, was kept a pebul-wood effigy of the snake deity, and this was never allowed to be moved in a westerly direction, because to have done so would have implied retreating from the traditional enemy — Burma.

If this particular restriction had a logical basis, several others looked like sheer superstition, but then the Manipuris — not least their ruling house — were superstitious by nature. When one Political Agent, at the close of the last century, wished to build a new Residency on a small hill outside Imphal he was obliged to abandon his excellent plan because the Darbar objected on the

¹ During the 1939-45 war the next Maharaja wanted to institute an order of the Holy Snake of Manipur, with two classes, one gold, one silver. A list of recipients was drawn up, but he was not allowed to go ahead with his plan.

grounds that the hill was haunted by an evil spirit inimical to the royal family, and therefore the Maharaja would never be able to visit the projected new house.

Nineteenth-century rulers of Manipur had three court jesters, who appeared with their faces painted in streaks, their eyebrows whitened and their heads tufted like a poodle's tail. Jesters had gone, but soothsayers and astrologers still exerted a powerful influence. For instance, the Maharaja was not permitted to go north on a Tuesday, particular days being deemed inauspicious for travel in each direction. Thus, if one Tuesday His Highness felt it imperative to move in a northerly direction, he would use the stratagem of changing his bedroom on the previous night for one a few yards farther north within the Palace. In this way he started his northward journey on the Monday, which was allowed!

It was the Maharaja's annual custom — one that was much appreciated by the beneficiaries — to give a Christmas cake to each member of the British Reserve. These sumptuous cakes were made and delivered to the Palace by the well-known Calcutta firm of Firpo, and would then be handed in at each bungalow by one of the royal daughters. One year — nobody ever discovered why — the Maharaja must have taken umbrage over some slight or misdeed, for he did not place his regular order for cakes, but instead donated a cabbage grown by convicts in the Jail garden.

These convicts — some of them serving terms for cattle theft or dacoity — used to be taken out in gangs to cut wood or clear the Palace moat. They also worked in the Jail workshop and garden, producing bamboo baskets and mustard oil, or they laboured to combat malaria in the swampy parts of the Manipur Valley. At the end of the day a gang of convicts armed with *dao* knives and axes would often be seen returning from a woodcutting expedition. Behind walked the warder in charge, and in the rear came another convict who carried the rifle which the warder could not be bothered to hold. Sometimes when they reached a road the warder would catch the bus to Imphal, leaving his charges to make their own unguarded way back to jail.

Back in the 'eighties women convicted of serious crimes were never put to death, but instead were exposed on a high platform in the bazaar, stripped to the waist and their breasts daubed with red. There the guilty one would stand, a guard holding the rope, while the town crier proclaimed her crime and shouted, 'Come and look

at this wicked woman!' Men who committed murder used to be put to death in the way in which they had killed their victims, but one Political Agent was instrumental in getting the ruler to adopt hanging as the mode of execution.

There was a time, within living memory, when a man who had been condemned to death had to run¹ south some forty miles to a place called Shuganu (meaning 'Don't touch it'), and as he passed through each village on the way people turned out to beat him. Thus he ran the gauntlet until, on reaching Shuganu, he was placed in a pit so that only his head showed above ground. Then the executioner would break the man's skull with a club. Just outside the Jail public hangings still took place up to the Second World War.

Every evening saw the people crowding to the Sena Keitel, or Golden Market, opposite the Palace, and to the more important bazaar in the British Reserve. Through paddy fields, over wooden bridges and along past the polo ground walked files of chattering women who held on their heads baskets filled with produce and pottery, and even carried babies on their backs as well. Amid the dust one saw the whirling green and scarlet and purple of their close-wrapped *phaneks*, pretty striped garments which, wrapped sheath-like across their breasts and tucked rather than knotted under the armpits, fell to the ankles and left the shoulders bare. Above these was the white or yellow of muslin shawl and head-dress — the women tied their hair in a knot behind; and sometimes a small green velvet zouave jacket was added.

The men, mostly short, muscular and spare in build, dressed in noticeably clean white loincloth and shirt, and of a chill evening might cover their shoulders with green wraps, while in wet weather they added the protection of umbrellas, a sign of status among the Manipuris. Another such sign was a wrist-watch, even if it did not go; and bicycles were much in evidence.² They are pleasant people, the Manipuris, independent but courteous. The men,

¹ Two British officials were breakfasting on the Residency verandah one morning. 'See that man there?' remarked the Political Agent. 'That man is a thief.'

'How do you know that?' asked his companion, in some astonishment.

'Nobody but a thief would run in Imphal.'

² When war came, the Manipuris as a whole proved themselves very loyal to the British. One of the least reasons, as far as the young men were concerned, was that the Japanese had sold them poor bicycles which kept on breaking down!

being ardent gamblers and devoted to their sports, are far from industrious, but are clean and much given to washing on a river bank.

The bazaar was no less a social gathering than a market. Here several hundred women, the great traders of Manipur and far more hard working than their menfolk, sat crosslegged in long rows either on raised earth banks in the open or under long shallow booths roofed with corrugated iron, and sold cloths woven and dyed at home, rice, fruit, vegetables and red earthenware jars. Muslims and hill-men dealt in chickens in a separate part of the bazaar. Not only would villagers bring in food and other wares from outside, but Imphal women would walk for miles across the valley to buy goods in outlying villages for resale that evening in the capital.

Often the bazaar reeked of sun-dried fish in evil-smelling baskets, for despite the little contact with India, from time to time some Manipuris would walk all the way to Calcutta and buy a large amount of a certain type of fish; by the time they had made the long journey back to Imphal the fish was so 'high' as to be thought a delicacy. Professional letter-writers sat to do their business, and when writing petitions to authority indulged in effusively exalted addresses such as 'Your Majesty' for the President of the Darbar. To and fro the chatter of high-pitched voices and gusts of laughter swept from stall to stall, for the women had a keen sense of humour and laughed as readily as they sang and danced. At dusk the great bazaar square would be crowded, and one by one the scores of tiny lamps would come alight and gleam on the long rows of women seated behind their goods: white muslins, gaily coloured quilts and loin-cloths, brass-ware. There sat also the sellers of food, of betel and coconut. And one's nostrils quivered to the scents and smells, the spices and dust and smoke of this glowing scene.

There was also a regular dog fair, where local pi-dogs which had been tugged into town were sold for food. They were often so wild that they had to be led, not on a cord or chain but on a rope passed through a six-foot hollow length of bamboo to prevent the animal from chewing through this rope rather than to keep it at a safe distance. These dogs had usually been starved for several days and then, a few hours before departure, stuffed with a heavy meal of rice. Manipuris did not eat them, but the Nagas did — roasted or served with curry and rice, and deemed a tonic. Less often they were used for hunting.

Off the main street of the bazaar, with its white buildings containing banks, leather and dress shops, could be found Indian tailors at work, and little Indian restaurants.

Since the wars and raiding parties there had been few links between Manipur and Burma. The route southwards over the frontier to Tiddim, hardly even a bridle-path, was seldom used except for an occasional meeting of the Political Agent of Manipur and British administrators from the Chin Hills, when disputes between hillmen living on opposite sides of the frontier were disposed of. Chiefs and litigants often came from villages up to seven days' march away, and these meetings not only provided impartial justice but were also social occasions for the hill people. On the south-eastern route into Burma the police manned a post at Tamu, but movement to and fro was not restricted, and once off the main tracks a traveller merely stepped over the border and no one knew he had crossed. It might have been expected that itinerant craftsmen and merchants would make their way into Manipur from the east, but they rarely did so. It was the humble cheroot so loved by Burmese men and women that formed a trade-link between the two States, since the almost papier-mâché-like outside of mealies, in which the chopped tobacco for these cheroots was wrapped, was not grown in Burma.

* * *

The Maharaja and his Darbar ruled with only the rarest interference from British authority. Indeed, one former President, Mr. Edward Lydall, recalls but a single disagreement with the ruler during four years: His Highness insisted that every god in the Manipuri calendar should be celebrated with a public holiday, but as this would have meant nearly one day in three as a holiday, the issue was taken to the Governor of Assam, who was able to dissuade the Maharaja from his well-meaning but disruptive course.

The decisions of the Darbar applied to the dwellers in the plain. In the past the strict Hindu Manipuris had exercised a loose sovereignty over the beef-eating and dog-eating hill tribes, whom they regarded as being on a lower plane of life; and so long as the tribes carried out the duties imposed on them, such as providing soldiers or porters, menial servants or produce, their way of life was little interfered with, though failure to obey orders brought drastic punishment. For instance, in the head-hunting territories

the State had only to arm several friendly villages and let them enter a recalcitrant village and find their reward in heads, loot and arson — the retribution of massacre and destruction. By and large, the Manipuris did not rule harshly, but until 1891 at least they extracted as much profit as they could and spent scarcely a rupee in return.

In order to give the hill tribes an administration akin to that of the hill districts of Assam, and also to relieve them of any fear of oppression by the Manipuris, from 1907 onwards control of the hills — an area of some eight thousand square miles — remained the personal responsibility of the President of the Darbar.

Whereas in the valley most of the inhabitants were of one race, and closely populated, the hill people, nearly two hundred thousand of them in 1941, were scattered in separate villages with from half a dozen to four hundred houses, and comprised many different tribes having their own customs and languages. Amid this diversity two main cultures stand out: the Naga and the Kuki, between which can be traced certain broad distinctions. Naga villages, usually built on hilltops, are defended by ditches, stone walls, spiked bamboo palisades and thorn fences; but Kuki villages, besides being a good deal smaller, have no such fortifications. Then again, while the Nagas live in permanent villages and have a private right of ownership in the fields they cultivate — the lack of broad open valleys has led various Naga tribes to evolve, with the utmost skill and perseverance, a complicated system of terraced fields, which are watered by channels diverted from the hillside streams — the Kukis, as might be expected from a nomadic people, cultivate communal village land which is allotted each year by the chief. Thus the rights of the actual cultivator cover only the crop which he grows and not the land on which he grows it. When one piece of ground has been exhausted the Kukis move to another, and even build a new village.

In days gone by a great deal of bad feeling between Nagas and Kukis had stemmed from the fact that the Kacha Nagas in the southern part of the Naga Hills had been dominated by Kukis before the British assumed control. Kuki hamlets would be established alongside a Naga village, and the Kukis would squat on land which had originally been Naga. In more recent years the troubles between the two races had been few: damaging each other's fields, village boundary disputes, cattle thefts and an occasional riot in-

spired by rice beer consumed at ceremonial inter-village visits after the annual rice harvest. The few police were not allowed to interfere in any dispute in a Naga village, and mostly they were used for traffic control, to prevent the looting of bullock carts on the road and to check the passes of the rare foreigners who found their way to Kohima and Imphal — an occasional anthropologist or collector of butterflies or monkey skins.

The Assam Rifles, who had one battalion at Kohima and another, the 4th, at Imphal, were a reserve to be used only on rare occasions when there seemed a likelihood of tribal warfare or very serious trouble. Acting as a sort of military police under the orders of the Superintendent of Police for Assam, their peacetime role was to show the British flag, and from time to time to go out on column in order to impress the tribes with the presence of British rule. Four British officers — a commandant and three assistants, usually from Gurkha regiments — were in charge, and most of the six hundred soldiers were Gurkhas, with a leavening of Naga, Kuki and Lushei hillmen. The 4th Battalion, who as Rifles marched to a light infantry quick step, manned three outposts: at Ukhrul to the east, at Tamenlong to the west and at Churachandpur on the southern edge of the plain — each a three-day march from headquarters. These outposts, square fortified buildings surrounded by walls of earth strengthened with stone and timber, were in communication, not by telephone or wireless — even Imphal had only telegraph communication with the outside world — but by pigeon (the Manipuris were great pigeon fanciers) or by runner. Supply columns, noisy with ponies and bullocks trained to carry packs, would almost always be on their way out to, or returning from, one or other of the outposts.

Others who went on tour in the hills were the British Political Agent, who, with servants, coolies and interpreters but no armed escort, walked along the hard, primitive paths worn through the jungle by generations of villagers; the State Engineer, who had to inspect bridges, roads and other public works; and the Civil Surgeon, who paid visits to his local dispensaries.

Leprosy, goitre, scabies and yaws were the diseases most prevalent among the hill people, who were visited by a travelling dispensary when they could not reach one of the eight dispensaries in the hills around Imphal. The town itself had a civil hospital with eighty beds, also several wards for tubercular patients in a

separate village, and five more dispensaries in the valley. There would be sporadic outbreaks of smallpox and cholera — one terrible epidemic in 1924 killed over ten thousand people — a great many cases of dysentery and always malaria. Indeed, more than one Burmese attempt to occupy Manipur failed because the invaders quickly became decimated by malaria contracted in the jungle on the way.

In 1940 about ten per cent of the dwellers in the Manipur Valley were Muslim, most of whom came originally from Cachar as captives or traders. Though they married Manipuri women and spoke the language, they were kept separate as far as possible, in order to lessen the chances of offending Hindu susceptibilities.

The hill tribes, though subject to Manipur State for generations, were neither Manipuris nor Hindus. The majority still held to the animistic beliefs of their ancestors, but during this century large numbers have embraced Christianity offered to them by the American Baptist Mission.



CHAPTER II
WAR COMES TO IMPHAL

'Let us beware, we have not heard the last of Manipur!'

Major-General Sir James Johnstone, 1895

THE British Political Agent from 1933 until after the end of the war was Christopher Gimson, a tall, upright, dignified bachelor with a fine head, a firm but benevolent expression, a courtly charm of manner and a twinkle behind his spectacles. After studies at Oundle and Emmanuel College, Cambridge, he went to India in 1911 as a man of twenty-four, and worked as sub-divisional officer, magistrate and settlement officer before being appointed to Imphal just after the First World War as President of the Darbar. There he spent two years, and in 1933 returned to the State, this time as Political Agent, who represented the Viceroy in Manipur.

He occupied the single-storied red brick Residency, with its façade partitioned by stucco Corinthian columns. In the extensive gardens, shaded by poplar, mango and jacaranda trees, neat lawns were flanked by beds of snapdragon or lupin, while rich purple bougainvillea sprawled over roofs and walls, and sweet peas grew so tall that a step-ladder was required when picking them. A scimitar-shaped lotus-pool caught the sun or was battered by the monsoon shafts; and in one corner of the gardens a little walled cemetery contained the graves of British officers who had died in Manipur. But above all the British Reserve had six superb grass tennis courts, among the finest in the world. Gimson, himself an excellent player, gave tennis parties for the dozen British residents at week-ends. Two courts would be played on at a time, while the others were revived with sand and dung and the ministrations of twenty-four gardeners. On Sunday evenings friends would come to dine and to enjoy a choice from his wide collection of some two thousand gramophone records, to which the great E. M. Ginn horn did full justice. Beside it a native bearer robed in scarlet and gold livery would wait to change the needles and turn each record.

Perhaps the most awkward situation with which Gimson had

to deal in peacetime was the second *nupi lan*, or women's war. Besides selling in the bazaar, the Manipuri women were politically influential, tough in support of their claims and grievances, and more ready than the men to exert pressure and take a lead, so much so that from time to time they acted in a most high-handed manner. In 1904, for example, during the first *nupi lan*, they demonstrated for a week when the British Political Agent temporarily introduced forced labour for making the Manipuris rebuild his assistant's bungalow, which had been burnt down.

Thirty years later a President of the Darbar was thrown into a water tank for trying to take steps to collect the water rate. 'Well,' said the women in ominously genial tones, 'if you are so interested in water, in you go!' And in he splashed. On account of a fishery dispute his successor narrowly avoided being ducked in the Logtak Lake by a hostile female crowd. He went out by boat with the leading men, while the women waited threateningly on the shore. The President was a canny Scot, and while still in the boat and out of reach, he granted the necessary, and reasonable, concession, thus denying the anticipation of the women, whose mood changed to joyful welcome when they learnt the good news.

Finally, in December 1939, occurred the second *nupi lan*. That year the cost of rice was already high, the prospect of a poor harvest threatened worse and for some time the unpopular Marwari¹ merchants had been buying up all obtainable paddy and then exporting it. Incensed by this policy and anxious for the future, several hundred women walked to the State Office and demanded from Mr. T. Sharpe, the President of the Darbar, that he should instantly forbid the export of rice. Other women went to the length of lying down on the road in front of lorries which were about to take loads of rice to Manipur Road. Sharpe replied that as he could give no such order without the prior sanction of the Maharaja, who was inconveniently in Bengal, a telegram must be sent.

Major P. H. Cummins, the Civil Surgeon, who had been warned of impending trouble by his servant, came on the scene, just in time to accompany Sharpe to the Telegraph Office. The crowds of chattering women followed. Once inside the office, the President and Civil Surgeon were not allowed to leave. Why? They must

¹ These men, who came from in and around Jodhpur, Rajputana, were the money-lenders of Assam, and in Imphal they had practically a monopoly of the export trade, and handled a good deal of internal trade also.

await the Maharaja's reply. But this might take two or three days. All protests were in vain. The female throng, now swollen to about four thousand, effectively laid siege to the Telegraph Office. Cummins, however, managed to slip a note to his driver, who was allowed to pass unmolested. The note, besides requesting coffee and sandwiches, also summoned military help, for some hot-heads and amazonian ringleaders at the back had excitedly begun to hurl stones and smash the office windows.

Colonel Bulfield, Commandant of the Assam Rifles, arrived next, but he too was detained. His troops, however, by pushing with their rifles and maybe jerking down a few *phaneks*, dispersed the crowd, though in the process several women were bruised by rifle butts or scratched by bayonets. No one was seriously hurt, but the very most was made of the slightest hurt, not a few women feigned injuries, and bitter protests were lodged. Cummins succeeded in getting most of the victims treated inside the office, and a few were smuggled out at the back and away to hospital; so that when some Congress agitators demanded to see the injured they were discomfited to learn that there were none to be seen, except at the hospital.

Next day came the Maharaja's reply: the export of rice was to be stopped. Orders to this effect were issued at once; whereupon the women, though many of them roamed through the bazaar terrorising shop-keepers, focused their attention on the rice mills, which lay about three miles outside Imphal. They had extorted written promises from the owners that they would not work their mills for export, but later that day, on learning that one mill-owner had soaked and boiled some paddy to make parboiled rice, a large and angry crowd marched on the principal mill. Meanwhile a deputation went to the Residency and said to Mr. Gimson, who had been away on tour when the trouble started and had hurriedly driven back on receiving the news from a runner: 'You have got to stop this milling. It is still going on, and occasionally a lorry sneaks out from the mills.' The Political Agent replied that as the export of rice had temporarily been stopped, they need not worry. Despite this assurance, the spokeswomen were not satisfied. 'Oh! We don't trust that. This is what the Darbar and His Highness said. *You* may believe it, but *we* don't. We are not sure we believe you either.'

The women were certainly outspoken. They were also prepared

to back their words with action, and this meant the burning of the mills, if the authorities failed to act. Accordingly, Gimson drove out to the mills, but such was the throng of nearly fifteen thousand beautifully dressed women, that he could barely steer a passage down the road.

'Sahib! Stop this milling!' cried the women.

'We have stopped it.'

To this they retorted: 'Those Marwaris can mill whether you know about it or not. The only way you can stop this milling is to have the switches taken out.'

And this was what Gimson eventually had to do before the angry throng would disperse.

These mills were run off the State hydro-electric plant which had been built by a former State Engineer, Mr. Jeffery. The Maharaja having decided that Imphal would benefit from a supply of electricity, the Engineer sent for a manual on how to erect a hydro-electric plant, of which he had no first-hand experience. He studied the instructions, and then he and his men set to work. Jeffery made only one error. The wires bringing the current into Imphal were, not unreasonably, set one above the other. Alas! Of an evening huge fruit bats used to swoop down on the top wire, alight with enthusiasm on this new parking line and then hang down on to the lower wire. Instantly a minor explosion, a short-circuit, several dead fruit bats and a black-out. This sequence was repeated for several evenings, until the State Engineer had the wires set side by side. Thereafter the bats could alight and hang down without danger, and the lights did not fail.

In September 1941, after reigning for exactly fifty years, Maharaja Sir Churachand Singhjee announced his intentions of abdicating, because he was very ill with tuberculosis; but he died before his wishes could be put into effect, and was succeeded by his eldest son, Maharajkumar Bodhchandra Singh, then aged thirty-three. Bodhchandra's jet black hair, bobbed and long, surmounted features reminiscent of certain portraits of Oscar Wilde, and for his age he was unduly stout, weighing sixteen stone.

Bodhchandra's accession to the throne almost coincided with the coming of the Second World War to Asia. In 1940 and 1941 the war had no direct impact on Manipur, which still remained one of the world's peaceful beauty spots. True it is that British members of the Imphal club discussed strategy and schemes for defeating

the Germans, and sometimes they wondered whether their pensions were safe, but otherwise the war seemed very remote. Not until the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbour on December 7th, 1941, did the possibility of war reaching India emerge, and even then it seemed improbable.

But not for long. Within ten weeks all Malaya and even Singapore had fallen to their onslaught. By March 7th, 1942, their conquest of the Dutch East Indies was complete. Already Japanese troops had entered Burma from Siam, and on the same black day Rangoon was given up. This could only mean the loss of the country, for our divisions had been forced back, first to the River Salween, then to the Sittang. By the end of March the Japanese advance up the central Irrawaddy plain had reached Toungoo, and a month later they were clamouring at the outskirts of Mandalay.

Imphal, which had seemed so far removed from any possible battle front, felt the war approaching without stealth and all too rapidly. This town in its peaceful valley protected by allegedly impenetrable hills was to become a forward supply depot, a staging post for reinforcements entering Burma, a building-up point. With disquieting abruptness everything seemed to go into reverse. The Burma Army was coming back. A camp for thirty thousand men was to be set up. Tents, gathered from every corner of India, were sent to Imphal under the most urgent priorities. Tarpaulins were brought from the tea-gardens of Assam.

Along the usually deserted roads and tracks stumbled exhausted, fear-ridden, desperate refugees. In Burma a million Indians, whose industry had fostered resentment in the more easy-going Burmese, felt themselves the hated minority, and, foreseeing that a Japanese invasion would mean a chance for the natives of the country to persecute them, left in their thousands by sea as soon as the Japanese crossed the frontier. Many others travelled north along the coast and were taken off by boats from Akyab. Others again went up central Burma and fled across the Chindwin towards India. Their route led them almost inevitably through Tamu to Imphal.¹ As early as January they began arriving: Indian coolies, dock labourers from Rangoon, household servants, and their

¹ When the Japanese took Kalewa and closed this route the refugees had to go farther north to Myittha, expecting to be evacuated by air, but there were too few aircraft, and after the airfield had been bombed on May 6th even these could not land.

women and children. Anglo-Indian and Anglo-Burmese refugees struggled along the tracks; British families who had been in oil or timber, even a few Italians and Swedes, were numbered in the throng.

Malnutrition was their worst enemy. Disease was another. Hundreds collapsed and died. Cars and luggage were abandoned on the roadside. Fire engines from Rangoon were left by the Chindwin, and for lack of room between decks on the ferry steamers, ambulances also. Perhaps it was just as well that most of the refugees had set off weeks before in ignorance of just how far away the Indian frontier lay. Nor did they foresee the hardships of the trail.

A refugee camp was established just north of Imphal at Koirengei. Here they came in their hundreds. Many had no money or spare clothing. Many, above all the women and children, were desperately ill. On most days the road was packed, until one felt one must be emerging from a football stadium. For thousands of refugees India had become the promised land. Manipur was for them not India. They must go farther, beyond the Brahmaputra, in their search of safety. Attempts to persuade them to stop at Kanglatongbi were in vain. They were promised food and shelter if only they would get off the road and allow the Army convoy to pass through, but to such inducements they remained impervious. Day and night the march went on. Those who dropped out lay where they fell.¹ Vultures waiting above the refugee camps and halting-places could be seen from afar. Every night a score of corpses was buried lest an epidemic break out. Children were leaving their parents, and parents their children. The farther they walked, the less they carried. The scenes were pathetic. In one family, where the mother had died on the road, the boys and girls were quarrelling over money and walked in two separate groups, a distance apart. Some Indians were half starved. Many had lost most of the members of their family on the long trudge from Rangoon or Pegu or Toungoo.

Amid the anguish and disorder several fine endeavors stand out. Padre Jones, for example, collected some hundreds of refugee children and tended their wounds, nursed their sickness, bathed

¹ Even as late as November 1942 battalions moving into training camps near the road had to bury skeletons of refugees who had died and remained undetected.

them and cared for them as a father and a man of God. But there were, alas! a few sordid Army and civilian drivers who would accept bribes of a hundred or two rupees to take groups of plaintive refugees a few miles up the road in their lorries and then unload them in favour of the highest bidder. By contrast, another parson named Molyneux, who had walked out of Burma, stayed behind at Koirengei to manage the camp. He and his Indian helpers saved hundreds if not thousands of lives by their efforts. But as many as ten thousand refugees waited at a time for a lorry to take them north, and while they waited dysentery, malaria, even smallpox killed off twenty to fifty a day. By April 1942 the shortage of lorries was such that only those refugees strong enough to trudge to Dimapur were able to go on. In Imphal the price of food, especially rice, rose sharply, and such things as atta, dal, flour and sugar became almost unobtainable. The monsoon rains brought fresh problems. Latecomers straggled into the valley, exhausted, feverish, weakened by hunger and by the three to four days' march through almost uninhabited and malaria-ridden jungle tracts from the Chindwin.

When the refugees did reach Dimapur, the metre-gauge single-track railway was limited to the hopelessly inadequate total of twelve trains a day — inadequate because the total of thirty-six thousand who arrived in April increased to more than fifty thousand in May. Only thereafter did the flow ease from a torrent to a stream and eventually to a trickle. In all about one hundred and fifty thousand refugees passed through Dimapur on their way to hospitals or to better-equipped camps. Another thirty-seven thousand went by way of Bishenpur and the track to Silchar. Along this route, thanks to Gimson's foresight, three camps, two of them by river crossings, had been set up and stocked with food by the Indian Tea Association, while at Silchar itself refugees, many of whom were taken on the last part of the journey by river steamer or lorry, found a dispersal camp manned by doctors and by a women's voluntary unit which provided clothes and hot meals.

When the throng of refugees was at its peak, when the camps were overflowing, when those in charge were almost at their wits' end trying to stop epidemics, yet another danger became a reality. With the Japanese now so close to India, the threat of air raids had become an ever-increasing danger. Certain precautions had already

been taken by the authorities and a black-out imposed on Imphal and the nearby villages.

Whereas public slit trenches had been dug round the bazaar and along the main streets, the Manipuri householders had been told to dig their own trenches. A band of local youths was trained to use stirrup pumps in case of fire. On a hilltop south of Imphal a section of Assam Rifles waited and watched, with orders that as soon as they saw or heard an aircraft — the Manipuris had never done either in their lives — they were to heliograph a message to headquarters, whereupon the siren warning would be sounded.

In April Japanese reconnaissance planes began to fly over nearly every day. The siren whined, but never a bomb dropped. After a sequence of false alarms the warnings became little more than tiresome interruptions to the day's leisurely routine, and seldom they were regarded with scant respect. Indeed, Gimson recalls that when the siren did sound mid-morning on May 10th, he said to his assistant: 'I *must* remember to tell Hurrell [commanding the 4th Assam Rifles] to stop these silly signals.' An hour later the siren wailed again. 'Damn!' exclaimed Gimson on his veranda. 'I forgot to tell Hurrell.'

These were almost famous last words. Bombs crashed upon bazaar and cantonment alike. Seventy civilians were killed and another eighty wounded, while a score of European refugees, one of them a judge, were caught either in camps or lorries and killed.

This first raid set ten thousand refugees walking north up the road to Dimapur, walking without rations and against the tide of military traffic. Within a few hours almost every house in the centre of Imphal had been abandoned: the Manipuris fled for safety to outlying villages, and almost the only local civilians to be seen were a few unwelcome looters. The Marwari merchants also fled, but their departure went unmourned. Far more serious was the cutting of the supplies of water and electricity, particularly the former. Not that the stirrup-pump band stayed to curb the fires: they too ran away, and the bazaar was gutted. For several days there was no one to bury the corpses of man and beast alive.

All Gimson's servants vanished. The policemen's failure to report for duty led to their suspension. Altogether it was a sorry aftermath. And almost the only cheering fact was the Japanese radio claim that they had bombed Imphal airfield — none existed at the time! — and had destroyed between forty and eighty planes

— there was not one aircraft within a hundred miles! The Germans went one better, declaring with resonant pride that their Japanese allies had bombed Imphal railway station, when the nearest station lay one hundred and thirty-four miles to the north!¹

A second raid took place on May 16th. One bomb demolished the main gate of the Jail, and some dangerous criminals took the chance to slip away and indulge in widespread dacoity until recaptured. In fact, a number of them returned of their own accord as soon as Mr. Sharpe, the President of the Darbar, announced that slit trenches had been dug in the Jail. Twenty-five bomb craters were counted in the Residency garden, but though every window was broken and the roof suffered, though a bedroom mirror was splintered and a good deal of plaster came showering down, the only direct hit was on the front flight of steps.

Gimson's office staff, already shaken by the first raid, vanished, and made their way home to Assam and even farther to Bengal. Seven weeks elapsed, and then, penitent and ashamed, they returned to duty, and did not run away again. His electric gramophone was holed by a bomb splinter, so he had to revert to using his older winding machine.

Many Manipuris believed that the Japanese must be on their way. After all, what had they seen to indicate the contrary but a retreating army and a rabble of refugees? The bazaars remained closed for a while, but petty contractors soon brought in fish and vegetables from the outskirts of the plain. Two Burma Police officers arrived to reorganise the Manipur State Police, and they effected a real and imperative improvement in discipline, efficiency and morale.

One further anxiety at this time was whether a road between Pael and Tamu could be made in time for the Army to use it in withdrawal from Burma. From Imphal the road ran south-east for twenty-eight miles to Pael, deep in dust, often straight across rice fields, while ahead rose the wall of hills just beyond Pael, where a track climbed some two thousand five hundred feet in ten miles to the Shenam Saddle and then descended nearly five

¹ On returning to Calcutta, one colonel was informed by his Indian bearer that he had thanked his god for their deliverance from the bombing and had given the sum of twelve rupees as an offering. Would the colonel therefore give him ten rupees for his own deliverance and two for the bearer's. The colonel paid up!

thousand feet in fifteen miles. Local labour making the road beyond Palel all absconded after contact with demoralised refugees and on the outbreak of cholera in their camps, so work was nearly at a standstill when the advance parties of the Indian Tea Association, who had promised to help, arrived at the beginning of March.

Soon there was a continuous line of camps along the twenty-five miles between Palel and the Lokchao River [*lok* = stream; *lokchao* = big stream]. Every item of stores had to be brought forward by local porters, by convicts from the Imphal jail, by native ponies and by bullocks belonging to the Assam Rifles. While bulldozers of No. 1 Excavating Company carved out a road, the immense labour force of tea-garden coolies trimmed, drained and rough-surfaced it, but south of Lokchao towards Tamu most of the road was cut by hand. The original survey for a motorable road was soon abandoned under pressure of time, and instead an Engineer officer cut a track with his bulldozers, sometimes following the old bridle-path but often cutting off corners with gradients the steepness of which scandalised civilian engineers, but which were inevitable if the road was to be finished within the allotted two months. The officer described it as 'a fantastic Corniche Road driven through tree-clad Alps'.

By April 2nd Lokchao, not Palel, was road-head, and on that day the Bailey Bridge was launched across the river. Only fourteen days remained, and at any time the first rains might paralyse all work. But by dint of tremendous efforts, the road to Tamu was put through on May 5th, one day ahead of schedule. During that week there had been a noticeable increase in the number of refugees, and workers had even seen a saloon car, still highly polished, chauffeur-driven, with two elegant ladies in the back. Tamu itself was a whirl of dust, which covered the improvised camps, the abandoned cars and lorries, and the people camping out. Soon, as the first trickles of the Burma Army came in sight, the tea-plantation labourers were withdrawn from what had become the forward area. They were needed for other and urgent tasks.

What, meanwhile, of the retreating soldiers for whom this road had been so hurriedly built? Burma Corps had been making its perilous, laborious way back over some nine hundred miles. Gaunt, bearded men, almost at the end of their strength, tramped doggedly along seemingly endless jungle tracks. Their uniforms became ragged, their boots wore out. Then, on May 12th, the monsoon

burst overhead, the rains cascaded down, and men went slithering on the muddy hill paths. Soaked through, shivering with fever or with the cooler air as they climbed from the plains of central Burma, they had to lie out by night under dripping trees and without bedding. Though the rains made the retreat an utter misery, they did stop the Japanese pursuit, and the clouds shielded the soldiers from attack by enemy aircraft. But the road up from Tamu got worse and worse, until on June 5th the Palel bridge was washed away by floods, and heavy rain caused a landslide at Shenam.

In small groups the troops came, but in ranks and carrying their rifles. "They might look like scarecrows, but they looked like soldiers too," wrote General Slim who came out with them. Most of the troops walked in splendidly — 17 Indian Division, 1 Burma Division, 7 Armoured Brigade without their tanks. It was all the more regrettable that the first flush of officerless men and of frightened non-combatants who rushed ahead of the fighting troops created so ill an impression upon those who had to make arrangements to receive the withdrawing army.

Here again most did their best with limited resources, but some did not differentiate between defeat and disgrace and accorded a welcome so unsympathetic that resentment was inevitable. Then it had been impossible, in the time and along the terribly inadequate line of communication, to send up enough tents and tarpaulins, so men who had no clothing but what they stood up in had to bivouac on steep, dripping hill-sides without bedding or groundsheets, let alone overhead shelter.

To begin with only the sick and wounded soldiers were sent back farther than Manipur, for sheer lack of transport. The remainder gradually settled into hastily erected camps and began to re-organise, to reclothe and to rest. Then, bit by bit they went back by road and by rail to Bihar and Bengal to reform and retrain.

When news came that General Stilwell and some American officers were making their way on foot over the hills from Homalin, the President of the Darbar went out in person to meet and guide back the party to Imphal. On this occasion the tough, elderly general was genial enough to belie his often justified nickname of 'Vinegar Joe', but several of his companions were a little morose, for they could not march any farther till their blistered feet had been treated with hot poultices in the Residency.

CHAPTER III

PREPARATIONS TO REPEL THE ENEMY

'What are you doing, just scratching away with your hands?'

An American Observer

By the end of June 1942 the only organised force between the Japanese and India was 23 Indian Division, which, since its creation six months before, had trained in Bihar in readiness to provide columns to harry the Japanese should they land on the coast anywhere between Madras and Chittagong. Now its three brigades had to check any Japanese advance up the Kabaw Valley and the valley of the Manipur River, to watch the paths from Homalin and Ukhrul, to prevent the enemy from interfering with British offensive preparations and to stop any Japanese attempt to dump stores. Across a front of one hundred and twenty miles they had a formidable task, and it was well that the Division had as its first commander no less a veteran than Major-General Reginald Savory.

As a young officer barely out of Uppingham and Sandhurst, Savory had won the Military Cross and been wounded in Gallipoli. Twenty-five years later found him commanding a brigade of 4 Indian Division, first at Sidi Barrani in the Western Desert and then on the rocky Eritrean hills above Keren. Fearless, energetic, thrusting — these adjectives apply to him with truth; and he instilled in those around him not only confidence but also some of his own courage, both moral and physical. This short, dapper, vital soldier, seldom seen without a walking-stick and pipe, had a staccato, even clipped manner, through which shone kindly humour and friendliness. He could be tough, very firm, even ruthless, when the occasion demanded, but he had much to contend with at this time and far too little with which to do so. He had a big chest, and not for nothing did he select for his divisional emblem 'the Fighting Cock', its chest puffed out, ready to take on all comers from beyond the Chindwin. Later General Savory went to Delhi as Director of Infantry for two years, and afterwards

served India as the last British Adjutant-General. But what he achieved round the hills of Manipur was not the least of his distinguished wartime exploits.

His place as Commander of 23 Indian Division was taken, in July 1943, by Major-General Ouvry L. Roberts, a Royal Engineer who had recently served at 4th Corps Headquarters as chief staff officer. A heavily built man of forty-five with sandy hair and a liking for cigars, Roberts had been an outstanding athlete in his younger days, having played cricket for the Army, and hockey for Cambridge, the Army and his native Wales. Always brief and to the point, Roberts impressed as a man who might go far. And in fact, after a distinguished career as a commander, he became Quartermaster-General at the War Office before finally retiring.

The men of the division waged war against nature, terrain and climate. They patrolled through the monsoon, using maps no larger in scale than $\frac{1}{4}$ inch to the mile, and sought not only to discover what the Japanese were doing but also to hearten the villagers by their active presence. This was a period when low morale had to be overcome, much less because of weather and jungle conditions than of Japanese supremacy. Troops going up to the front for the first time heard stories, from those who had come out of Burma, about the Japanese as supermen who hid in trees, wore disguise, burrowed underground and even flew. They were told how the enemy, moving noiselessly, could travel for days without food. Nor was this feeling that the Japanese had mastered every known trick in the book lessened by certain Intelligence reports and directives from above. Training in jungle lore and in wet-weather craft was quite enough on its own to drag down the troops' spirits if already feeling a sense of inferiority. One might learn to disguise oneself as a banana leaf, but would this be any use against so cunning an enemy? Soldiers learnt to sharpen bamboo stakes, to burn the points so as to strengthen them and set up *panji* defences, driving the stakes into the ground at an angle and in such a way that any attacker or trespasser received a nasty leg wound. If one night a wild deer or other animal impaled itself on the bamboo spikes, some apprehensive soldier peering into the eerie darkness would hear the sound, think it must be a marauding Japanese and fire, whereupon everyone else was likely to open fire. And, once started, such panicky and indiscriminate shooting was extremely difficult to arrest.

Patrols went off into the Kabaw Valley and down to the banks of the Chindwin, as much as four days' march from base camp over mountainous country with mule and coolie transport. At first, patrol reports had to be discounted by half, for it was a case of a hundred Japanese seen in this village, and two hundred more in that. The valley was alive with apprehension and rumour, with disquiet and exaggeration. In fact, Japanese patrols seldom crossed the river, on this front at least. And when one Indian force did bump into some Japanese who were using captured British mortars the enemy forgot to remove the nose caps of the bombs first!

It took months to get used to the wind blowing through acres of bamboo and causing sounds which so resembled pistol or even machine-gun shots. In the villages everyone came under suspicion to begin with, and stories went around that every Burman must be in league with the enemy. This was very far from the truth. But to the early patrols a harmless villager squatting on his hunkers eating rice must be a spy, and if a local lit a fire — and plenty of fires were lit every day in the jungle — then he must be signalling to some Japanese outpost. Later the villagers acted as guides and interpreters, gave valuable information and provided boats in which our patrols could cross the Chindwin by night.

Many a soldier who trudged off on patrol succumbed to disease. Perhaps the most dangerous was scrub typhus, caught from a mite which frequented certain tracts of long grass through which troops might walk or on which they slept. There was no inoculation and no specific treatment except nursing: complete rest, immobilisation in bed, feeding. The patient was often in greatest danger when being moved to a place where this general nursing care could be given. To evacuate by air was extremely hazardous, and ideally the cases were to be kept isolated and *in situ*. When one company of Seaforth Highlanders was ravaged by this scrub typhus — another company on the adjacent hill was unharmed — the doctors insisted that the invalids would die if they were moved, so nursing sisters had to stay on the hill to look after them.

The typhus could be mistaken for glandular fever: glands started swelling all over the body. Some patients had a rash, others went deaf, many found difficulty in breathing when the illness went for the lungs. As for the original lesion by the bite, it was accurately likened to a cigarette burn.

One patrol of Seaforth Highlanders, a hundred and forty men strong, had seventy per cent of its numbers disabled by malaria. One brigadier, on being ordered to send out a patrol for three weeks at a stretch, remonstrated because no quinine could be provided for the men. After the first week, he explained, the members of the patrol would spend all their time carrying each other. At once some quinine was forthcoming, though otherwise it was severely rationed.

Hundreds went down with the fever. Men who caught malaria back in India came up to Manipur and infection spread. Soon the hospital was full. A new one was built, and that also filled. And yet another, until brigades were obliged to hold their sick in the field ambulances. When these were full, battalions kept the malarial and other cases at the regimental aid posts — a hundred patients at each, but one battalion had some two hundred and fifty men in camp at one time with the fever.

The administrative results were complex enough. Out of twenty lorries maybe four only were runners, because the other drivers were down with fever. The few men who remained on their feet barely sufficed to lead and look after the regimental mules. The effect of malaria on technical troops such as Signals and Indian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers was most marked, and their departure, with the extreme difficulty of replacing them, had serious results, such as delayed construction of urgently needed telegraph routes and, at one time, a complete lack of any form of mechanical repair. One example was the recovery company, which was reduced in active strength to one sergeant and two Indian other ranks. These three men were responsible for sixty miles of road, and on their own, despite valiant efforts, they just could not manage. Not only were vehicles not repaired, but sections of the road became an avenue of 'corks' awaiting attention, while down the khudside¹ and in the jungle lay more wrecks to be retrieved.

Thus was 23 Indian Division almost immobilised by the ravages of malaria, in much the same way as British regiments had been decimated by the 'black vomit', or yellow fever, in the West

¹ 'The *khud* (Urdu for "precipice") is a much more intimate enemy than the Jap. In some places going over the khud is the beginning of an unprecedentedly fast downward journey of 1000 feet and more'—Captain Pemberton, American Field Service.

Indies during the 1790s, or by the terrible but less fatal inroads of fever in the disastrous campaign of Walcheren in 1809. By the end of November 1942 General Savory found himself five thousand men under strength, which, out of just over seventeen thousand, was very serious. Even though the infantry battalions could be based upon reasonably malaria-free districts, their fighting patrols had to go down into the malarial valleys and ran great risks of contracting the virulent disease. One mule company had only sixty-three out of two hundred and eighty Indian muleteers still at work. A mountain battery lost half its men, and Divisional Signals fared almost as badly. An infantry battalion was reduced to one hundred and twenty men, barely the strength of one company. To add to the trouble, three of the five mountain batteries were immobilised because of surra, a form of pernicious anaemia, among the mules. And to make matters worse, reinforcements came up so slowly from India that they merely kept the division at its almost constant figure of five thousand below war establishment. Indeed, when a certain mule company received in October one hundred and ninety-two reinforcements, all but ninety of the men went down with malaria immediately on arrival in Manipur, having caught it on the journey.

Drugs were scarce, and one colonel, who had one hundred and fifty Gurkhas in his makeshift battalion hospital, went on a course in India and sent back to his medical officer five thousand aspirins which he had purchased in Calcutta.

Not until the following May, when the division was placed upon suppressive treatment of atabrin, when anti-mosquito gloves and masks were issued for men on patrol or on guard at night, and when other strict precautions, such as sleeves rolled down and trousers tucked into gaiters or puttees, were enforced, did the malaria begin to diminish.

The high ground between Kohima and Maram was christened 'the Health Belt', and it was here that three hospitals were established. Otherwise the only place where the ravages of malaria were not rife was the Imphal plain itself, and two forward Casualty Clearing Stations were expanded at Palel and Torbung to hold four hundred patients each. In this way the medical authorities were able to avoid the constant loss of sick men to India, as they could treat most of the malarial and other cases without sending the sufferers to some distant hospital from which it was difficult to

get them back to their units. This greatly reduced the strain upon the already overloaded railway.

But the establishment of hospitals was not without its problems. Along the road east of Dimapur, hospitals could be built only in tiers up and down the hillside, and this seemed to be little more than a running sheet of water to the doctors and nursing sisters when they first arrived at Kigwema to set up 59 Indian General Hospital. From the surgical wards by the road up the slope past the medical to the skin wards at the top was a distance of a mile and a half and a climb of five hundred feet. To begin with the hospital was contained in marquees and bell tents, but soon local Naga labour built wards and offices of huts made from bamboo and thatch, and known as '*bashas*', the Nagas singing to the rhythm of a tune as they cut wood on the hillside; later in the evening they would return with bright shawls and little hurricane lamps to worship and sing Christmas hymns and carols in their own white, stone-built church.

At 28 Combined Military Hospital in Thoubal, south-east of Imphal, the wards were in thatched bashas with half sides to keep out the wind and rain. Most of the patients lay on stretchers supported several feet off the ground by forked branches which had to be cut in the nearby jungle. In soft earth these props would sink unevenly, and the stretchers had often to be straightened hurriedly before a man found himself tilted out of 'bed'. For the most serious cases a few iron bedsteads were available, but these sank even farther into the ground.

Though spared the blood-sucking leeches to be found in several other hospitals, the patients and staff at Thoubal had to endure the activities of large water-rats. Men who were too ill to look after themselves had to have a convalescent soldier at their stretcher-side to keep these rats at bay, which might otherwise have bitten them severely. At night the nurses could hear the rats crawling along the mosquito nets and nibbling buttons from their clothes; or they might hear the rattle-rattle of a tooth-tumbler — a rat was at work. Toothpaste and bars of soap vanished into rat-land with exasperating frequency and ease. The marauders even ate through mosquito nets to get at the patients' wounds, and time and again during the long dark hours the night staff would be summoned to chase rats off the beds and stretchers. Water was short — only four pakhals (large metal containers) a day for the theatre and

surgical ward, for instance — and it was used for washing instruments, scrubbing hands, crockery, and then thrown out to nourish pineapples which had been planted by the medical orderlies and grew splendidly.

At first the operating theatre was a tent, with coconut matting over the earth floor, and a collapsible Army table with iron legs. By day the sides of the tent were kept open unless the rain was slashing in. Except in emergency, the surgeons tried to avoid operating by night, for the only lighting was by hurricane and pressure lamps, and in the middle of an operation the anxious white-gowned theatre sister often had to call out to the Indian lance-naik on duty: 'Pump the lamp, quick! It's going out.'

Number 41 Indian General Hospital at Leimakhong, between Imphal and Kanglatongbi and close to the airstrip, was on the side of a mountain where no Manipuris would live because they said the mountain was haunted and unlucky. They believed it was one of the god Siva's¹ many abodes. Yet the British felt a sense of peace there. Lieutenant-Colonel Hildreth Whale, who in January 1943 took a small group of Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service sisters from Arakan to Manipur to form the nucleus of the nursing staff of this hospital, writes of Leimakhong: 'I thought it one of the loveliest places that I had seen and still feel deeply attached to it. Set above the trees with elephant grass around us, we had a view over the whole Imphal plain — vivid green with deep blue hills beyond. It was not unlike many places in Ireland.'

One night a sister, woken by a tremendous wind, found that the tent next to her own had been blown flat and the Australian nurse inside came crawling out from under the heavy canvas, clutching her most precious possession — an Australian bag. On reaching the wards they found a dreadful state of chaos for the tail end of a cyclone had struck half the hospital, including all the tented surgical wards and the operating theatre. Men with fractures in splints and others with head wounds had been flung from their beds and seriously hurt. The staff worked all that night and throughout the next day before order could be restored.

In the Royal Air Force hospital the staff had no screens with which to provide privacy for any of their patients, until the devoted and resourceful nurses made curtains from butter muslin.

¹ Siva, one of the Hindu Trinity, represents the principle of destruction in the universe.

Of an evening they would collect tubular-shaped ammunition holders, paint them yellow — the only colour obtainable at the time — and use the finished product instead of a bedside locker in the wards. For tables they had often to make do with heavy metal ammunition boxes, or with empty cable drums scrubbed clean, the holes filled with plaster of Paris, and the top painted — by this time yellow had given way to pastel shades of blue or green. Between the beds and stretchers the nurses and orderlies laid strips of bithess (bitumenised hessian) which had been spared from the construction of all-weather airfield runways.¹

Chattering like magpies and giggling, Manipuri women came in from nearby villages to do the hospital laundry, and would walk up the path with piping calls of '*Memsahib!*' to attract the attention of a sister. In wet weather the drying of sheets presented a problem, since airing cupboards did not exist, and only the sun could be relied upon adequately to do the job. Two wet sheets came in useful, however, because a patient suffering from heat stroke was laid between them, and the top one was then shaken to create a draught, the wards having neither fans nor punkahs.

Such was the shortage of bedpans that men with acute dysentery were obliged, when supposed to be on complete rest, to crawl along the ground to a latrine or be helped by an orderly if one happened to be free at the moment. The rare bedpans were kept near the pathological laboratory — another basha; and when a sick man passed a stool, the pan was labelled, the contents at once tested, and the pan then sterilised in readiness for the next summons.

Soldiers who had lost weight had to be tempted to eat, and this was not easy to achieve with offerings of dehydrated mutton resembling cork shavings, with tough, skinny, local chickens, pounded salmon in tins, dehydrated potatoes and tinned peaches. Flies were usually a revolting nuisance, and patients well enough to cope were issued with fly swatters and told to kill as many as possible and to protect the men who could not wave away these persistent tormentors. Leeches used to get into the beds and would hang on all night until, bloated, they fell off in the morning, a patient having without realising it lost up to a pint of precious blood.

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¹ See page 195.

All this time over thirty thousand coolies from the tea estates of Assam had been widening the road south from Dimapur, and also quarrying stone, building petrol storage depots and installing ordnance dumps. Once the weather broke in May, this road showed just what it could do when cut in treacherous strata. The mountains, being geologically new, had very little rock, mostly shale, which soon became saturated by monsoon rains and had little to hold it together. Any fall of rain was immediately followed by landslides. These blocked the road, of course, but were as nothing compared with the scenes at Milestone 42 on June 19th, 1942, when a spur round which the road ran started moving, and water from the hillside above turned it into a morass. Thus, overnight, 4th Corps had its sole line of communication cut. Porters staggered to carry stores across the one hundred yards' gap, but this proved a very slow, tedious and often quite impossible business, because at its worst a man could sink to his armpits in the mud. Half rations were ordered. One August day the Corps Commander returned from a forward tour and a plank track was laid just before he was due to cross the landslide. Even so, the General sank up to his knees, and twenty minutes later the track had gone altogether.

Early in July the Indian Tea Association, who were still keeping their estates going with very depleted staffs, and at a time when the British Government was stressing the urgent need to produce the largest possible tea crop, because the tea-producing Dutch East Indies had been lost to Japan, because large stocks of tea had been destroyed in the German air-raids on London and because the recent reduction of the tea ration to two ounces seemed the limit, sent hundreds of workers to Milestone 42 to reinforce the local Naga labourers, who had been working ever since the great slide occurred. As the hillside was still slipping down at the rate of about three feet an hour, for only two hours a day was it possible to rush light convoys across. Thereafter the road broke up and vanished into the valley below.

Every day a new road had to be built across the morass, soon christened 'the Slough of Despond'. Starting at dawn, the workers managed to get a planked road, its outer edge marked by tar barrels, ready by six o'clock in the evening. Then convoys, piloted across the usually slippery planks by a picked team of British drivers who worked under floodlamps, rumbled and squeaked over the danger point until the road was no longer safe for the day. The drivers had

to make a reconnaissance of the course on foot, just as do white-breached riders during an international show-jumping contest.

As it was impossible to stop a moving mountainside, the only thing to do was to hasten its descent by diverting into the mud glacier a stream, which gradually washed away all the mud until hard rock appeared underneath. By the end of August the spur had become a re-entrant, and the road's foundations solid and permanent. Henceforth the work of doubling the width of the road — and the rock ledge most of the way — from twelve to twenty-four feet went ahead. But with little or no mechanical equipment, this was a formidable, even heartbreaking, task, especially in the face of rock falls, land subsidence and other delays. An American visitor remarked: 'What are you doing, just scratching away with your hands?' Soon afterwards four bulldozers arrived to assist the labour, though it was not long before two of the machines had been dismantled to provide spare parts to keep the others working.

Month by month the work went on, under the supervision first of Brigadier Michael Gilpin and then of Brigadier Grand, the Chief Engineer of 4th Corps; and eventually, in January 1943, the road, with a tar-macadam surface and a line of white posts to show the khudside, was opened for two-way traffic, under a rigid system of control posts every ten miles.¹ A single jeep could go from Dimapur to Imphal in seven hours, but convoys took far longer, and any vehicle might be delayed for half an hour on end when, for instance, an excavating machine inched its way across one of the many bridges and culverts.

Even with the good surface all was not smooth going along this vital road, for not all drivers had experience enough to master its treacheries and contortions, and many the lorry which slid, lurched or skidded over the khudside and came to rest dozens and sometimes hundreds of feet below. The hospitals had constantly to deal with the injured from such mishaps, and other travellers along this mountain road found themselves stopping to render assistance, but

¹ Colonel Solly, who had so often driven along this one-way road, was again driving north, but this time early in 1945, when he was stopped by military policemen and told to go slowly on account of heavy vehicles coming south: three great railway engines, each on a tank transporter, and three tenders, also on transporters. They were on the way to central Burma, where the 14th Army needed them to make the railways work. Behind each tank transporter travelled a crane, which had to lift one end when the transporters failed to negotiate a sharp bend in one turn.

having first to clamber down the hillside to the fallen prostrate vehicle. All their strength and resource were in demand to extricate the driver and passengers and to carry them up to the road for rapid despatch to hospital.

Work had also to be done on the road to Tamu, large stretches of which had been washed away by the summer rains. Some fifteen landslides blocked what remained. Engineers, with two bulldozers and graders, pioneers and 49 Indian Infantry Brigade began work early in November as soon as the weather cleared; and while one battalion protected the engineers and pioneers on the road, a second battalion worked to convert the bridle path to a jeep track. When one huge landslide cut off all those on the road from supplies, the new track served a purpose sooner than bargained for. To replace the rope bridge across the Lokchao River, a girder bridge was launched by using one bulldozer as a cantilever and pushing the bridge over with a second. Tamu was reoccupied just before Christmas, and thereafter one convoy a week ran in each direction, taking two days to Imphal and two days back. On the other three days of the week the road had to be closed for repairs and the construction of passing places — a hazardous operation, since the precipice dropped on one side anything up to a thousand feet, and any attempt to bulldoze farther into the hillside was likely to cause a fresh landslide.

* * *

In February 1943 Headquarters of 4th Corps moved forward to Imphal from Jorhat by the Brahmaputra, whence touch had so far been maintained with the immense front by means of a single telephone line to Manipur Road and then southwards — a line on which speech was inevitably difficult. Fourteenth Army had not yet come into being, and 4th Corps came under the command of Eastern Army Headquarters in Calcutta, a three-day road and rail journey away.

The commander of the Corps was fifty-one-year-old Lieutenant-General G. A. P. Scoones, who although he had commanded a division in India, had hitherto held no operational command in the field during the war. As a young officer Geoffrey Scoones had accompanied 2 Gurkha Rifles to France in the First World War, and having gained the Military Cross while in command of a machine-gun platoon, was awarded the Distinguished Service

Order while serving as personal liaison officer to the then Lieutenant-General Claude Jacob during the Somme battles. Between the wars Scoones had commanded a battalion of 8 Gurkha Rifles and had held several staff appointments, until in 1939 he was selected as Director of Military Operations at G.H.Q. in Delhi — a highly important assignment, since it involved the planning of war in so far as this might bear upon India.

It was indeed fortunate that Scoones had all this wealth of knowledge and experience behind him, since in the months to come he was to face problems and situations which, as difficult as they were varied, would call for momentous decisions and improvisation both tactical and administrative in circumstances of continual strain. He was to fight a battle on which so much depended.

Short and of slim build, Geoffrey Scoones was an exceedingly fit and energetic officer, with a tremendous capacity for hard work. In his younger days he had been a keen horseman, riding in many point-to-points. Thoughtful, shrewd in assessing future developments, he was analytical in his approach to problems. To the outside world his expression was stern, his manner often abrupt; but those who served close to him soon found that beneath this severe façade he had an engaging smile, a keen sense of the ridiculous and a very real concern for the welfare of the regimental officer and soldier alike. Of this concern he tells one agreeable story. After the siege of Imphal had been in progress for some weeks, Scoones realised during a visit to several units that the ubiquitous and seemingly inevitable bully beef was beginning to pall on the British troops, as indeed it was on himself in the Mess. So he took steps, which involved much agitation and perseverance, to have some tinned steak and kidney pudding flown in to relieve the monotonous diet. Later he visited other British regiments, and one day happened to arrive at a Gunner battery about to eat its midday meal. There was the coveted steak and kidney pudding.

'How's the steak and kidney?' enquired the General of a gunner who was busy with what he had on his tin plate.

'It's not so bad, sir, as long as you lace it with a bit of bully.' A disconcerting *douche* upon well-intentioned effort.

When India became an independent member of the Commonwealth, Scoones became Principal Staff Officer to the Commonwealth Relations Office. On the conclusion of his distinguished

military career, like a few other military officers of high rank, he was selected for a diplomatic post, becoming High Commissioner for the United Kingdom in New Zealand before he finally retired from public service.

Meanwhile 17 Indian Division, with a new flash showing a Black Cat, back arched, tail up, against a yellow background, had been recovering from its ordeal in Burma. Battalions which had come out in 1942 were so reduced in strength — the 2nd Battalion, The 5th Royal Gurkha Rifles, for example, could parade at full strength perhaps a hundred men once a fortnight for a march or some minor exercise — that it was extremely difficult to carry out the simplest training programme. So humid and hot was the weather that the troops tired quickly when walking through scrub or thick grass. Men who had become debilitated during the last campaign were so susceptible to malaria and intestinal complaints that to reduce the recurrence of the former, all returning leave parties and drafts of reinforcements were 'blanketed' with quinine on arrival in Manipur.

A further difficulty was the great delay imposed on returning leave and reinforcement parties by the tenuous and over-loaded line of communication with Calcutta and frequent landslides along the Dimapur-Imphal road during the torrential monsoon down-pours.

The division set to work to build up renewed confidence and to weld veterans and reinforcements into a professional team. All sorts of methods of meeting and overcoming the known Japanese tactics were discussed and rehearsed. It had also been found during the first Burma campaign that too many unarmed followers — the name given to the cooks, sweepers, tailors and cobblers among others — had been a liability in actual battle, so these men were armed with rifles and trained to fight.

One of the greatest single factors in the build-up of morale was the personality of the Divisional Commander, Major-General David Tennant Cowan, a powerfully built man of ruddy complexion with blue eyes and a determined, projecting jaw whence derived the nickname 'Punch', by which he was known throughout the Indian Army. Born in 1896, he had joined the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders in 1915 as a subaltern almost straight from Glasgow University, and had won a Military Cross on the Western Front. After the war he had transferred to 6 Gurkha



Lieutenant-General G. A. P. Scoones, C.S.I., D.S.O.,
O.B.E., M.C., G.O.C. 4th Corps



Air Vice-Marshal S. F. Vincent, D.F.C., A.F.C.,
A.O.C. 221 Group R.A.F.

enemy would deny them this source of provision absolutely. Therefore arrangements had to be made to supply the Chin Hill Battalion, the Levies, and the Chin villagers.

The Levies, their ranks swollen by members of the Burma Rifles who had come out of Burma and by discharged riflemen of the Burma Frontier Force Rifles, were all on different scales of rations, clothing and equipment. For instance, the Chin Hills Battalion was armed with 303 rifles and old leather equipment, whereas the native levies had shot-guns and even flintlocks. Indeed, one levy was given a 12-bore shot-gun in exchange for his flintlock manufactured in the year 1685. The villagers, who used these as hunting guns, made their ammunition from 'any old iron' and explosives reputedly concocted from charcoal mixed with wine and dried in the sun. Later the Army had to purchase black powder and lead bars in Calcutta and have these dropped in the Chin Hills. As rifles could not be spared, shot-guns had to be issued, and here again the provision of ammunition was a headache for someone.

It was decided for many reasons to occupy Tiddim. But even by using the whole of 17 Division's mules, one battalion only could be supplied at such a distance from Imphal, and 2/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles were selected for this task. To begin with, a single company was sent, because the number of troops who could be maintained by mule convoy and an occasional air drop was very limited, all the more so as the mules had to carry with them all their own fodder for a journey that might last a week each way. At this time the Tiddim road was motorable in fair weather as far as Milestone 54 only; most of this stretch lay in the plain and had no more than wooden culverts. Thereafter another seventy-three miles of mule track led to the Manipur River, a jeepable track covered the last thirty-five miles over the Beltang Lui and then three thousand feet up the 'Chocolate Staircase', so called on account of the rich colour of the road surface against the green hillside, across which the road made forty hairpin bends in seven miles. These were so sharp that any gun, trailer and tractor had to be unhooked one from another and manhandled round each corner individually.

Obviously if one battalion, let alone most of a division, was to be maintained for a long period and, at the same time, a monsoon reserve built up, a motorable road must be built as far as Tiddim in the least possible time. In many places there was only a track a

few feet wide cut into the mountainside, and one engineer aptly described the road as 'a series of boulders joined together by dust'.

Thus for weeks on end sappers, pioneers, labour units and local villagers worked in their hundreds to make the mule track from Milestone 54 to the Manipur River fit for jeeps then beginning to arrive in small numbers. This was a tough engineering feat, because the country was extremely hilly and jungle-covered, and the few graders and other mechanical aids which could be spared had to cut a road up several precipitous hillsides, in long hairpin bends. By February 1943 road-head had advanced nearly thirty miles, and the rest of 17 Division set to with pick and shovel to continue this work. Conditions were extremely hard for the members of 'Navviforce', as it was called, because they had to sleep in the open beside their work, sometimes with a steep drop of hundreds of feet below them, and a sheer slope towering above.

Conditions were also bad for the drivers who used the road. On long stretches the bottom was a foot or more deep in mud or dust, according to the season, and the only possible means of conveyance was a jeep. Even so, they had often to carry chains on the wheels, use low gear and four-wheel drive, and follow the ruts of the previous vehicle. A slight error of judgment or a skid could mean a fall of hundreds of feet down the mountainside. Many vehicles did end up in this way, but fatal accidents were fortunately rare. On the other hand, precious jeeps had to be written off, at a time when they were not only scarce but also the only means of supplying 17 Division with food, ammunition and petrol.

As mentioned, the first battalion to go to Tiddim was 2/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles, and its commander at this time was Lieutenant-Colonel R. C. O. Hedley, a high-quality professional soldier, steady and reliable, who always seemed to understand perfectly what he was asking of his men. He was, moreover, a man of great compassion who felt deeply the sight of Gurkha officers and non-commissioned officers, with many of whom he had grown up and served for years, being killed or badly wounded. Believing that efficient officers spelt an efficient battalion, he would not tolerate inefficiency; and even during the hardest fighting, woe betide the British officer who was unshaven, unless he had just returned from a fighting patrol. His steely eye and long pull at a cigarette-holder could be daunting to his officers. But though a strict disciplinarian and inflexible of purpose when the situation demanded, he knew

when he could afford to ease up, especially if things were going badly. Indeed, the tougher the fighting, the friendlier and less remote he became; and he was at all times an inspiring commander whom everyone admired.

Osborne Hedley's memory was remarkable and his attention to detail meticulous. For example, he would, even though exhausted, devote hours to writing citations for decorations, on the grounds that it was the main duty of a commanding officer to get the best from his men and then, if they had deserved it, to obtain for them the best rewards.

B company of 2/5 Gurkha Rifles left Imphal on December 4th for Tiddim. The march took a week, for rocks, landslides and fallen trees had to be cleared from the track. Three hundred and twenty-nine mules were required to carry the company stores, ten days' reserve rations for the men, and rations and equipment for the mule company. In order to induce the mules to cross the bamboo suspension bridge a hundred yards long over the Manipur River, the men had to cut grass and lay it thick on the floorboards and weave it into the wire sides of the bridge, so that the mules could not see the water while crossing it; and to prevent the bridge from swaying too noticeably, the mules had to be sent over in small groups. All crossed safely, and the march was resumed.

With poor communications, no artillery and reinforcements at several days' distance, the company, and later the whole of Hedley's battalion, was in a difficult position and had orders not to get involved with the enemy or to take undue risks. Instead, its role was to find out what was going on in the valley and foothills, to reconnoitre every path, to accustom men to moving in this arduous type of country and to help the morale of the local Levies. They had to trail their coat, encourage the friendly hill people in the belief that the British were staying in the area and prevent the Japanese from penetrating into the hills from their forward positions along the Kalemryo road.

Once or twice the Gurkhas could not resist a battle, and took the opportunity to shoot up parties of the enemy — on the edge of Kalemryo, for instance, when one patrol saw a Japanese officer mounted on a grey horse inspecting the defences. Mortar bombs were fired, and the enemy ran in great confusion, twenty of them being killed in this brief, effective action. Sometimes opposing patrols played a sort of hide-and-seek in the foothills. From time to

time Japanese parties would raid a Chin village and seize rice and livestock. Now an ambush, now a fierce encounter, now a skilful disengagement or the rehearsal of some bright stratagem would be the news of the week.

The country was enormous. Thickly wooded spurs and ridges were separated by deep, humid valleys. The almost impenetrable jungle restricted movement largely to the one jeep road between Tiddim and Kalemmyo, to a number of steep and winding tracks which linked the Chin villages, and to some very narrow footpaths between these villages and their plots of cultivation, where, on a burnt patch of hillside jungle, the tree-trunks and undergrowth had given way to tilled soil and growing plants.

Tiddim, a large and attractive Chin village extending along a ridge nearly six thousand feet up among tall pine trees, contained a small hospital, a post office, a court house, a bazaar and several red-brick bungalows with paned windows, in addition to some fifty houses built of wood planks and roofed with red corrugated-iron sheets. Roses, honeysuckle and marigolds bloomed in tiny front gardens. Tiddim's population until the coming of the troops numbered a little over one hundred and fifty.

Along the road south and east towards what was called Vital Corner one could see banks of vivid primulas, many white parasitic orchid growths, red and white rhododendron and magnolia trees bent by the prevailing west wind. The great trees on the ridge by Vital Corner, gnarled and evil-looking, resembled something out of Grimm's Fairy Tales, and from their saturnine branches hung festoons of dank, dripping creepers thickly covered with green moss.

Beyond Kennedy Peak glossy grass slopes ran down to Fort White, alive with virulent leeches, and to the two Stockades.¹ From this mountain close on nine thousand feet above sea-level one obtained the most splendid view into central Burma, and also westwards over the Lushai Hills. The Peak afforded views of a sloping green spread of empty land and patched woods and scant hamlets, whose only sign was a curl of smoke, a bare splash of

¹ Fort White owed its name to Sir George White, V.C., the defender of Ladysmith, who in 1889 commanded the Burma Field Force during the Chin Expedition. The two Stockades were survivors of four which in those days guarded the mule track and telegraph route up from Kalemmyo. Mr. Joseph Kennedy was a distinguished member of the Survey of India Department, and he defended the Peak with a handful of soldiers.

soil, a dozen thatched huts and perhaps the barking of a bony dog.

For some time past the activities of the Japanese had made it clear that very soon they would have to be met in strength not only in the Kabaw Valley but also in the Chin Hills. Cowan's 17 Division, less 63 Brigade already at Tiddim, had been resting and training in Shillong, hill station and capital of Assam, but now it was decided to move the troops back into the fighting area. This was easier ordered than carried out. Only six trains could be provided, owing to the very limited railway capacity; so a complex road-cum-rail move was organised, with the division's four mule companies, a mounted reconnaissance regiment, jeeps, ponies and carriers. Even so, it took forty-two days to move the division, less one brigade, from Shillong to Tiddim.

The Japanese had been building up a base near Yazagyo, from which they threatened our line of communication at several points. Even while 17 Division was arriving piecemeal, the enemy captured Fort White and the high ground near Milestone 52 on the road up from Kalemmyo. The ensuing series of battles imposed further burdens upon the administration, since some medium guns were sent to support the forward troops, and their heavy ammunition demands were difficult to bring up; and on several occasions a sudden request for some bulky item of stores would severely strain the already slender resources.

The decision having been made to hold the Chin Hills definitely, the garrison there had to be regulated by what could be fed, and the forward brigade was cut down to the minimum requirements of food, a very limited ammunition rate and almost no reserves of clothing or equipment. It was obvious that the very long line of communication from Imphal could easily be cut by the Japanese, quite apart from continual interference as a result of the monsoon and the precarious nature of the road. Consequently it became necessary to build up a 'cushion' between Imphal and Tiddim, and the obvious place for this was the Singell Ridge by Milestone 100. But this ridge was waterless, and engineer equipment with which to pump water up some three thousand feet was simply not to be obtained. So the ridge became an obstacle. The only spot for this base was nine miles farther south near the headwaters of the Kaphi Lui.

Here, at what became Road-head, stores for some twenty days

were collected as fast as possible. Then, in January 1944, it was decided that steps must be taken at once to stock up Tiddim itself for one division for seventy days, so as to hold the Chin Hills throughout the monsoon, which would probably last a hundred days. Of these, the fair-weather unmetalled road could be relied upon for only thirty.

By now a Bailey Bridge¹ had been built across the Manipur River in replacement of the bamboo suspension bridge, and three-ton lorries could reach this point, but as yet they could not travel onwards to Tiddim. The construction work was tremendous, not least because the bulldozers required the road to themselves during the hours of daylight, yet at the same time 17 Division had to be maintained by this road and reserve stocks had simultaneously to be built up at Tiddim. Thus twenty-four-hour timetables had to be adhered to strictly for traffic, with much running at night.

There was another cause for apprehension. Such enormous strides had been made in improving the Line of Communication that it was considered possible to feed and supply enough troops in the Imphal plain and farther forward to carry out a limited offensive early in 1944; and everyone began to think about attack and advance. But one factor had to be borne in mind: with the forces available and the length of front to be held or watched, it was out of the question to protect the slender tortuous road and the many installations along it.

Since all the installations required more and more labour for building them, quite apart from men to handle the manifold stores, hundreds of unarmed labourers had been brought in to work right forward. Many engineering units, only partially armed but with a great deal of equipment, had come to work on roads and airfields. Certainly no work was done on preparing defences for the massive and cumbersome supply, ordnance and ammunition depots at Kanglatongbi, Palcel, and Milestones 82 and 109 on the Tiddim road.

* * *

From November 1943 until the following March, 48 Brigade and Brigadier Guy Burton's 63 Brigade alternated in trying to advance

¹ Sir Donald Bailey, a British engineer, gave his name to what became a standard method of bridge construction: a roadway of timber planking carried between two main girders made up of steel 'lattice' panels, each of which could be handled by six men.

from Milestone 52 towards Kalembo, now nibbling, now trying to get round the back of Point 8198, now launching a head-on attack.

Burton had been chief staff officer to General Cowan and had then commanded 3/10 Gurkhas for several months before taking over 63 Brigade. A strong personality, capable of definite decision, he had tremendous drive and tenacity, and was particularly sound and resolute in adversity.

The 1/7 and later 2/5 Gurkhas had platoon positions, with snipers and night ambushes almost round the corner, but they never quite got behind, nor did Burton's men ever evict the Japanese along the narrow, wooded ridge where it was impossible to deploy many troops on so thin a front and where the enemy had dug formidable bunkers. It became a matter of holding certain key points along the ridge and of sending out 'tiger' patrols of selected Gurkha non-commissioned officers for three days at a time to probe south-west towards Mualbem and the Manipur River and to investigate frequent rumours of Japanese movements on that flank.

One Gurkha battalion attacking a Japanese position succeeded in overrunning it after a long-drawn-out struggle. They had suffered quite heavy casualties, particularly from snipers who could not be located — until the Gurkhas entered the position. Up in the trees were a number of dead Japanese. It seemed peculiar that they had not fallen to the ground on being killed, but closer inspection revealed the reason. These men had been tied into the branches — tied not in order that they should not fall out, but tied so as to ensure that they could not get away!

Tactically the possession of Point 8198 was important if it was visualised returning to Burma that way, but no hill features beyond it were vital, and although it constituted an irritant, its capture did not justify severe casualties, particularly as it was extremely difficult to evacuate to hospital any soldiers who were wounded in this area.

Some idea of these difficulties is afforded by D. Spencer, a member of the valiant American Field Service¹ team who drove am-

¹ The American Field Service had started in 1915 as a volunteer ambulance and transport corps with the French armies. Under its Director-General, Stephen Galatti, it performed the same service in 1940 until the fall of France, when its ambulance sections were sent to the British and the Free French forces.



Major-General H. R. Briggs, D.S.O.,
G.O.C. 5th Indian Division



Major-General D. T. Cowan, D.S.O.,
M.C., G.O.C. 17th Indian Division



Major-General D. D. Gracey, O.B.E.,
M.C., G.O.C. 20th Indian Division



Major-General O. L. Roberts, D.S.O.,
G.O.C. 23rd Indian Division

balances up and down the roads to Tiddim and to Tamu, and of whom more will be said as the battle develops.

'The wounded came by stretcher-bearer, mule, jeep, or on the backs of their friends to Tiddim, whence by jeep to Milestone 132 (Tutum), then by American Field Service Fords to Milestone 109, then to Milestone 82, then to Milestone 37 (which is the Casualty Clearing Station). In this case I think the Regimental Aid Post was a shelter behind which men were roughly bandaged and doped — doped thoroughly to withstand the shock of the mules or jeeps or stretchers.'

The road was constantly being improved, but in mid-January when 88 Indian General Hospital moved to Milestone 37 and 16 Casualty Clearing Station went forward to Milestone 109, for the treatment of wounded and sick before they were sent back to hospital in Imphal or were sufficiently recovered to return to their units in Tiddim, Spencer described the road, from an ambulance driver's angle, as —

'terrible — a few good spots where you can actually go in 3rd gear — down the mountain into MS 109, sweeping round those smoothly banked curves, the road very nicely graded and amazingly smooth. Recent rains had laid the foot-thick dust which hid pot-holes and rocks. In place of dust in the shady spots, the road was shiny clay. The 'bulldozer boys' had scraped it and rolled it when it was just the right consistency. . . . The boys when driving never use any gear above low and very often stick to low-low (crawl) for hours on end. The average over the bad spots is no more than 1 mph. The usual run with four fairly badly off stretcher patients is twenty-seven miles (MS 109 to 82) in nine hours. If there are battle casualties in the top stretchers, and they're badly hurt, it will often take twelve hours.'¹

Up on Kennedy Peak² the guns were shot at extraordinary angles of sight and depression, not allowed for in the normal range tables. 159 Field Regiment carried out trials with a view to placing 25-pounders on a jeep axle, and two fitters, who were afterwards given a monetary award and the British Empire Medal, devised a jury axle which gave excellent service in allowing guns to be dragged to

¹ *History of the American Field Service*, pp. 476-9.

² At eight thousand nine hundred feet this was claimed to be the highest point that 25-pounder and medium guns reached in the war.

out-of-the-way places. When one gun had its axle damaged by enemy shellfire it was transferred to a jeep axle and fired hundreds of rounds in subsequent battles. In the early stages the traversing wheel could not be used, as it fouled the wheel, and the gun had to be traversed by means of an ordinary spanner turning the spindle. But gradually these shortcomings were ingeniously put right.

Another gun fell over the khudside and was retrieved in the most remarkable way by the aid of a jeep with a hand winch, the gun being stripped to pieces by the battery fitters and then hauled up the precipitous hillside bit by bit.

From time to time in the Tiddim area supplies were very short, not least for the gunners, and when batteries for torches could not be obtained the guns were laid at night by the glow of hurricane lamps.

During January and February 1944 the Japanese held on to the high ground they had seized before Christmas, with a battalion of 215 Regiment at Fort White and Milestone 52, and another battalion guarding points away to the north-east below Monglang, at Dolluang and Pimpi, and along the Fort White-Mualbem spur to the west. Meanwhile 17 Division, having learnt to eschew the costly attempts to capture enemy strongpoints by attacking along sharp ridges, was seeking to isolate and seize one by one the Japanese positions; and already some vital lost ground had been regained in this way.



PART TWO
EVENTS BEFORE THE BATTLE



CHAPTER IV

THE JAPANESE PLAN AN INVASION

'That the impact of your army may be like a grindstone dashed against an egg — this is effected by the science of weak points and strong. . . .

'Appear at points which the enemy must hasten to defend; march swiftly to places where you are not expected.'

Sun Tzu

JUST as two boxers go back to their corners after a particularly gruelling first round to consult with their seconds and plan their future tactics, so in the early months of 1943 the British and Japanese were considering what they should do next and how they should do it.

In 1942 the Japanese had succeeded in overrunning Burma much more quickly than they had originally anticipated; by May of that year they had reached the awkward situation of 'Where do we go from here?' The alternatives were — should they defend what they had conquered or should they push on into India.

There were some who had advocated an immediate advance into north-eastern Assam, but this proposal had had to be abandoned owing to the British threat in Arakan, a province of Burma on the eastern shores of the Bay of Bengal. This province had been captured by the Japanese as they had advanced northwards through Burma, and since their forces in that area were weak, reinforcements were necessary if they were to maintain their position. In consequence, troops had to be moved from central Burma, leaving insufficient for the contemplated advance into Assam.

Then, in the latter half of 1942, the suggestion was put forward that Imphal should be captured. Both Imperial Headquarters in Tokyo and Headquarters Southern Army in Singapore, who exercised direct control over the forces in Burma, had favoured this proposal so much that 15th Japanese Army was ordered to plan for such an operation.

The supporters of this policy argued that the British defences were probably unprepared and that the capture of Imphal would

deny to them, the British, the best jumping-off place for a counter-offensive into Northern Burma. Both these suppositions were in fact true, and on the face of it, this plan looked most attractive. But if it was to achieve its object it would have to be put into effect quickly.

Others, in particular the two leading divisional commanders who would have to do the job, strongly opposed the idea, on the grounds that an advance by either side was impossible because of the mountains and jungle, the complete lack of any roads and railways, and the many deadly indigenous diseases prevalent in that part of Burma through which an advancing army would have to pass. One of these two generals, Mutaguchi by name, was destined to play a leading role in the operations to come.

Eventually the arguments put forward against attacking Imphal were accepted and the offensive plan was discarded. Instead 15th Army settled down to a defensive role and occupied areas mainly on the eastern side of the River Chindwin. So for the remainder of the year no major engagements were fought, but in the mountains around Tiddim and in Arakan small attacks by both sides were continually taking place.

And then, early in 1943, certain disturbing events and reports began to cause concern in the Japanese High Command and to suggest that a revision of their strategy was necessary.

In January Brigadier Orde Wingate's columns had penetrated on foot deep into enemy-held territory, through country hitherto thought impassable, and in doing so had created alarm and confusion in the rear areas. Could this have been a reconnaissance for something much larger?

In the north the Chinese Army which had been driven out of Burma in 1942 had been reorganised and retrained with American assistance. It was daily increasing in numbers, and the Japanese knew that the Chinese were pressing for an early Allied offensive to re-open the Burma Road.

In Manipur the British were reported to be developing a base and making roads eastwards and southwards from that place. Air photographs indicated that they were also extending and improving the nearby airfields.

These various factors pointed towards one thing: an impending Allied offensive; and the general opinion was that this would come early in the fall of 1943. The question now facing the Japanese was

this: would it not therefore be better to forestall these intentions by destroying the base from which the British would launch their attack?

To meet this new situation the Japanese High Command in Burma was reorganised by the foundation in March of Headquarters Burma Area Army with General Kawabe in overall command. This new headquarters was to control all Japanese forces in Burma and Arakan, while 15th Army Headquarters was to be responsible only for the defence of Northern and Central Burma and the Chinese front.

The most significant feature in this reorganisation was that command of 15th Army was given to Lieutenant-General Mutaguchi, at this time fifty-six years old. A Japanese description of him shows him to have been a man of strong personality with so fierce a temper that his subordinates, through fear of incurring his wrath, were liable to keep from him unpalatable facts. As a result, he was not always aware of the true situation. He was determined to have his own way, and his opinions carried much weight.

His army consisted of three divisions. Of these, 56 Division watched the Chinese front facing Yunnan Province, 18 Division was responsible for the area of northern Burma lying some two hundred and fifty miles north-west of Mandalay, with posts on the Chindwin, while 33 Division had already taken up positions to defend the approaches to Mandalay across the Chindwin from the west and north-west.

The total force under Mutaguchi's command amounted to something like 100,000 men including all the supply, medical and other administrative troops.

He, who had so strongly opposed an advance in 1942, when he was commanding a division, was now, as Army Commander, no less strongly in favour of capturing Imphal with the least delay. He had been so impressed by Wingate's achievement in passing a sizable force through the mountains and jungle, that he was convinced, given good weather and proper preparations, that this was the right policy to adopt. Consequently, he began to press his views on General Kawabe.

But even then there were still some who opposed the idea, including members of his own staff and of Burma Area Army Headquarters. They considered that the troops which could be made available would be insufficient for the task and also that the

difficulties of keeping such a large force supplied would be too great.

This last objection was put forward despite the fact that the Japanese lines of communication northwards from Rangoon were a good deal better than those which led to Imphal from India. Besides a good railway up to Myitkyina and a network of roads covering a large part of the country, there were navigable rivers like the Irrawaddy and the Chindwin. But, of course, the Royal Air Force were making all these increasingly difficult to use except during the hours of darkness.

Mutaguchi was adamant, and, sweeping aside all objectors and objections, he continued strongly to advocate his ideas, until by degrees they found favour at Southern Army Headquarters and at Imperial Headquarters.

As weeks went by, the Tojo Government became more and more enamoured of the proposal, and not without particular reasons.

Within a year from the opening of hostilities the Japanese had established themselves in the Aleutian Islands away to the north-east, extended their front line in the Pacific as far south as New Guinea and succeeded in almost everything they had undertaken. As a result, morale at home had soared.

But now the situation was changing. They had been forced to withdraw from the Aleutian Islands, while in the south, Allied forces under General MacArthur's command were gaining the upper hand. Japanese ground, sea and air forces had suffered a succession of defeats at Guadalcanal, in the battles of the Coral Sea, at Midway Island, in New Guinea and elsewhere. Civilian morale was suffering in proportion, and the Government needed a success somewhere to put matters right. A victory in Burma might well do this. The impact of such a success would not only be local; it would certainly boost morale at home; it might well cause panic in India, with consequent embarrassment to the Indian Government. As well as putting paid to any thoughts of a British offensive against northern Burma for some time to come, it would be a very serious blow to the Allied cause.

In fact, such a course of action had much to recommend itself to those who had the responsibility of running the war in Tokyo.

But it all took time to get the wheels in motion, and a series of conferences were held in Singapore and Rangoon through the



General Kawabe Masukazu, G.O.C.
Burma Area Army



Lieutenant-General Mutaguchi Renyu,
G.O.C. 15th Japanese Army



Lieutenant-General Sato Kotoku,
G.O.C. 31st Japanese Division



months of June to August 1943. On the agenda were such matters as the available information about the enemy, the country through which the advance would have to pass, the number of troops required and the organisation of the supply arrangements.

As regards the number of troops that would be needed, it was decided that three and a half divisions would be sufficient. The question of supplying 15th Army once it had crossed the Chindwin still gave rise to a great deal of anxiety, while information of the strength, positions and intentions of the British 14th Army was far from satisfactory.

It was in this atmosphere that a decision was taken in September 1943 to issue orders to 15th Army to prepare plans for the invasion of Manipur and the capture of Imphal. Mutaguchi, with his senior commanders, went ahead to make the detailed plans for what was termed Operation 'U'.

The troops made available to him were 15, 31, 33 Divisions and the best part of 1 Division Indian National Army. Of these, 33 Division, which had fought its way up through Burma in 1942 and was by far the best Japanese division, was already in touch with the British west of Kalemmyo and at the southern end of the Kabaw Valley.

'Yumi' Division, as it was called, was recruited from the area round Sendai in the north-east of Japan. The men of one of its regiments, 214, wore in the centre of their caps, a small badge depicting the head of a white tiger. This emblem may well have originated from an historic occasion in 1868 when Wakamatsu Castle, in the area from which the regiment came, was besieged. Faced with defeat, nineteen of the defenders, young men, committed *hari-kiri en masse*, and in time became national heroes. They called themselves the '*Byakka-tai*' or 'White Tiger Band'.

31 Division, which had arrived in Burma during August for the relief of 18 Division, moved to the area of Homalin, a town on the Chindwin, a matter of sixty miles north-east of Tamu. But 15 Division, which was urgently required, was still hundreds of miles away in Siam, and had to be brought to the line of the Chindwin before this attack could get under way.

This last Division, 'Matsuri' Division, had been raised in and around Kyoto, the ancient capital of Japan. It is an interesting fact that within the Japanese Army its soldiers had never been looked upon as of the highest class — an opinion shared by the British

and Indian soldiers who had to fight them; and this was borne out later during the interrogation of prisoners whose remarks about the division generally were hardly complimentary.

The Indian National Army was an unknown quantity. It was the military organ of the Indian Independence League headed by Subhas Chandra Bose, an extreme Nationalist, who had fled from India in 1941 and was now working in close collaboration with the Japanese. The object of the League was what its name implied: complete independence for India.

The I.N.A., of which Bose took personal command, was made up from civilians and Indian officer and other rank prisoners of war, chiefly from those taken during the invasion and occupation of Malaya. Some had been persuaded to join by peaceful means, others by means which were far from peaceful, while some saw that by joining, an opportunity might present itself of rejoining their old comrades should they have to go into action against them. The officers were all very junior in the Regular Indian Army and now held ranks far above those for which they had been trained. At this period only one division was in being and had received some training, the second was forming in Malaya and plans were in hand to raise a third.

At last, early in January 1944, executive orders were received from Tokyo for the attack on Imphal, but it was not until late January that General Kawabe issued final orders to 15th Army. The offensive was scheduled to begin in the first week of March.

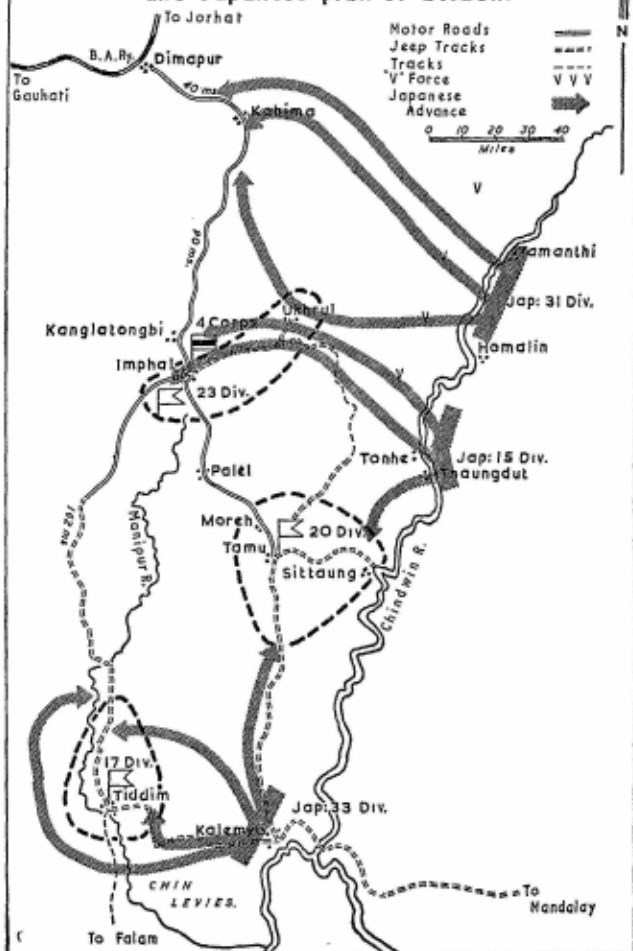
In estimating what reinforcements the British could bring in, Headquarters Burma Area Army had considered that the nearest, consisting of two infantry divisions and some armour, were in the valleys west of Imphal and that a month would be needed before they could properly intervene in the battle.¹

To help Mutaguchi's 15th Army, the attention of General Slim would have to be diverted elsewhere and his reserves committed before the assault on Imphal was launched. The obvious way to do this was to attack 15th Indian Corps in Arakan. It was with this object in mind that orders had been issued to begin offensive operations against 5 and 7 Indian Divisions of 15th Corps, about a month before Mutaguchi began his advance. The date fixed for this diversion was February 4th, 1944.

Mutaguchi acted quickly, but many months had elapsed since

¹ There were, of course, no British divisions in this area.

4 Corps dispositions as on 29th. Feb. 1944
and Japanese plan of attack.



the plan had first been put forward, and numerous changes and improvements had taken place on the British side since the Burma Army had withdrawn to Imphal in May 1942.

He decided upon a storming assault from a number of different directions at different times. On March 8th the main part of 33 Division, commanded by Lieutenant-General Yanagida, was to open with a surprise attack on 17 Division by cutting the Tiddim-Imphal road at Tongzang, some forty miles north of Tiddim and thereby blocking the only line of retreat to Imphal. Yanagida was to cut the road again near Milestone 100 so as to prevent the arrival of reinforcements from Imphal; he was also to occupy the attention of 17 Division from the direction of Fort White. Simultaneously, a strong detachment from 33 Division, under Major-General Yamamoto, was to advance up the Kabaw Valley towards Tamu.

Yanagida has been described as a talented and highly intelligent man, tall for his race, with a pale face, unusual in a soldier, and clear eyes. It is also on record that he was inclined to be over-conscientious and too cautious — characteristics which, if true, were to prove his undoing.

Mutaguchi anticipated that during this opening phase all General Scoones' attention would be concentrated on these two places, and this would give his other two divisions a free run direct on Imphal and Kohima. He therefore issued orders to Lieutenant-Generals Yamauchi and Sato commanding 15 and 31 Divisions respectively to be prepared to cross the Chindwin on March 15th, a week later, by which time he expected that such reserves as 4th Corps had available would be well on their way to extricate 17 Division from its precarious position. 15 Division was to attack the north-west of Imphal and cut the Imphal-Kohima road, while 31 Division would advance directly on Kohima, capture it and so prevent reinforcements from moving south to relieve the Imphal garrison.

Yamauchi appears to have been a man of polished manners, who had studied at West Point in his young days and later had been the Japanese Military Attaché at Washington. It is said that from the outset he had realised the immense potential strength of the Anglo-American forces and the folly of challenging it in a haphazard manner without adequate preparation.

Sato is described as of great courage, of easy manner, of unruffled casualness, of open-hearted nature and inclined to be un-

conventional. The qualities of character in both were in sharp contrast to the overbearing obstinacy of their superior commander.

Once 33 Division had disposed of 17 Division it was to continue its advance northwards and enter the Imphal plain from the south. Yamamoto Force, on reaching Tamu, was to turn westwards, drive on Palel and capture the high ground overlooking Imphal.

Food and ammunition were problems, but the Japanese soldier was used to living hard, a bag of rice tied to his belt lasting him ten days! The lack of roads, particularly in the jungle country through which 15 and 31 Divisions would have to pass, would make it impossible, in the initial stages, for supplies to be sent up in motor transport or for dumps to be stocked up behind these two divisions.

All depended on the swift capture of the Tamu-Imphal and Tiddim-Imphal roads, and indeed of Imphal itself. Once this was done the Japanese felt sure that the supplies and vehicles taken would meet a large part of their needs, while more could be sent up along these two roads from bases farther back in Burma and dumped well forward. But until this situation existed, infantry battalions and other fighting units were to carry a month's supply with them, and this they were to supplement from what they could collect locally in villages on the way.

Elephants, mules and bullocks would carry the rations, but since there were not sufficient of these, each unit would have to use some of its soldiers as porters. The bullocks, once their usefulness as beasts of burden ceased to be effective, would provide a welcome change of diet.

Mutaguchi saw the operation being completed in one month, after which the whole of his Army would turn to the defensive before the monsoon set in.

Obviously preliminary moves would be necessary to put the three divisions into their final positions before their respective 'D' Days. These had to be carried out with the greatest secrecy and with the maximum deception so as to lull the British into thinking that any forward moves by the Japanese were only with the object of strengthening their defences along the Chindwin.

So, as far as the Japanese were concerned, the stage was set for what was to prove one of the most decisive battles in their history and one on which entirely depended their continued presence in Burma.

During the cool spring, the hot summer and the torrential rains of the monsoon of 1943, the major effort of 4th Corps and the Royal Air Force was put into improving the lines of communication behind Imphal, making good roads forward into the Kabaw Valley and beyond, into turning the mountain track to Tiddim into something that could be used by a vehicle larger than a jeep, and to improving and increasing the airfields in the Imphal plain.

The whole countryside swarmed with armed and unarmed labour, which was all included in the General Reserve Engineer Force, an organisation known as G.R.E.F.

The task of Brigadier Bill Williams, recently appointed as Chief Engineer of the Corps and the officers in charge of sections of the road, was a heart-breaking one. There was no question of putting up such signs as 'Closed to all vehicles'. Not only were the roads being used by convoys taking supplies and ammunition to the forward troops while the road was being built, but often no sooner was a stretch of road completed with its culverts than a huge landslide would fall down the mountain. This entailed hours of toil and sweat to clear the tons of earth before the work could go on and convoys go through.

To add to their difficulties the monsoon made conditions quite atrocious. Small streams became torrents and poured down the hillsides, washing away sections of the road; everywhere was mud several inches deep. But to the everlasting credit of these engineers and their labour force the roads were made and the bridges built to such a high standard that when the time came they were fit to take even the heavy tanks. A remarkable achievement.

In 1952 an American who had very good cause to know every inch of the road from Imphal to Tamu went down it. Talking about it in 1960, he said: 'It was not an M.1, but still darned good!' It will be a matter of satisfaction to those engineers who built it for military use only, to know that then it was still being kept up by the Indian Government for peaceful purposes.

As time went on such progress was made that by the autumn it was possible to bring up another division to take over some of the tasks carried out for so long by 17 and 23 Divisions.

From early October until December, from time to time, lorries passed eastwards through Imphal carrying British and Indian soldiers wearing on their shoulders a new sign: a white sword clasped in a mailed fist on a black background. The significance of

this chosen emblem was readily understood by all ranks, standing as it did, and still does, for courage, chivalry and vengeance. Such was the sign of 20 Indian Division.

The Division, comprising British, Indian and Gurkha troops, had been raised in India in April 1942. From its inception it had been earmarked to fight the Japanese. In consequence, it had the advantage of being able to concentrate on preparing for this without being distracted by the chances of being sent to the Middle East. For its transport it had mules and motors; and for the past year it had been training in the jungles of Ceylon, excellent conditions for the role it was to be called upon to carry out in the near future.

Its commander was Major-General D. D. Gracey, who had the unique experience of not only raising and training the Division, but also of leading it throughout its period of active service against the Japanese. Douglas Gracey, then fifty years of age, was a man of considerable physical energy and infectious enthusiasm. These characteristics were understandable in one who, as a boy at Blundell's School, had not only captained the school but had also been captain of cricket, football and hockey. Later, as a young officer on leave from India, he had represented Devonshire at cricket. His regiment was the 1st Gurkha Rifles, and while serving with it in the First World War he had been wounded twice and been awarded the Military Cross and bar. But the wounds which he received in battle were not the only ones he had suffered: while out shooting and when taking a snap shot at a wild boar, the bolt of his rifle had blown back, shattering the bone below his right eye. Although the mark of the accident was still evident, the lucky escape from losing the sight of one eye had not diminished his keenness and skill, and he would often walk out in the evening from his headquarters with a gun, to shoot jungle fowl for the pot.

Of medium height and thickly built, he had a prominent jaw and a ruddy complexion. Ready to appreciate a joke even against himself, he was approachable, but, when occasion demanded, he could be explosive, his ire dying away as quickly as it had arisen. Because of his long connection with the division, he knew almost every man, and by his personality and drive he had welded it into a happy and efficient fighting machine.

When Pakistan became an independent member of the Commonwealth Gracey was appointed the second and last British Commander-in-Chief of the Army.

Three months elapsed before the whole of the Division was complete in its new surroundings, and by this time it had taken over in the Kabaw Valley from 23 Division, which was able to return to the Imphal Plain for a well-deserved rest and to train for what was coming next.

* * *

The front for which General Slim was responsible was not confined entirely to Assam. As the crow flies it covered a distance of between 500 and 600 miles — from Ledo in the north to Maungdaw in Arakan in the south, roughly along the line of the Indo-Burma frontier.

In the Ledo area, two hundred and fifty miles north of Imphal, was the American General Stilwell with three Chinese divisions backed up by a number of Americans. His task was to drive a road south-eastwards through the Hukawng Valley in the direction of Myitkyina to join up eventually with the old 'Burma Road' leading into China through Yunnan province. Preparations for the project naturally took time, but it was hoped that the advance would begin some time in the autumn, probably October.

Three hundred miles to the south-west of the Imphal plain lay Arakan, where, by September 1943, 5 and 7 Indian Divisions of 15th Corps faced the Japanese along the line of the Maungdaw-Buthidaung road.

There was no direct land communication between 4th and 15th Corps. Instead there were miles of mountainous jungle, intersected by waterways with no roads worthy of mention. To reinforce one from the other meant a tedious journey by road and rail back into India and then along the difficult lines of communication which fed each front. A division could take anything up to three weeks to move and be ready to fight again at the other end, whether from Imphal to Arakan or vice versa. A threat to either front might well mean that reinforcements would be too late to influence the battle unless the means of moving the troops and their equipment could be speeded up.

As already pointed out, 4th Corps, with its three divisions, was responsible for no less than two hundred miles of front, from north of Homalin on the Chindwin to as far south as Tiddim. A rough comparison with a similar area of country in England is interesting. Assuming London to be Imphal, then Taunton would

replace Tiddim and Dover, Tamu. From London to Taunton and Dover respectively there would be one indifferent motorable road; the whole country would be mountainous and most of it thick jungle through which ran only narrow paths used for centuries by the locals, carrying their goods slung on poles over their shoulders.

It was obviously quite impossible, nor was it necessary, to hold the whole of that long line of jungle-covered mountains. But it was essential to keep it all under observation by some means, since both Wingate and the Japanese had already given evidence that country deemed impassable before the war was in fact not so.

Partly to ensure that the enemy could make no move without being spotted, Scoones had disposed his Corps in December 1943 with that object in mind.

As already explained, Cowan's 17 Division was centred on Tiddim and in touch with the Japanese 33 Division, who had established posts along the track from Fort White to Kalembo. Covering his southern flank in the Chin Hills was Hasforce, so called after Lieutenant-Colonel Haswell, its commander. This little detachment was made up from the Chin Hills Battalion, led by British officers, and from the Chin Levies, again led by British officers and lightly armed. It was the responsibility of Hasforce to give warning of any Japanese move westwards and to harass any who attempted such a move.

On the Chindwin front 20 Division had its headquarters near Tamu. One brigade was nosing its way south down the Kabaw valley; another was working along the Yu River valley towards the Chindwin; the third was also pushing towards the river in the direction of Sittaung. On the northern flank of the division, about twenty miles away, 9 Battalion 12th Frontier Force Regiment, one of its battalions, was protecting the left flank and keeping an eye open for any attempt the enemy might make to cross the river.

In rear and in reserve in the Imphal plain was 23 Division and 254 Tank Brigade.

To fill gaps and to make certain that the whole front was carefully watched, both laterally and in depth, there was 'V' Force. Nobody seemed to know the origin of this name. There was one theory that it had something to do with the Prime Minister's 'V' sign; some said it was so named because it was the Vth force of this type that had been raised during the war. Be this as it may, 'V' Force played a very important part in the events leading up to the

battle and produced some invaluable information of Japanese intentions.

When it was originally raised it had been intended that it should form a 'stay-behind' organisation if ever the Japanese crossed the Indo-Burma frontier. Its task would be to provide information and harass the enemy rear areas, supply columns, and dumps, much as the Spanish guerrillas had done during the Peninsular War. But the Japanese had not advanced and now it was carrying out the very important job of obtaining information of enemy movements.

The Assam Zone of 'V' Force, which was the one immediately concerned with all that happened on or near 4th Corps front, was commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel R. A. W. Binney, a Regular officer of 9 Jat Regiment. From his headquarters in Imphal he controlled the activities of six 'areas'; the Ledo area to the extreme north and in touch with General Stilwell's divisions; the Kohima area which stretched from that place forward to the Chindwin north of Homalin; the Imphal area, working in close touch with 20 Division; the Chin Hills area operating under the orders of 17 Division; the Lushai Hills area to the south-west of Tiddim; and, finally, a watch and ward area in the mountains to the west of Imphal.

This last, very different from the remainder both in its organisation and its task, was under the direction of a British lady, Miss Ursula Graham Bower, who had lived among the Nagas before the war and was held by them in great respect and confidence. She agreed to establish a watch and ward area from among the Nagas in these mountains, who would report to her enemy air activity, any movement on the jungle tracks and any incidents of a suspicious nature. As these Naga tribes had been involved in a serious revolt against the Government in 1922, only those men who were specially selected by Miss Graham Bower were armed.

As for the other 'areas', these were made up of a headquarters and four platoons of the Assam Rifles — about one hundred and forty men, chiefly Gurkhas. In addition, each area was allowed to recruit up to a thousand locals, mostly Nagas, who were given rifles or shot-guns, ammunition, blankets and some supplies, and who stayed in their villages unless required for some special job.

The commanding officer, the four platoon commanders and the small headquarters staff were British. Few were Regular officers, the remainder being recruited from the tea-planters in Assam,

members of the Bombay-Burma Trading Company and Steel Brothers and officers who had been in the retreat from Burma in 1942. For instance, the Ledo commander was a tea-planter; the Kohima area was commanded first by an Assam police officer and later by an employee of the Imperial Tobacco Company; the Imphal area was under the command of a Regular Gurkha officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Murray.

'Areas' were to patrol the whole countryside, to keep in close touch with the villagers, particularly in the forward area, even on the far bank of the Chindwin and generally to establish an intelligence network within their own parish. Although the main object of each 'area' was to obtain information and not to fight, as it was not organised or equipped to do so, this did not mean that if opportunity was offered to a patrol to ambush or surprise small parties of the enemy, it was not to take advantage of it.

Each 'area' headquarters was in touch with Binney by wireless, but depended on runners to bring information back from their detachments — a slow and laborious method.

Although this dispersal of his divisions was forced upon Scoones, it did make reasonably certain that no large enemy force could advance undetected. But it also meant that his lines of communication were extremely vulnerable to sudden attack.

CHAPTER V

THE JIGSAW PUZZLE

'If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself and not the enemy, for every victory gained, you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle.'

Sun Tzu

IN the early days after the withdrawal from Burma, knowledge of the Japanese strengths, dispositions and intentions was scanty. An organisation had therefore to be got together as quickly as possible so that the pieces could be collected to make up the Intelligence jigsaw puzzle.

The chief means of obtaining information were by contact by patrols with the enemy on the ground and by reconnaissance and photography from the air. Of course, there were other sources of intelligence, some of which were highly secret and whose existence was only known to a few.

The Royal Air Force suffered from two very serious disadvantages not encountered in Europe or North Africa. First, the pilots and navigators generally looked down upon an expanse of green jungle, and when they were trying to pick out a target one patch of trees looked exactly like another. When bombing they could, more often than not, see no results because of the dense jungle. This would have made matters difficult enough, but in addition the Japanese were experts at concealing themselves, their positions and their equipment. All too often a pilot would spot no signs of life until he flew back over his own lines! Neither British nor Indian troops were in the same class when it came to camouflage and scrupulous concealment.

Secondly, the weather. In the dry months before the monsoon the presence of dust particles hanging in the atmosphere over the Imphal plain made it difficult to see downwards for more than a mile. With the coming of the monsoon the atmosphere soon

cleared, but other and worse problems arose. One could never be sure what the weather would do from one minute to the next. As the storms increased in frequency, they and the associated cloud became a distinct hazard, bringing as they did violent squalls, exceedingly bumpy flying conditions and torrential rain, which cut visibility to nil.

Aircraft would set off from Imphal on a mission perhaps two hundred miles away, far beyond the Chindwin. At first all would be well, with fine weather and comparatively clear skies. Air Control would be talking to the pilots by radio provided they did not fly low enough for the intervening mountains to blot out all communications: there were dead areas, and though one could hear the Radio Telephone in one valley, the signals might vanish in the next, and one was out of touch with base. 'Task completed — we are coming back,' the leader would be heard to say. Later, as the planes drew nearer to base, the dreaded message would come over the air: 'Cumulus has come up between us and home — we are climbing now — we cannot get above it — we can't get round the cloud — petrol is running short — we'll have to come back on a course.' Then silence. The operator would keep on calling, but he would obtain no reply. Either the pilot had flown blindly into a mountainside or else the aircraft had got out of control in the cloud and crashed.

Cumulus or cumulo-nimbus cloud proved a deadly foe. Banks of it often towered from a base at one or two thousand feet above the plain to a height of twenty-five thousand feet and more. Such a thick and high wall was often present over the mountains west of Imphal. Once in it, there was no knowing what might happen. Too often the pilot found himself helpless, and one R.A.F. Dakota was seen to emerge from a cloud upside down. The adventures of another Dakota provide an example of the strange things that occurred within that dark and terrifying atmosphere. It flew into one of these belts of cumulus and was instantly tossed about like a pea on a drum. At times the Dakota would shoot upwards for several hundred feet, only to drop like a stone. No wonder people had a theory that the wings were liable to be wrenched off during such violent events. In this case the pilot shut off the engines. His early life passed before him as if in some morbid kaleidoscope. He could do nothing with the aircraft, which was totally unmanageable. Suddenly, after what seemed a very long stretch of time, the

hapless Dakota went up and up and still farther up at a speed of climb far beyond the normal capabilities of such a plane and also beyond the strain which it had been built to withstand. 'It must break up,' thought the pilot. Then, like some windswept rocket, the Dakota was thrown out of the top of the immense cloud into brilliant sunshine. The pilot switched on the engines and, unhurt though severely shaken, he and his crew flew on without further misadventure.

On occasions an air photograph would reveal important information, but this means did not provide nearly the same amount of useful intelligence as was produced in other theatres of war, largely because of the peculiar conditions of the jungle.

The earliest close air support for the troops of 4th Corps had been a squadron of small two-seater Lysanders, based on the Imphal airstrip — in those days short and usable in dry weather only. The Lysander, primarily a reconnaissance aircraft, was a tortoise compared with the speed of the Hurricanes and Spitfires which came on the scene later.

But although reconnaissance was its proper role, the squadron commander had other ideas for it in these special circumstances, and decided that his Lysanders should give the ground troops some modest air striking power. To this end he caused racks to be fitted under the wings to carry twenty-pound bombs, and with these they had a good measure of success. A particularly noteworthy achievement took place on the Chindwin in the second half of 1942, when one of the pilots on reconnaissance spotted a small steamer, presumably manned by Japanese, puffing up the river. The 'Lizzie' attacked immediately and by accurate aiming — or, shall it be said, by good fortune — managed to drop a twenty-pound bomb plumb down the funnel! The steamer sank to the bottom, and never again, for the rest of the war, was any steamer seen on the river. In some newspapers there appeared a report of a successful naval action on the Chindwin!

The instructions to this squadron had been to fly in support of the Army through fair weather and foul until it could fly no more. This it did most gallantly through the winter of 1942-3 until eventually the squadron commander decided that it had shot its bolt. Orders were received for it to leave Imphal, and one by one the pilots took off, until last of all the squadron commander himself taxied out. So accurately had he judged the remaining flying

life of his own aircraft that, as he reached the runway, the undercarriage collapsed with old age. It subsided into the dust, and there it remained for some time as a monument to this fine little 'Lizzie' squadron which had earned the admiration and thanks of all for the magnificent support it had given.

On the ground, the keeping of continual contact with the enemy was precisely what the leading divisions set out to do — and did with conspicuous success. Their patrols, never still, were always looking for the Japanese, observing their movements and laying ambushes for them to obtain identifications and documents. It was largely from the latter that the most valuable information came.

Much blood and sweat was expended by these patrols because of the conditions in which they operated.

To begin with the whole atmosphere was different, especially for the British soldier. The jungle was a frightening place until one got used to it. There was a slogan: 'Treat the jungle as your friend'; but it was a friend who took a hell of a lot of knowing. Often one could see only ten or twenty yards — all around was thick with trees and undergrowth; there was a foreboding silence broken only now and again by weird sounds from unseen animals or birds; and all the time there was the possibility of a burst of fire from a cunningly hidden enemy.

Months of unbearable heat would be followed by long periods when the rain poured down unceasingly, so that officers and men were seldom dry, either due to rain or their own sweat.

Patrolling had to be done on foot, and usually involved marching miles through the most formidable country — up precipitous hills, along knife-edge ridges and down into the valley again, only to have to climb the next hill. Frequently a path had to be hacked through the jungle; rations and ammunition had to be carried.

The chances of a badly wounded man getting back alive were small, and if he fell into enemy hands his hope of survival was even less. Now and again an infuriated elephant would charge down the track, and the men of the patrol would have to fly for their lives in all directions.

Altogether it was a most exhausting performance. No wonder a period of acclimatisation and special training was necessary before troops were fit to undertake such physical exertions.

But now and again this grim business had a lighter side, as the

experience of a Gurkha patrol shows. This patrol, a platoon strong, was returning to its base after several arduous but uneventful days in the jungle near the Chindwin. Some distance ahead of the main body moved the two scouts, a lance-naik and a rifleman, the former carrying a tommy-gun, while the latter had a rifle slung over his shoulder.

Rounding a bend in the track, hemmed in on either side by thick jungle, they came upon a small clearing dotted with clumps of bushes. The lance-naik suddenly stopped in his tracks and, attracting the attention of his comrade by touching his arm, whispered '*Lo, bagh ayo*' ('Look, a tiger'). For, sure enough, a tigress had just leapt into the clearing and disappeared into one of the clumps.

After waiting a minute in suppressed excitement, the naik again whispered: 'You go round to that side of the bush,' pointing to the opposite side from that by which the tigress had entered, 'and throw some stones and I'll shoot it when it comes out.'

Quite unperturbed by his perilous mission, the rifleman collected some stones and crept forward. A shower of pebbles rattled among the bushes, out charged the tigress, fortuitously from the opposite end to the rifleman. A burst from the tommy-gun, and she fell stone dead.

Some hours later, having skinned the magnificent beast with their kukris, the platoon marched to company headquarters, bearing their trophy in triumph, their faces wreathed in smiles.

Today this skin hangs on a wall in the Regimental Officers' Mess in India, a proud reminder of the sporting instincts of these gallant little men.

In order to cut down the long marches and to push out as far as possible into the vast 'No-man's-land' to keep a close eye on the Japanese, a system of patrol bases was evolved. As much as a whole battalion might be detached from a brigade and would establish itself several miles forward or to a flank. A battalion headquarters 'area' would be formed which could be easily defended against enemy raiding parties; from it, companies would be sent out even farther to make smaller bases from which patrols could go and search for the enemy, returning to some kind of comfort and safety. The whole front of a division might be covered like a chequer board with these patrol bases, pushing nearer and nearer towards the Chindwin and occasionally across it.

A base was seldom less than a company strong, about one hun-

dred and twenty men all told, with their rations and ammunition and sometimes with a medical officer. If a reasonable track existed jeeps carried out the stores and blankets, but more often this had to be done by the faithful mule or even porters. The position was carefully hidden away in the jungle, trenches were dug and 'basha' huts built of bamboo, grass and leaves to give some protection against the sun and the rain.

The patrols themselves were of two kinds, the reconnaissance and the fighting. The job of the reconnaissance patrol was to see without being seen, to get information without fighting, and might consist of anything up to half a dozen men under a non-commissioned officer.

A fighting patrol went out with the object of obtaining identifications and valuable documents and marked maps by killing or capturing the enemy. It could be a platoon strong, thirty men under an officer, with their automatics, rifles, grenades and even a mortar if that was likely to be useful. Sometimes they would go out with the express object of attacking a small Japanese position, at other times they would lay an ambush on a track that the enemy was known to be using.

The Japanese often helped by the careless way in which some of their patrols moved through the jungle. Chattering and making plenty of noise they would come along a track, apparently oblivious of the possibility that an enemy might be waiting for them. Such conduct was inexplicable in a soldier so expert in this type of fighting; and many patrols were highly successful.

* * *

While the capture of documents was one thing, the translation of them was quite another matter. In Europe and Africa many British people could speak and translate fluently the various languages in common use, but Japanese, probably the most difficult language in the world, was a very different proposition. Japanese speakers and translators were few, and they were wanted in several different places at the same time; in England, in India, in Assam and in Arakan. Few Regular officers had learnt Japanese before the war, and not all of them could be made available; of the small number of British civilians who had lived in Japan or Korea, some were internees and the majority had never learnt Japanese. There were one or two university lecturers in the language, and others

who had learnt the language in London or had been through the Instructional Centre at Simla.

Until the opening of the battle it was for the translation of documents for which they were primarily required and not for the interrogation of prisoners. Prisoners were even scarcer than Japanese linguists! Before March 1944 one prisoner only was taken on the entire 4th Corps front, and he simply because he had not the means of putting an end to himself before he was captured. Even later, out of the very many thousands of Japanese who took part in the Battle of Imphal, a little over one hundred prisoners fell into British hands, most of them being either badly wounded or almost dead from disease and starvation.

The reason for this was that the outlook of the Japanese soldier to war differed widely from that of any other soldier. To die for the Emperor on the field of battle was to him the supreme honour, since by doing so he assured himself of a continued honourable existence in the hereafter. For a Japanese soldier to be taken prisoner was the lowest form of degradation. It also meant not only that he was officially written off as an individual and mourned as dead by his own kith and kin, but also that the honours of the hereafter would be forfeited for ever. To him, therefore, the 'last man and the last round' meant what it said. One knew a position had been captured only when every single Japanese had either been killed or incapacitated to the extent that he could do no harm — even to himself. Very tough physically, he observed the sternest discipline, and his personal needs were negligible compared with those of Western troops. Furthermore, he had been training for this type of warfare for years.

With all these characteristics it is not surprising that few prisoners were captured or that the Japanese soldier was probably the most formidable in the world.

Such linguists as there were belonged to The Combined Services Detailed Interrogation Centres — CISDIC; and at the beginning of 1943 one Japanese-speaking officer only had been posted to 4th Corps Headquarters. By the time the battle opened No. 1 Mobile Section had been formed, consisting of seven officers. In command was Major R. L. Storry, who, in pre-war days, had been a lecturer in English at Otaru University in Hokaido, the northern island of Japan. Of the other six officers, four had been in business in Japan, one, a Royal Air Force officer,

had been gold prospecting in Korea, while the last had learned the language in London. Most of them had received a brush-up at the Instructional Centre in India.

The Section also included two 'Nisei' (Japanese-American). The word *Nisei* is Japanese and means 'second generation'. Therefore, those employed in CISDIC were the children of Japanese parents who had emigrated to the United States, chiefly to California and were usually American by birth.

At times they were a source of anxiety, since they were Japanese by race and looked it, despite the fact that they wore American uniform and steel helmets, and there was no knowing what a sentry might do when unexpectedly confronted by one of them, particularly after dark. They had to be very careful how they moved around.

The story is told of a certain American colonel, a liaison officer at Corps Headquarters, who was caught in the open during a Japanese air raid. As he dodged behind a tree to get out of the way of the machine-gun bullets, he ran straight into the smaller and more Japanese-looking of the two *Nisei*, who exclaimed excitedly: 'Say, Colonel! Are those our 'planes or theirs?' The Colonel said afterwards that momentarily he was at a loss as to how he should reply!

As can be imagined, the capture of the first prisoner, taken in January 1944 on the front of 20 Division, was a momentous event and caused a great flutter all the way up the line.

Douglas Gracey, when he heard the news, rang up Corps Headquarters and spoke to the Brigadier General Staff.

'I've got some good news for you,' he said. 'A prisoner! 32 Brigade have taken him in the Yu River valley.'

'Good gracious,' replied the Brigadier in his astonishment. 'Where is he? What's his rank? Does he know anything?'

'He's a private soldier and pretty badly wounded, I gather.' Gracey went on: 'He is now on his way back to my headquarters, but it will be at least a day before he gets here.'

'All right, that gives plenty of time to get the medical experts down to you,' was the Brigadier's answer. 'We must keep him alive somehow.'

Brigadier Bill Dimond, the Deputy Director of Medical Services, gathered his specialists together and, jumping into the waiting jeeps with the most up-to-date drugs and medical comforts

(brandy and the like), they drove in haste to the headquarters of 20 Division. Probably never had a prisoner of this lowly rank been given such a reception. It was worthy of those meted out to noble knights captured on the field of battle in the days of medieval chivalry.

Slowly and gently, to battalion headquarters the stretcher-bearers carried back Second-class Private Ishizaki, for that was his name.

Brigadier D. A. L. Mackenzie, 'Long Mac' as he was known to all, commanded 32 Indian Infantry Brigade. He was a huge man, standing six foot five inches high and broad in proportion. Somewhat reserved in manner, he was a master of understatement. Absolutely sound, he could be relied on through thick and thin to do whatever was to be done. His ferocity was that of the bulldog. His coolness, however bad the situation might be, was infectious, which was just as well, because his brigade probably saw more hard fighting during the siege than any other in the Corps. A tower of strength, he inspired his troops with his own sterling qualities.

When Mackenzie heard of Ishizaki's arrival he went to see him in the Regimental Aid Post. There he lay on a stretcher very badly wounded in the knee, with an armed sentry on either side to prevent him doing away with himself. The Northampton who had captured him were very proud of their prisoner and were determined that he should leave them alive.

Ishizaki could speak no English, nor could his captors speak any Japanese. As he looked up at this immense Brigadier with his Gurkha hat and with red tabs on the collar of his jungle-green bush shirt, he distinctly pointed to the rifles of the guard and then to himself, as much as to say, 'Bump me off, please.'

The problem was how to get him back to the Administrative Area some miles in the rear, where he could receive better medical treatment before being transferred to a motor ambulance. If he was sent by land the journey would probably kill him, for he would have to travel on a mule, since no jeep could get up the track.

It was decided to float him back up the Yu River on a raft manned by locals who were expert in handling craft in these waters. The raft set off, but even then, so determined was Ishizaki to do away with himself that he made a great effort to roll into the water. With medical attention constantly at hand he eventually arrived safely in hospital at Imphal, where the CISDIC officer

was ready to talk to him as soon as he was in a fit state to be interrogated.

Ishizaki was only too willing to co-operate, but alas! like the majority of prisoners, particularly those of junior rank, he knew nothing of value. He had looked a very unintelligent Japanese, which, in fact, he was.

The CISCIC section had its office close to the Intelligence Division of Corps Headquarters, so that all information it obtained could be passed quickly and at the same time the Section could keep right up to date with all that was happening and intended. Since their job was not to interpret but to interrogate and translate, they had to know of everything that was going on in order to question prisoners intelligently and know what was really important among the captured documents.

Responsible for all Intelligence work was Lieutenant-Colonel Derek Holbrook, the First Grade Staff Officer, Intelligence, a Royal Engineer in his early thirties, with a high complexion and thinning hair. He combined an astute brain with a ready sense of humour, which qualities served him well when it came to the long hours of sorting out the extraordinarily complicated Japanese order of battle as it was revealed and confirmed piece by piece. At this he was a genius, and when the attack eventually took place, the Japanese plan, strengths and dispositions coincided almost exactly with what he had forecast.

The tasks of the CISCIC officers were varied, intricate, sometimes very arduous and not infrequently odorous when they had to handle bloodstained and evil-smelling papers. On some days, when haversacks of papers had to be sorted out and the immediate operational ones translated without delay, work went on day and night; on other days there might be only an odd post card or pay book. Later in the battle an officer might have to go to a division or brigade headquarters to interrogate a prisoner or to examine a piece of equipment or a knocked-out tank which bore Japanese characters.

As far as the prisoners of war were concerned, nearly all were extremely co-operative, probably because they never expected to be taken prisoner. This may also account for the fact that the Japanese seem never to have been given any security training. So when faced with an inconceivable situation they naturally answered questions truthfully, often volunteering information on matters

about which they thought they ought to have been asked, or offering to draw sketches of positions and dumps.

When first interrogated in the forward areas by a Japanese-speaking officer, they would frequently ask to be shot. This would be sought as a favour: 'You understand the Japanese spirit,' they would say. 'Please shoot me.'

It was the experience of CISEDIC that prisoners did not expect to be tortured on capture. Indeed, they expected correct treatment, complaining bitterly if by chance they had received some rough handling when first taken. On being told of the inhuman treatment meted out to British and Indian prisoners, they would deny it hotly.

Once it became clear to a prisoner that he was not going to face a firing squad, he made a fairly rapid psychological readjustment to the new situation. He felt lost to his own country and in a way absolved from all responsibility to it or to his countrymen. He was ready to begin a new existence. For example, a prisoner who had been a fisherman expected to be allowed to start life again as a fisherman in India. Often he would expect to be enlisted in the British Army, not necessarily to fight in Burma, but elsewhere: rather on the lines of the Japanese game 'Go', a kind of draughts in which captured pieces can be used against one's opponent.

It must be realised too that the majority were either wounded, sick from malaria or in the last stages of starvation. Yet their physical toughness was astounding. A man would be brought into hospital desperately wounded, unconscious, shivering with fever, his teeth black from starvation, his legs and arms like sticks, yet he would usually recover thanks to the great professional interest taken by the medical officers in the casualty clearing stations. One doctor was known to say that during a lifetime in London he could never hope to see so many varieties of wounds and diseases. He regarded each death as a defeat and made many follow-up enquiries about his patients after they had been sent back to India.

Nearly always, interrogations were carried out in hospital, as few prisoners were in a fit state to be put into the prisoner-of-war or the Military Police cages. So, to an outsider, a typical interrogation would resemble a conversation between a patient and a doctor exercising his best bedside manner. The CISEDIC officer would go to the hospital with a 'right up to the minute' knowledge of what was going on in the battle. He would sit down with the

prisoner, and he might even offer him a cigarette. Then the questioning would begin.

The atmosphere was invariably friendly, possibly for two reasons. First, the prisoner was delighted to be spoken to in his own language and in a reasonably polite manner. Such an expression of delight was not peculiar to Japanese wounded. In the hospitals in Egypt one would see the pleasure spring up in the eyes of our own Indian wounded when one of the officers' wives in a visiting party could speak Urdu. 'When are you coming again, Memsahib?' they would ask. 'There is no one here who speaks our language.'

'I will come at the same time next Tuesday,' she would reply. On the following Tuesday they would be waiting on the steps of the hospital, clustering round to give her a tremendous welcome.

Secondly, the history and training of CISEDIC officers must be borne in mind. Most of them had lived in Japan, and although they had no illusions about the Japanese Army and the Police State, yet the Japanese race as a whole did not appear to them — as it certainly did to many — to be made up of a horde of sub-human fanatics.

Therefore, while they never forgot for a moment that the safety of the British and Indian troops might depend on a particular interrogation, they did not approach it as a battle of wits or of will. Nor, as it turned out, was there any necessity to do so.

Sometimes during an interrogation a prisoner might say that he came from a certain province which happened to be well known to the interrogator, and this might lead to the discovery of mutual acquaintances or even mutual friends. On rare occasions the CISEDIC officer might be at a loss for a word or might not fully grasp the sense of what a prisoner was saying, particularly if he spoke in a strong dialect. If this happened, the Japanese would nearly always come to the interrogator's help by reminding him of the word for which he was searching or by repeating slowly what he had said.

The officers, on the other hand, were very different, but no more than four or five were taken during the whole battle; of these one only was unwounded, and he was suspected of desertion. Except for this last, they were unco-operative and ready to take any chance of committing suicide. All were remarkably ill informed and knew only what was happening in their own particular unit.

In the later stages of the campaign, when nearly all the prisoners

were at their last gasp due to starvation, scathing attacks were made on the Japanese High Command. Mutaguchi, in particular, was an object of abuse.

Undoubtedly most of the Intelligence 'plums' came from captured documents. Again the Japanese were extremely careless in carrying into battle, orders, marked maps and other priceless papers. An outstanding example of this particular trait was the contents of a haversack taken from a dead Japanese officer in the early fighting, about thirty miles east of Imphal. In it was the plan of attack by 15 Division on the north and north-west of the Manipur plain.

As a result of another incident during March 1944 in the Kabaw Valley Corporal George of the Border Regiment was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal. His company formed a patrol base twenty miles south of Tamu, from which it was sending out patrols farther southwards to locate the enemy. Corporal George was the leader of one of them. As he and his men were making their way stealthily southwards, to their great surprise they suddenly came upon a Japanese staff car stationary on the track. Inside sat three officers, and lying on the top were some soldiers: presumably a reconnaissance party with a small escort.

George did not hesitate. He opened fire, killing the officers and the escort before they could react. Since time would be short before a hornet's nest came to life through other Japanese being attracted by the firing, he and the patrol hurriedly searched the car and bodies, gathered all the papers together and withdrew. After a long trek back, they eventually arrived at division headquarters, where George handed in the documents, little knowing the value of what they contained. The CISEDIC officers took charge, and to everybody's amazement, there was laid out the plan of operations for the coming attack up the Kabaw Valley.

With patrols bringing in documents and the officers of CISEDIC using their skill to translate, the Intelligence jigsaw puzzle gradually assumed a recognisable picture. The contribution made by these interrogators and translators was of immense value, for without them, a detailed knowledge of the Japanese and their intentions could never have been built up. Moreover, all the physical hardships and dangers undergone by the forward troops in collecting documents and other items of Intelligence would have been to no purpose. In consequence, they were indirectly responsible for

saving the lives of many British, Indian and Gurkha soldiers by providing commanders and staff with vital and urgent information on which to base plans to defeat the enemy with the least number of casualties.

Even so, some pieces of the jigsaw were still missing, and these had to be found from other sources.

Because the British withdrawal from Burma had been so rapid, there had been no time to arrange for any 'left-behind' organisation to report on what was happening within the Japanese-occupied territory.

Once contact had been regained in the forward areas, 4th Corps Intelligence staffs had a comparatively comprehensive idea of what the enemy was doing near the Chindwin. But they were little the wiser about what was going on east of the river, and this information could only be obtained by sending parties to sit inside the enemy lines and report back such news as they were able to glean.

It was with this object in mind that a number of specially selected officers — British, Australian, Anglo-Burmese, Chinese, Kachins and other refugees — were recruited under the auspices of what was known as GSI 'Z', a General Headquarters Intelligence organisation. Some were powerfully built and bearded, others were small, dark and neat, but all were tough and used to living hard.

Many of those selected were forest officers and employees of the big commercial firms in Burma who, before the war, had worked in the areas now occupied by the Japanese. They were thoroughly acquainted with the country and with the local Burmese, of whom a number had been their own employees. In fact, they were well equipped to go back to operate behind the enemy lines, but it would be a dangerous undertaking, as once their existence was known to the Japanese, they would be high on the 'wanted' list. It was decided to form little groups, each consisting of two officers who had chosen to work together and about eight Burmese to carry, cook and to act as general handymen. These latter were chosen by their officers. Each party was to go to the places in which the members had lived before the war, set up a hide-out in the jungle, contact former employees and build up an Intelligence organisation within a specific area. It was hoped that their lack of numbers would increase their chances of remaining undetected.

The group had a small but powerful wireless set on which it could transmit and receive up to a range of four hundred and fifty miles. It took in as much food and other supplies as it could carry, and thereafter was to be resupplied by air drop as occasion demanded. The officers were provided with gold sovereigns and other gifts with which to reward their agents for the information they brought in. It was planned that they should stay in enemy-held territory for two months at a time, after which they would be given a period of leave in India before they went back again.

This was a courageous body of volunteers who, while living in the middle of the enemy, carried their lives in their hands, were dependent on the loyalty of their agents and faced certain torture and death if captured.

It was in great part due to their activities that much valuable information was obtained, and often at such speed that it was possible to make plans to hit the enemy hard when he least expected it. On the front of 4th Corps there were three of these groups, one in the north, in the Homalin area, one in the centre, and one in the Kalewa district. And although undoubtedly the Japanese knew of the existence of these groups, not a single one was captured. In fact, there were only two casualties, one officer dying of a combination of exhaustion and malaria, while another, a particularly brave man, was regrettably killed by one of our own shells when he was right up close to the enemy and sending back his report.

It was thought at one time that pigeons might be a good means of communication in case wireless failed. Experiments were made by taking these pigeons farther and farther away from their lofts, until finally they were put into aeroplanes and released in flight. The results were most unfortunate, since no sooner did the birds leave the aircraft and get into the slip stream than all their feathers were blown off. They lost their buoyancy and fell like stones to the ground. Heads were put together to find some means of overcoming the problem. The answer was simple. The pigeons were wrapped round with 'Bronco' so that when they were thrown out of the aircraft the paper took the strain until they were clear of the slip stream! This antidote proved an outstanding success, but in the event pigeons were never used as messengers.

It might have been thought that the circumstances would lend themselves to an extensive use of local agents — that they could be found among the Manipuris and so escape detection. This did not prove to be the case, and although both sides now and again tried to make use of a few agents, they met with no great measure of success.

The Japanese tried to set up a spy system headed by a member of the ex-ruling family of Manipur. He was soon spotted and a close watch was kept on him, while his underlings quickly fell into the hands of the Field Security Section.

There was, however, one Manipuri from Imphal who, if only for financial reasons, must have been sorry when the war was over. He worked for both sides, and was used by the British to go behind the Japanese lines when they advanced into the southern part of the Plain. During the course of his activities he came into contact with the Japanese officer responsible for organising espionage on that particular sector of the front. Allowing himself to be enrolled, and making no secret of what he had done, he was used to convey to the Japanese such information as was thought good for them.

One day he pointed out on an air photograph the house in which his Japanese master, a major, lived, adding that this major took his siesta in the house between the hours of two and three each afternoon. This was too good a chance to miss, so the Royal Air Force were called in to help, and the next day they bombed and strafed the house at the appointed time. Later it was discovered that the major had escaped, because although he had been in the house during the bombing, he had been unhurt and had been able to take refuge in a slit trench before the machine-gunning started.

The Japanese did not seem to attach the same importance to the value of good intelligence, or if they did, they set about obtaining it in the wrong way. On the whole, their information was poor and often inaccurate.

Up to the time that they attacked Imphal, it was difficult to know how much they knew about 4th Corps. Once the battle began in earnest, it soon became apparent that their information was far from accurate. As one proof of this, the maps which they issued to the troops before they advanced showed the British as having six divisions, whereas there were only three and a tank brigade.

Naturally steps had been taken to mislead the Japanese, and they had obviously believed a great deal of false information that had been disseminated. They, in their turn, had tried to deceive 4th

Corps by planting orders intended to give the impression that a whole division was in a certain place instead of the one battalion actually there; but it was all so clumsily done that Scoones' Intelligence staff saw through this rough deception within twenty-four hours, though at first it caused some alarm.

When the war was over, Derek Holbrook, still the Chief Intelligence Officer of 4th Corps, sought out the senior Japanese Intelligence officer of Burma Area Army Headquarters in Rangoon. He turned out to be a major, whereas his equivalent in 14th Army had been a brigadier. Consequently he had been far too junior to make his weight felt, and owned that he had experienced great difficulty in getting anybody in the headquarters to take notice of him. This must have been one factor which contributed to the lack of good intelligence in the Japanese High Command.

One of his important sources of information was the News Broadcasts by All-India Radio. These he had to take down and present early each day to his commander. Since these broadcasts were one of the means for conveying misleading information, it was not surprising that some of the titbits passed on to the General were inaccurate.

Another factor may have been the success of the Royal Air Force in shooting down Japanese reconnaissance aircraft. Although the British were remarkably inept at hiding either themselves, their equipment or their dumps, and air photographs properly interpreted could have revealed a mine of information, it is doubtful whether many photographs did get back.

The enemy photographic aircraft were two-engined and cumbersome. They were piloted by men dedicated to their task, dedicated in the sense that they had been ordered to take photographs, and photographs they were going to take no matter what the situation. They would come over without a fighter escort and fly in a dead straight line — an essential requirement for taking aerial photographs. The radar would show them coming while still some distance away, and up would go the British fighters ready to give them a hot reception. As the Japanese flew on, apparently oblivious of the approaching enemy, and took no evasive action, they became sitting ducks, and very few returned having completed the task for which they had set out.

It was by these various means and agencies that 4th Corps was able to follow the principle of Sun Tzu, pronounced two thousand four hundred years before — 'to know the enemy'.

CHAPTER VI

PORTENTS OF THINGS TO COME

'Just as water retains no constant shape, so in warfare, there are no constant conditions.'

Sun Tzu

ALTHOUGH it was obvious to officers and men, British and Indian alike, that sooner or later a purely defensive attitude on the Indo-Burma frontier would end, it was not until late in December of 1943 that the attack was uppermost in everyone's mind.

The change came about at Christmas due to an instruction from 14th Army to 4th Corps which ordered that preparations should be made for a limited offensive against the Japanese on the Chindwin. This was indeed heartening news after the eighteen months which had elapsed since the British had walked out of Burma, particularly so for the men of 17 Division, who had many old scores to settle.

The object of this 'limited offensive' was to attract the attention of the Japanese to the Chindwin front so as to assist operations elsewhere, namely General Stilwell's advance from Ledo and the fly-in by Wingate's forces to areas well behind the enemy's front line.

In brief, the Corps was to take advantage of any favourable opportunity that presented itself of crossing the Chindwin on the front of 20 Division and at the same time to give the Japanese the impression that an attack on Kalembo was about to be launched. To make such operations possible, the road to Tamu from Palel would have to be made two-way and all-weather by April, while a large dump at Moreh (five miles west of Tamu) was required to be stocked up with all the needs for a force of two divisions.

It was to implement these plans that Cowan's division was having a series of spirited actions on the track which led from Tiddim through Fort White towards Kalembo against stubborn resistance by the Japanese 33 Division. For reasons not apparent at the time, the enemy were extremely sensitive to a British advance into the

foothills at the southern end of the Kabaw Valley, and resorted to every trick to prevent any infiltration into that part of their defences.

In the Kabaw Valley, like the fingers of a hand, 20 Division was pushing out towards the Chindwin in all directions. There was great activity at Moreh, where convoys of lorries from Imphal were arriving daily with stores to make the big depot. On the road from Palel, Indian Engineers with thousands of labourers were working feverishly to make the road all-weather and two-way; bulldozers were right up among the forward troops as they levelled out the road from Moreh southwards down the Kabaw Valley.

Behind Imphal, the railway and the roads were being used to their full capacity to bring up ammunition, petrol and supplies to stock the numerous depots being built in the Imphal plain in preparation for the offensive.

To meet the threat of Japanese bombers which flew over from time to time, dumps were dispersed over a wide area. Some had to be sited outside the plain, as there was not sufficient space to get the necessary dispersion. For these, roads, tracks and clearings had to be cut out of the jungle so that lorries could drive right up to the sites at which the various stores had to be unloaded, and bashas had to be built to give protection to the more perishable items. All was activity and bustle, particularly on the airfields, where work was going on to make at least two of the six strips all-weather.

This was the situation towards the end of December 1943 and the beginning of January 1944, when certain events occurred and certain identifications were obtained which gave rise to the suspicion that the enemy was also thinking in terms of an early offensive.

In late December, 31 Japanese Division had been identified in the Homalin district. Although it had relieved 18 Division as far back as August, this was the first intimation received by the British that this division had arrived. Patrols also discovered that Japanese posts had moved right up to their own bank of the Chindwin to places where they had not been seen before.

But more was to come to add weight to the surmise that the enemy was up to something big. Early in the New Year a pilot flying over Homalin saw some strange objects floating in the river. On closer inspection they appeared to him to be rafts, and this he duly reported. An air photograph confirmed that he had been cor-

rect, and they could only be for one purpose — to ferry large numbers of troops across the river.

Immediately more aircraft took off from Imphal to bomb this target, and more photographs were taken to see the effects. These were most disappointing, because little or no damage had been done — and other means had to be devised of destroying them. A suggestion was made that drums full of petrol should be dropped to ignite when they hit the target, so setting the rafts alight. Hopes were high as the aeroplanes took off with their petrol drums, but the results were just as disappointing as before, the target being impervious to any form of air attack. Nothing further could be done except for the Royal Air Force and the 'V' Force detachments in that area to keep the rafts under close observation.

Later, towards the end of January, the CISCID officers at Corps headquarters were at work on some documents that had come from 20 Division. As they continued with the translation they were puzzled. Could they have made a mistake? No — it was quite clear. There, in front of them, were identifications of an entirely new Japanese division — 15 Division. This news was taken to Holbrook and passed on quickly to the Corps Commander.

It was a lucky break, and the most important information that had yet been received of what was being planned by the enemy. Since three instead of two Japanese divisions were now in the line opposite 4th Corps, there could be little doubt of what the enemy was up to, but the question to be answered was — when was he going to attack?

It was through the aggressiveness of the forward troops that this invaluable information came into British hands. On the northern flank of 20 Division, 9/12 F.F. Regiment, keeping an eye on any enemy in the vicinity of Thaungdut about forty miles south of Homalin, had moved two companies right up to the banks of the Chindwin in order to have patrol bases farther forward.

Everybody enjoyed patrolling on the Chindwin at this time of year. The air was clear and fresh; the river was not in flood; the villages were bright with smiling, attractively dressed Burmese women, running their homes as if unconscious of the fact that they were doing so in a 'No Man's Land' of fighting and patrolling. The villagers themselves were friendly and quite ready to sell fresh food to the Indian soldiers, which came as an agreeable change

from the dry ration. They would even insist on providing a meal for the Colonel when they heard that he was in the village.

The country too was different. Except for jungle-clad foothills running down to the river, it was open, and patrols had an uncanny feeling of being watched from the enemy bank as they crossed the cultivated paddy fields between the clumps of jungle.

Since nobody was ever seen on the far bank merely by watching from the near side, it was decided to cross the river to find out for certain if any Japanese were close to the bank. Fortunately most of the country boats were on the British bank, and local headmen were prepared to hire them at about twenty-five shillings a time. It became a common occurrence for patrols to cross in these boats, which were mostly of the dug-out type, the smaller ones carrying four to five men, while the larger would take as many as fifteen. They were propelled by the owner with an oar at the stern, and since the current was quite fast, the take-off had to be diagonal from upstream. Naturally it was rather an uneasy moment for the occupants as the boats approached the farther bank in the dark. Would a hostile reception committee be awaiting them? So far this had never happened.

As the troops became more skilful at moving about in the jungle and in these boats, and as it appeared that patrols could cross the river unmolested, more ambitious plans were made to lay ambushes on the farther bank.

In early January a highly successful little operation of this nature had been carried out, a few of the enemy being killed without loss to our own troops. This made the Commanding Officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Geoffrey Mizen, decide to try again on a larger scale, taking personal command himself. Mizen, a man of thirty-eight, was tall, good-looking and exceedingly fit. This last quality was indispensable to a battalion commander in Burma, since the appointment was a most exacting one, both physically and mentally. The ensuing weeks were to show his coolness under strain and how well he understood his men, who in turn had implicit faith in him.

On January 27th, 1944, a small force consisting of one company, some mortars, a medical aid post and sufficient of headquarters to control the operation set off in darkness from Sedaw, the company patrol base a few miles north of Thaungdut. Moving through the jungle and avoiding Thaungdut itself, it emerged on the river bank

opposite the village of Settaw, five miles farther south. Here the men lay up, the mortars were positioned and arrangements made to cover a crossing by the greater part of the company. In hired boats the men were rowed silently across in the gloom. Nothing stirred as they made a safe landfall and the pre-arranged ambushes were laid. All was peaceful and quiet until ten o'clock the following morning, when Mizen heard some firing. This lasted a few minutes only, and nothing further happened for some time, until presently signals were made indicating that a boatload was returning. The boat was seen to put off into the river, and as it touched the near bank out scrambled a section of 9/12 F.F. Regiment carrying two dead Japanese.

The N.C.O., a Sikh, was questioned as to what had happened. In the course of his interrogation he said that he thought these Japanese must be new, because of the casual way in which they had walked into the ambush, contrary to his experience on other occasions. A search of the bodies produced a good crop of documents over and above the inevitable postcards that all Japanese soldiers carried on their persons. Of course, nobody could understand them.

So impressed was Mizen with the report that the Japanese encountered might be fresh troops, that he decided to call off the operation and ordered the remainder of the company to come back.

The bodies having been buried, the little force withdrew, this time by an easier way through Thaungdut to the original base at Sedaw. There, Mizen left for his headquarters some miles in the rear in the Kabaw Valley, taking with him the documents. The next morning they were sent to 20 Division Headquarters and thence to 4th Corps, where this vital information came to light.

On February 4th the Arakan front flared up with a strong Japanese attack on 7 Indian Division. The fighting was fierce, with the enemy trying to destroy first 7 Division and then to cut the main lines of communication from 5 Division back towards Chittagong and India.

Although they failed in the first part of their plan, the Japanese succeeded in drawing a number of 14th Army reserves to Arakan, thereby creating as intended a more favourable situation for Mutaguchi and his 15th Army when the time came to assault Imphal.

Meanwhile the 4th Corps pot had passed the simmering point. It was beginning to boil. More evidence kept arriving to indicate

that the Japanese did not intend to wait much longer before they attacked. For instance, during the middle of February the enemy, who had been operating in the Chin Hills south of Tiddim, were reported to be leaving their old haunts and moving northwards.

An identification revealed the presence of 213 Regiment of 33 Japanese Division at the southern end of the Kabaw Valley together with a Heavy Artillery Regiment which had not been there before. It was known that 213 Regiment had been, until very recently, in Arakan; and obviously it had now moved back to rejoin its old division.

Patrols and aircraft reported much more activity of river craft on the Chindwin opposite 20 Division. In addition, the Royal Air Force, during night reconnaissances, had seen that the road between Indaw and Homalin was being used very extensively by motor transport. This was also confirmed by the 'Z' post operating in that area.

During their daylight reconnaissance flights beyond the Chindwin, pilots had also noticed large numbers of bullocks collected together which had not been there before. These could be either beasts of burden or rations on the hoof.

'V' Force had been very attentive to the rafts at Homalin, and now they too reported through their patrols that the numbers had increased.

Finally, the Royal Air Force, during their sweeps in the back areas, had observed that the Sittang Bridge over the River Salween, blown up during the withdrawal in 1942, had been repaired. This now presented the Japanese with a direct land communication back to the notorious Siam railway and Bangkok.

The road from Indaw to Homalin to which reference has been made had been secretly built by the Japanese through the jungle as a supply line for their 31 Division; and they had used it for some time without being detected, since a road was virtually impossible to see from the air through the overhanging trees unless its existence was already known. The Japanese took care not to use it in daylight, and it was discovered quite by chance in circumstances of extreme bravery. It happened in this way.

While 4th Corps and the Japanese 15th Army were sparring and preparing to attack one another, planning was going on at 14th Army Headquarters for the fly-in of Wingate's 3 Indian Division in early March to the Indaw area on the Mandalay-Myitkyina rail-

way, with the object of creating havoc on the Japanese lines of communication to the north and north-west of Mandalay.

One day in January a Royal Engineer major named Towers walked into Derek Holbrook's office. He was aged about thirty-five, of average height, slightly built but wiry. Until recently he had been employed on airfield construction in the valley to the west of Imphal.

He explained to Holbrook that he had come to seek advice and help in carrying out a mission which he had been given in connection with Wingate's proposed operation. He had been instructed to go to Indaw, a distance of one hundred and thirty miles from Imphal as the crow flies. When he got there he was to find out whether the air-strip which had existed before the war was usable, and if not, what would have to be done to make it so. The task completed, he was to return and give his report. On paper it sounded quite simple, but Towers had no special training in jungle navigation, nor did he speak any Burmese. To reach his destination he would first have to get across the Chindwin, then find his way through thick jungle over a high range of mountains. As if this were not bad enough, most of his journey would be through Japanese-held territory, and he would have to run the gauntlet twice — there and back.

Holbrook gave him all the information he could about the Japanese, our own troops and the country through which Towers would have to go; he also promised to arrange for all possible assistance in crossing the Chindwin. Among other things, he told him that once beyond the river he should keep his eyes and ears open for 'X', one of the 'Z' party through whose area he would pass. He added: 'It is most unlikely that you will meet, but you never know.'

When all the arrangements had been fixed, Towers and his party set out on their hazardous journey and crossed the Chindwin without any enemy interference. Shortly afterwards there followed a kind of 'Dr. Livingstone, I presume?' meeting in the middle of the jungle between Towers and 'X'. Both were surprised, 'X' the more so, as he had not been told that Towers was on his way. His surprise increased when he heard what Towers expected to do, and since he was quite convinced that, by himself, the Major would never succeed, he signalled back to this effect. At the same time he asked for permission to accompany Towers, because he knew the

way and also how best to avoid the enemy. Permission having been granted, the two set off together.

After they had travelled eastwards about forty or fifty miles, they came upon a freshly constructed road up and down which Japanese transport was constantly moving, particularly at night. They stayed in observation, and as soon as opportunity offered, 'X' wirelessly back news of their discovery.

Details were passed to the Royal Air Force, who, now that they knew exactly where to look, found the road, and with their machine-guns and rockets made it just as difficult for the enemy to use as the rest of their lines of communication. No longer could their lorries drive along it in safety, not even at night, as any sign of a light was at once a target for the Royal Air Force pilots. This must have been a great disappointment to the enemy, who could never have known how the secret was discovered.

On and on went 'X' and Towers, keeping well away from tracks likely to be used by the enemy, until at last they reached the Indaw airstrip. The area swarmed with Japanese, but they managed to get all the information they wanted, although it meant two or three unnerving days waiting for an opportunity to examine the strip carefully.

The reconnaissance complete, they started on their homeward journey well satisfied with what they had done. All went well until they reached a point from which 'X' considered Towers could go on safely by himself, while he returned to his secret hide-out and his normal job. But in the jungle the unexpected is ever present.

By this time only one porter remained. History does not record what happened to the others. With this one Burmese boy, Towers plodded on towards the river, physically and mentally tired after his exhausting experience. As they walked along the track, suddenly without warning they were confronted by a wild buffalo, probably the most dangerous of wild animals. There he stood directly in the way in which they wanted to go. Neither side hesitated. The buffalo charged, heading straight for Towers, who did his best to scramble into a tree. He was too late, and the horns of the infuriated beast ripped into the biceps of one arm, making it useless.

Luckily he escaped further injury, but the boy had disappeared, nor was he ever seen again. The buffalo eventually moved off into the jungle, and Towers even more exhausted from pain and loss

of blood, forced himself on towards the river, which he reached without any further trouble.

The story told at Corps Headquarters of how he succeeded in crossing the six-hundred-yard-wide Chindwin was an amazing one. By this time Towers was in very poor shape; his useless arm made swimming impossible, and there were no boats that he could see. He sat down behind some bushes close to the river bank to await events, hoping that somebody or something would turn up to get him across.

Sitting quietly in his hide-out, he heard movement on his own bank. As the footsteps got nearer he saw that two armed Burmans, obviously members of the Burma National Army, collaborators of the Japanese, were approaching his hiding-place. Drawing his revolver with his good arm, and poking it through the bushes when they were opposite to him, he ordered them to halt and throw their rifles into the river. Taken by surprise, the Burmans did as they were bid, and when the rifles had splashed into the water Towers told them to build a raft.

With plenty of bamboo close at hand, the making of a raft was an easy matter, but there was always the chance that more Burmans or Japanese might come along the track. The period of waiting was an anxious one. When the raft was completed he ordered them to launch it and then to make themselves scarce.

Having seen them out of sight, he crept from his hiding-place, clambered on to the raft and began paddling with his good arm towards the opposite bank. This would have been hard work for any man, but for one in his condition, badly wounded and half starved, it was especially so. Despite his disabilities, he made progress, and it looked as if the last obstacle was to be overcome. Then, when he was nearly across, the raft began to sink and the water rose slowly round him. Standing on the raft, since the water was by then nearly waist high, and calling on his last reserves of strength, he at last touched firm ground. Staggering ashore, he collapsed.

Quite by chance a patrol of 9/12 F.F. Regiment happened to be near by, and coming upon this motionless body, they found to their amazement that it was not only alive but a British officer.

The wound caused by the buffalo had turned gangrenous, but despite this and the fact that the journey back to Imphal was the worst possible thing for a man in such a plight, Towers reached hospital alive. Four weeks had elapsed since he had set out on this

extraordinary exploit, and when Holbrook went to see him as he lay in bed he was a shadow of his former self. Even so, he was able to describe all that he had seen and give a most valuable account of the secret road.

Gradually events were moving to a climax. It was clear that the enemy was well ahead with his plans for the invasion of Manipur, so that all thoughts of a British offensive had to be re-examined. New plans had to be made to meet the coming Japanese advance.

CHAPTER VII

FEAR NAUGHT

NEVER use tanks in penny packets — avoid close country — tank commanders must be able to see: these were the principles ruling how and when tanks should be used.

It was not surprising therefore that many people should think that the jungles of Burma would be no place for armour. The mountains, the trees and the lack of roads would make it impossible for them to operate. Admittedly 7 Armoured Brigade had played a gallant part in the retreat from Burma, but it had been used mainly on the roads except when the country was open, as it is in central Burma. It had been forced to abandon its tanks before crossing the Chindwin — the last obstacle on the way back to India.

Luckily some doubted whether this was really the true situation, and it was decided that further investigation should be made to see whether tanks could be of use in the proposed offensive against the Japanese. So it was for this purpose that Brigadier R. A. L. Scoones, the brother of the Corps Commander, was sent to Assam to make a thorough examination and report back to G.H.Q. in India.

Scoones, known as 'Cully', was a very experienced Tank Officer who had already fought in the Western Desert with 7 Armoured Division. Aged forty-three, thick-set and physically hard, he possessed a nice turn of humour, a likable personality and the ability to express his opinions clearly and concisely. He was eminently suitable for the task in hand.

He realised that the only way to find the answer was to walk the course himself through the jungle in the Kabaw Valley and scale the hills on the Tiddim road. He came to the conclusion that apart from limiting the number of tanks that could be used in any one place at any one time, the teak forests of the Kabaw produced no problem, nor did the mountainous country of the Tiddim road. The more he saw, the more he was convinced that tanks could make a very useful contribution in this extraordinary country.

On his return to India, although some were still sceptical, his opinion carried the day, and he was posted to command 254 Tank Brigade, which moved up to Imphal at the end of 1943. How right Scoones had been was to be evident from the outstanding part played by the tanks under his command as the battle progressed.

His brigade comprised two regiments: the 3rd Carabiniers, Prince of Wales's Dragoon Guards, and the 7th Indian Light Cavalry. The former was equipped with the heavily armoured 'Lee-Grant' tank mounting a very efficient 75-millimetre gun, while the latter had 'Stuart' tanks, light both in armour and in armament (37-millimetre gun), but with the advantage of being able to get more easily through swampy ground. Both could fire high explosive or armour-piercing shells as required, and had additional fire power from their machine-guns. To enable them to climb the hills, they were fitted with 'grousers', spikes affixed to the tracks, which gave them a better hold on the steep slopes.

3 Carabiniers, who had earned their first Battle Honour under the Duke of Marlborough at Blenheim, was commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Ralph Younger, originally 7th Queen's Own Hussars, a tall, good-looking officer with great drive and energy who had already seen much fighting in the Western Desert, where he had been awarded the Military Cross, and in Burma. Besides setting an example of outstanding leadership which was eagerly followed by the rest of the officers and non-commissioned officers of the Regiment, Younger's knowledge of what tanks could or could not do and his easy manner led to a great spirit of friendship and co-operation between tanks, artillery and infantry.

7 Cavalry, the second oldest cavalry regiment in the Indian service, derived from the 3rd Madras Cavalry, which had served at Seringapatam and in the Mysore and Mahratta Wars of the Wellesley era. Now it was commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Jack Barlow, a powerfully built man with ginger hair. This first-class leader in battle had gained a fine Military Cross in the fighting in North Africa. The composition of its squadrons, officered by British and Indian alike — one squadron commander later became High Commissioner for Pakistan in London — was, respectively, Jat, Punjabi Mussulman and Sikh. Most of the men came from the farmer class and were very good at handling horses, cattle or

camels.¹ Only at the outbreak of war did the regiment discard its horses, but the men took to mechanisation rapidly, proved themselves particularly good at maintenance, and a former rough-riding instructor, for example, would be quick to adapt himself to become the new instructor in gunnery or in wireless.

Besides the two cavalry regiments, there were other troops, fighting and administrative, without whom the tanks could not function properly. For instance, there was a squadron of Engineers to help them over any obstacles they might meet; a tank-bridging section which could lay a bridge when required; a Recovery Company and Workshop Company to pull out the lame ducks and to carry out repairs; an Ordnance Field Park to hold the spares that might be wanted and, of course, signallers.

In addition, there was a battalion of infantry — The Bombay Grenadiers, whose role it was to protect the tanks at night and to accompany them into battle for their protection when in thick jungle with the enemy close at hand.

All these were Indian soldiers, highly trained, highly efficient and working in an atmosphere of intimate friendliness with their British comrades.

The Japanese tanks — of mediocre quality — were of two types: the medium and the light, though from the British point of view their medium was in reality a light tank, and the light was a ban-tan. The medium had a small type of gun and two machine-guns, while the light was armed with only one machine-gun. This latter had a crew of two, who had to be very small men to fit into the restricted space. Except on one occasion they were never used to help their own infantry in attack, being mainly fought as dug-in pill-boxes, perhaps because their means of communication were so indifferent.

As in the Arakan fighting, the Japanese had realised that the British tank was their main enemy on the ground, with the result that during this campaign they resorted to all sorts of methods to try to knock them out. Some officers in particular showed the most fanatical bravery in their efforts to destroy the advancing

¹ In 1942 a well-intentioned department, perhaps believing that the North-east Frontier of India might be like the North-west, sent a detachment of camels to Manipur, with a Pathan in charge. They were intended to carry wounded men in sawjals, one on each side. But camels can scarcely walk in rain, and in the monsoon they slipped and slithered, got foot-rot, and some even died in the adverse conditions.

tanks, even to the extent of climbing on to the top and forcing their way in through the turret.

To begin with, their reaction was to close with the tanks and place on the sides 'sticky' bombs, which had a devastating effect when they exploded. It was for this reason that the Bombay Grenadiers were trained to move sufficiently close to be able to spray the sides of our tanks with bullets, and so kill any enemy who tried to get near them. Later the Japanese produced not only a grenade which could penetrate the armour of the big 'Lee-Grants' but also a very effective anti-tank gun, which knocked out a number of them.

The mountains, the jungle, the ability to see only a few yards in front — but not the climate — were all new to the Carabiniers and 7 Cavalry. From the time they reached Imphal until the moment the battle began, they trained day and night with the infantry from 23 Division. They experimented with various methods of getting through swampy ground, of climbing the jungle-covered hills and of dealing with Japanese bunkers in conjunction with the infantry. It was fortunate that they had this respite, because when the moment came for them to go into battle they were ready for anything that they were called upon to do.

CHAPTER VIII

'CALCULATIONS'

'Now the General who wins battles makes many calculations in his temple 'ere the battle is fought.

'The General who loses a battle makes but few calculations. Thus do many calculations lead to victory and few calculations to defeat; how much more no calculations at all.

'It is by attention to this point that I can foresee who is likely to win or lose.'

Sun Tzu

FOR most of the period that headquarters of 4th Corps had been in Imphal it had been concentrated in bungalows, bashas and other huts in the north-west corner of the town.

That part of the headquarters in which the Corps Commander, General Scoones, and his planning and intelligence staffs, had their offices was a large civil bungalow surrounded by trees. In Sun Tzu's days the General had a temple in which he collected his thoughts, made his calculations and sought guidance from the gods. In 1944 Scoones' 'temple' was what had been a bathroom, leading out of one of the bedrooms, a small room about ten feet long and six feet wide. It had one small window, and all the light by day came through the open door. The furniture consisted of a wooden table and two chairs, while a map of the area of operations covered one wall.

The various Messes were near the offices, and the sleeping-quarters, again basha huts, were close by in little compounds surrounded by a fence. It was in one of these compounds that the Corps Commander and his Chief Staff Officer had their respective bashas.

The garden was completely overgrown. Outside the General's basha two rotten trees lay on the ground, and on them he was cultivating some exotic species of orchid of which he was very proud. The Chief Staff Officer had no flowers, nor was he particularly interested in them, but he was interested in getting hot

water for his occasional camp bath. Invariably the water was cold, and at last the Brigadier expostulated with his batman.

'Why is it I can never get a hot bath?' he asked.

'Because the wood is very difficult to come by, sir,' the batman replied.

'But I can't understand it. There's lots of wood lying all over the place. See if you can collect some.'

Sure enough, the next evening the Brigadier came back from the office about seven o'clock, tired after a day of many problems and frustrating conferences.

'Bath ready?' he called to the batman.

'Yes, sir, all ready,' came the reply, 'and nice and 'ot too. I got some wood today and it burned beautiful.'

'Splendid!' said the Brigadier as he took off his clothes in pleasant anticipation.

The batman hustled into the basha bearing two steaming petrol tins of boiling water, poured them into the canvas bath, added some cold and withdrew. The Brigadier stepped in and settled down to his first really hot bath for weeks. It was very comforting.

As he sat there pouring water over his shoulders, he thought over the events of the day. It was a good time for thinking as he was relaxed, it was quiet and there were no telephone calls to distract him. But this state of affairs was too good to last for long.

Suddenly there came a bellow from the Corps Commander's basha.

'Who in the name of fortune has taken my orchids? The trees have gone too! Wait till I catch the chap.' There followed a short description of the dire punishment awaiting the culprit.

Uneasy thoughts passed through the Brigadier's mind. He got out, dried quickly, put on a few clothes and called to his batman.

'Where did you get the wood for my bath?'

'Well, sir, I had a good look round as you told me to, and I found a couple of old trees lying outside the General's basha. Nice and 'andy they were, and I didn't think that nobody wanted them, so I cut 'em up. They burnt beautiful, sir.'

'You'd better make yourself scarce,' said the Brigadier, 'and come back in an hour's time.'

Later that evening the Brigadier had to explain to Scoones what had happened. It was not a pleasant moment, but the Corps

Commander's rage had died down and, blessed as he was with a strong sense of humour, the incident was passed over and the batman was saved.

* * *

In Geoffrey Scoones the Japanese had an opponent who was a master at the art of making calculations, an expert in sorting out a military problem quickly and presenting on paper a very clearly reasoned answer bringing out the various factors which had led him to his conclusion.

By February 29th it was still not clear exactly what the enemy intended to do, nor when, but obviously the time had come to make a detailed plan which could be put into operation at once should the Japanese attack in the near future — an eventuality to which Generals Slim and Scoones had, of course, already given much careful thought.

With its airfields, supply and ammunition dumps, its hospitals and workshops, the Imphal Plain was the key. The loss of this base would do more than put paid to any further organised resistance in Manipur. It would be a crippling blow by which the Japanese would gain an overwhelming victory.

To Scoones, therefore, the object stood out with unmistakable clarity — 'to hold the Imphal Plain and destroy any enemy who attacked it'. To do this was not going to be easy, bearing in mind how widely separated his divisions were on the ground. The infantry of both sides were roughly equal in strength, but certain information pointed to the fact that another Japanese division might well be brought up to take part in the battle, and this would give them an advantage in numbers.

In the air the British had a definite superiority, with seven squadrons immediately available for support of 4th Corps, whereas the enemy seemed to have no permanent allotment of aircraft. Up to date, the Royal Air Force had had an almost continuous record of success against marauding aircraft.

In tanks and artillery, from all information available, it looked as if the British would have a distinct advantage, since 254 Tank Brigade had two regiments of tanks, of which one was composed of the heavy Lee-Grant, much bigger than the few light tanks which had been seen in the Japanese rear areas. As for guns, there had always been indications that the Japanese were weak in artillery.

In keeping his forces supplied the enemy had an advantage, since his wants were less, a factor which enabled him to maintain larger forces over roads which would not meet British requirements. Furthermore, he had the Mandalay-Myitkyina railway, from which radiated three reasonably good roads to the Chindwin, each around one hundred and ten miles long, far shorter than the one road from Dimapur to Imphal (one hundred and thirty-three miles), and that between Imphal and Tiddim (one hundred and sixty-seven miles). This made it possible for him to bring his forces together much more quickly than the British could ever hope to do. At the same time, the latter's long communications offered a very vulnerable and enticing target to the Japanese, just the sort of target that would appeal to them. Since the guarding of this long line of communications would be a prohibitive drain on 4th Corps, it had somehow to be reduced in length.

From a glance at the map it was obvious that 4th Corps, with its divisions spread out round the countryside, would be at a great disadvantage if obliged to fight a defensive battle. Two hundred miles of jungle and mountains lay between 17 Division at Tiddim and 20 Division in the Kabaw Valley. To reinforce one with the other meant a move back to Imphal and out again. Admittedly these dispositions had been forced upon the Corps by the Japanese in the early stages, but they were also suitable for the limited offensive visualised by 14th Army. To fight a battle of the nature that was likely and to comply with the object which Scoones had set himself, namely the defence of the Imphal plain, the Corps would have to concentrate. Clearly a decision had to be taken in the very near future as to the role of the Corps; was it to be the limited offensive which was being planned or a defensive battle against an all-out attack by the Japanese. If the latter, then a change in the lay-out must quickly be made.

An added difficulty was the presence of all the unarmed labour. There were thousands in the Kabaw Valley building the road forward and working on the supply base at Moreh; there were more constructing depots and accommodation in the Imphal plain. These labour units, without any transport of their own, would be a serious embarrassment should the enemy advance in strength. They and their mechanical equipment would block the roads, work would have to stop and they would need to be protected and fed. If it was accepted that a major offensive was coming, the whole

aspect of labour would have to be reviewed and the probability of its evacuation to India would have to be considered.

In Arakan the Japanese made a furious attack on 15th Corps and had been repulsed with heavy loss. Outlying brigades and units in isolated positions surrounded by the enemy had held on until reinforcements arrived. Why could not 4th Corps do the same? The answer was simple. 15th Corps had a tidy compact lay-out; its divisions stood side by side; the sea had afforded one safe flank; it could be reinforced with comparative ease. As no such conditions existed in the 4th Corps area, to adopt the same policy would almost certainly result in piece-meal defeat.

In Geoffrey Scoones' mind there was every indication that an offensive was imminent and that the Japanese were well placed to carry out a number of different plans. They could attack 20 Division while holding 17 Division, and at the same time cut the Dimapur-Imphal road. Or they could attack 17 Division first and then destroy 20 Division. The greatest threat would arise if the Japanese used all three divisions at once to cut the Dimapur-Imphal road, the Tiddim road where it crossed the Manipur River, and the Imphal-Tamu road somewhere between Palel and Tamu, combining this with determined attacks on both forward divisions and possibly against the Imphal plain itself through Shuganu in the south-east corner.

At this stage it was quite impossible to make a certain forecast, but Scoones felt that he should have plans ready to meet the worst threat.

What was he to do? When to call off the limited offensive plan was by far the most difficult decision he would have to make. 17 and 20 Divisions had gained their present positions with much blood and sweat, and the offensive was uppermost in everybody's mind. If he pulled back the forward divisions to Imphal too soon and then nothing happened the effect on the morale of his soldiers would be very bad indeed. If, on the other hand, a withdrawal was left until the Japanese offensive was in full swing, divisions might well be defeated one by one.

In thinking out various alternative methods of defeating the Japanese onslaught, Scoones discarded any idea of remaining in his present positions. The risk was too great, and he would have to fight the battle at a severe disadvantage from the start. He could

compromise by withdrawing 17 Division to Imphal and fighting the battle in the Kabaw Valley, but like many compromises, it avoided the main issue, that of concentrating his entire force to fight. 17 Division might not get back in time if heavily pressed by 33 Division. Even then, if the Japanese followed up as they were most likely to do, the only effect would be that the lines of communication between Imphal and 17 Division would be shorter. Such a plan would not serve Scoones' purpose.

There was nothing for it but to get 17 and 20 Divisions back to the Imphal area at the first sign of a definite threat, for by doing so he could concentrate the whole of his Corps, shorten his lines of communication while at the same time lengthening those of the Japanese, who would thus be placed at a disadvantage.

Naturally, further advantages would come his way once the enemy reached the outskirts of the plain. The country here being much more open, the British aircraft would be able to see their targets plainly and the tanks able to manoeuvre with far greater ease. If the Japanese could be held off until the monsoon broke in May, nature would decide the final result. Clearly the chances of doing this were infinitely greater if he fought the battle while concentrated.

But when should he begin to pull back his outlying divisions? The whole move would be a retrograde step. All the effort that had been put into the building of the roads would come to nothing and, more galling still, the enemy would benefit from all the work that had been done.

Such were the thoughts passing through his mind at this very critical time, and from them emerged a plan which he passed to General Slim for approval.

In essence his intention was unaltered: 'To hold the Imphal plain.' To do this 17 Division, when ordered, was to move back to Imphal as quickly as possible, to make a clear breakaway, and not to hold any intermediate positions on the way back until it got to somewhere between Milestone 40 and 50 on the Imphal-Tiddim road. There it was to leave one brigade to guard the approach to Imphal while the remainder became part of the Corps reserve in Imphal itself. Further defended areas were to be made around Milestone 36 and in the village of Bishenphur so that the lines of communication to the brigade left behind to hold off the enemy would be protected. Plans would be made at once for de-

molitions on the Imphal-Tiddim road, and these would be set off under the orders of Cowan as he withdrew.

Douglas Gracey's 20 Division was to continue to make a nuisance of itself to the Japanese in the Kabaw Valley, but was not to move farther south. Then, as soon as it became clear that something big was happening and 4th Corps gave the order, Gracey was to concentrate his division in and around Moreh, remaining there until all the labour units and mechanical devices at work on the Tamu road had been evacuated, after which he would withdraw slowly back along the road towards Shenam. Here he was to halt and hold this extremely important entrance to the Imphal plain, having destroyed any stores that it had been impossible to back load from Moreh before he left.

There remained Ouvry Roberts' 23 Division, which would have under its command 50 Parachute Brigade now on its way from India to join 4th Corps and the invaluable 254 Tank Brigade.

One brigade of 23 Division was already in the area of Ukhrul prepared to counter a Japanese move from the north towards Tamu. The remainder of the division, with 50 Parachute Brigade, was to be responsible for protecting the Kohima-Imphal road and for destroying enemy parties that entered the Imphal plain.

For close defence of the airfields, dumps and hospitals in the plain, all the various units were to form themselves into a series of 'boxes'¹ with all-round defence, and whenever possible were to be situated so as to cover the airfields. Each 'box' was to be self-contained in ammunition, food and water to withstand a siege of ten days.

Throughout all these deliberations General Slim was in constant touch with Scoones. By air from Comilla, the site of 14th Army Headquarters, it was only a matter of three-quarters of an hour by air, provided the weather was good. In January and February this was usually the case, so the Army Commander was able to visit Imphal frequently.

General Slim approved the plan, but the decision as to when to withdraw 17 and 20 Divisions he left to Scoones, the man on the spot, making it clear that this decision was not to be taken until

¹ Any unit which was isolated on permanent defence went into what was called a 'box', an area defended by troops and having its defences all round. The garrison might comprise any force from a company to a brigade.

such time as Scoones was as sure as he ever could be that the Japanese had started an all-out assault.

With the plan prepared and ready to put into effect at once, there followed a period of anxiety and suspense for all the senior commanders and staff officers who had been let into the secret. The next few days would probably provide the answer.

PART THREE
THE JAPANESE ADVANCE



CHAPTER IX

THE CURTAIN RISES

'The Army has now reached the stage of invincibility and the day when the Rising Sun shall proclaim our definite victory in India is not far off.

'This operation will engage the attention of the whole world and is eagerly awaited by 100,000,000 of our countrymen. By its very decisive nature, its success will have a profound effect upon the course of the war and may even lead to its conclusion. Our mission is thus of the greatest importance and we must expend every energy and talent in the achievement of our goal.

'I will remind you that a speedy and successful advance is the keynote of this operation. . . . When we strike we must be absolutely ready, reaching our objectives with the speed of wildfire despite all the obstacles of the river, mountain and labyrinthine jungle. We must sweep aside the paltry opposition we encounter and add lustre to Army tradition by achieving a victory of annihilation.

'Aided by the Gods and inspired by the Emperor and full of the will to win, we must realise the objectives of this operation.

'Conscious of their great responsibilities and of their duty to emulate our heroic ancestors, both officers and men must fight to the death for their country and accept the burden of duties which are the lot of a soldier of Japan.

'The will of the Emperor and our countrymen must be fulfilled.'

THIS is an extract from the Special Order of the Day issued by General Mutaguchi about three weeks before the assault on Imphal was due to begin. Its stirring phrases fortified the soldiers of the crack Japanese 33 Division when they advanced on March 7th, 1944, in an attempt to destroy 17 Division with a double flanking movement and to smash 20 Division.

Somewhat less stirring were the words of Tokyo Radio, which referred to the Japanese soldiers as marching joyfully across the frontier 'with tears streaming down their tawny cheeks'.

From Yazagyo in the Kabaw Valley, with the bulk of 214

Regiment (a Japanese regiment was approximately the equivalent of a British brigade), Ogawa Force and Saito Force, respectively under the command of Majors Ogawa and Saito, moved westwards along the jungle track leading to Tongzang and the Tuitum ridge, which overlooked the vital bridge across the Manipur River.

In the Kabaw Valley Major-General Yamamoto, who commanded 33 Division Infantry Group,¹ started his move north towards Tamu. He had with him all but a battalion of 213 Regiment, 14 Tank Regiment, amounting to some twenty-one medium and forty light tanks, and most of the divisional artillery, including some of their heaviest guns. He knew that by the time he reached Tamu he could expect help from 15 Division, which would by then have crossed the Chindwin.

Fifteen miles to the south of Tiddim, the enemy's Western Manipur Force, comprising the greater part of 215 Regiment, crossed the river at Mualbem on March 8th and set out for Milestone 100 on the Imphal road, where it was to establish itself in order to prevent reinforcements from moving south to the aid of 17 Division.

They turned north along tracks through dense jungle and among steep hills; and for either the Royal Air Force or our infantry patrols to spot these columns in such covered country, let alone assess their strength, was extremely difficult, especially as most Japanese movement occurred at night.

On March 9th a lone rifleman of the 1st Battalion, The 10th Gurkha Rifles who had got separated from his comrades came in from patrol to say that, while lying up on a hill overlooking a river crossing, he had seen a very large column of Japanese on the west bank the previous evening. On the same day an Engineer officer wrote in his diary: 'Things commence happening in Tiddim. Jap looks like mischief.' Others like him thought the same, and it was deemed advisable to begin the evacuation of certain Corps troops who were attached to 17 Division and whose presence was not essential if a battle began: for example, the Khasi porter corps, a mobile surgical unit, a field veterinary hospital, a salvage unit, a field remount section and a mobile X-ray unit. Enemy troops were said to be in Kaptel, where Sappers had blown the suspension bridge on the 10th. Report had it that the Japanese were using elephants down

¹ In addition to the divisional commander (in this case Yanagida), there was also a major-general commanding the infantry of a Japanese division.

The Tiddim Road.

Motor Road, unmetalled. = = =

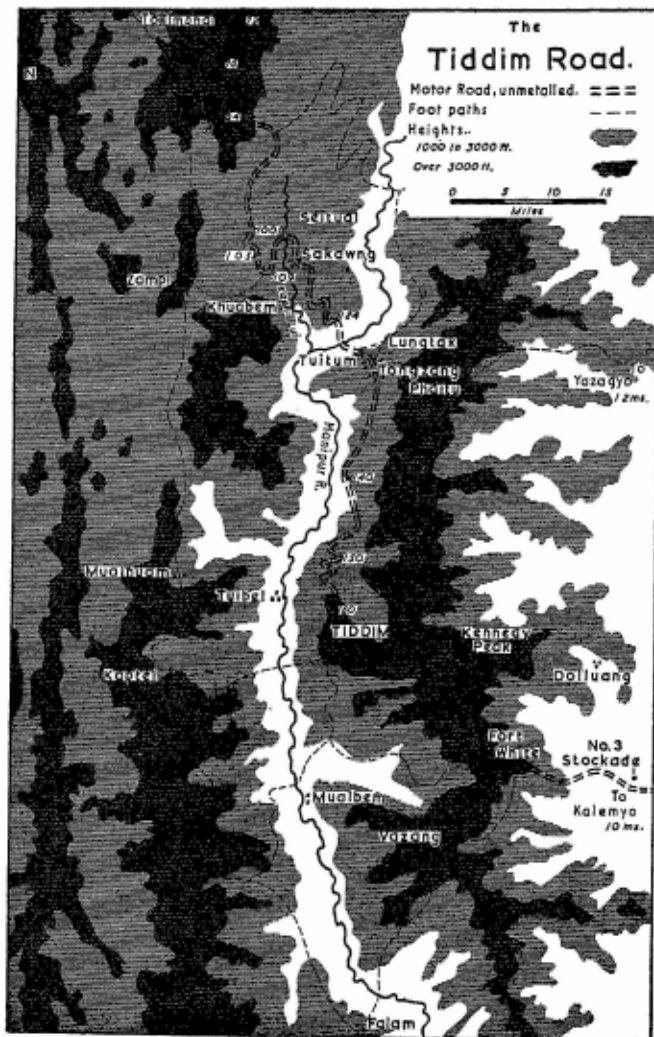
Foot paths - - -

Heights..

1000 to 3000 ft.

Over 3000 ft.

0 5 10 15
Miles



by the Manipur River at Tuibel, site of another suspension bridge which had been prepared for demolition. Enemy artillery and mortars were more active than usual south of Kennedy Peak.

Cowan's divisional headquarters and the administrative units began to dig defensive 'boxes' and to erect wire, since at this stage Tiddim was to be held at all costs, with supply by air, and 48 Brigade acting as a mobile striking force. That was on March 11th. Two days later a patrol captured a Chin villager who had acted as coolie to a Japanese battalion which, he said, was heading for Singgel at Milestone 100.

Soon after half past eight on the evening of March 13th Scoones telephoned to Cowan and gave him orders to withdraw his division to the Imphal plain. He had been informed by the commandant of the scattered, low-lying and almost indefensible supply depot at Milestone 109 that Japanese troops were in the hills only a few miles west of his camp. To add to his difficulties, the commandant had five thousand unarmed labourers and next to no fighting troops except a sapper field company and three companies of 9 Jat Machine-Gun Battalion. The remaining company was on its own, holding high ground by Milestone 100. In the light of these disquieting reports Scoones had decided that 17 Division must come back without delay.

At five o'clock on the afternoon of March 14th the division began marching out of Tiddim almost at the same time as the Japanese 214 Regiment closed in on Milestone 109 and cut the road. Within twenty-one hours of the withdrawal orders being issued, sixteen thousand marching troops, two thousand five hundred vehicles and three thousand five hundred mules had been pulled in from positions covering an area of fifteen miles radius round Tiddim and scattered over a mountainous front of more than twenty miles. The Military Police were severely taxed to exert the traffic control required to prevent a chaotic bottleneck as the columns moved away. That evening a storm arose and a high wind blew. A red glow in the sky over Tiddim showed that the sappers were not leaving much for the enemy to use.

Hedley's 2/5 Gurkha formed the rearguard. All the long-drop latrines were filled to the brim with mortar bombs and detonators which could not be carried; and booby traps were set in and around the village. At three in the afternoon the battalion set off along the ridge, leaving behind one patrol which, having been to a

Chin village some three thousand feet below Kennedy Peak, was not due back for another hour and could not be warned of this rapid departure. However, the patrol, under Lance-Naik Uggan Singh Rai, rejoined the 2/5th that evening, having come through unscathed all the booby traps and other obstacles which had been prepared to delay the Japanese pursuit! As the Gurkhas marched along the road they were encouraged to hear behind them the regular shelling by the Japanese of Kennedy Peak — an evening 'hate' which for once would be an utter waste. The men grinned and felt more cheerful.

The soldiers were also cheered by the news of Japanese radio claims that, except for a detachment trapped at Tongzang, the entire division had been overrun and annihilated after a desperate last stand at Tiddim. 'In that picture of utter desolation,' said the Japanese announcer, 'one can read the panic which must have reigned in the hearts of the division in its last moments.' In fact, Cowan's troops covered twenty miles during the first march, down the Chocolate Staircase and over the Beltang Lui to Milestone 144. The Japanese followed with caution and, as will be seen, devoted their main effort to getting in ahead to block the road of escape.

Meanwhile, twenty miles north of Tiddim, strong patrols of 214 Regiment attacked the 1st Battalion, The West Yorkshire Regiment at Paidim on March 6th, and two days later stormed a hill which guarded the approaches to Tongzang village. The enemy then divided his forces and put in three attacks on villages and hill features on the eastern flank of Tongzang, but his efforts were defeated by some unbrigaded units of 17 Division, welded into a composite group nicknamed 'Tonforce'. Although 1/4 Gurkha Rifles were sent on March 11th to help 'Tonforce', on March 13th Cowan, realising that the Japanese were attacking very strongly this vital position astride the only road to the Manipur River bridge and to Imphal, despatched Brigadier Burton and the rest of 63 Brigade north to strengthen the garrison, whose defences were in danger of being overwhelmed.

'Tonforce', supported by a battery of 29 Mountain Regiment, continued to hold the ring of posts round Tongzang against repeated attacks by 214 Regiment; but while thus heavily engaged it could not prevent one Japanese battalion from getting past through the jungle north of the village and, on March 16th, establishing

itself on the saddle astride the road at Milestone 132, near Tuitum, just before 63 Brigade could do so.

That night things were confused, with reports of enemy columns coming up behind and on the flank. Cowan told Burton: 'Forget those bloody Japs and keep your eye on the ball.' The 'ball' was the clearance of the road northwards. A preliminary attack by one company having failed to dislodge the enemy, 1/3 Gurkha next day went in after a heavy airstrike and a bombardment by most of Baron de Robeck's artillery: 129 Field, 29 Light Mountain, and 82 Indian Anti-aircraft/Anti-tank Regiments. The mountain howitzers were brought up almost in Waterloo style, and Burton recalls standing beside Colonel Horsfield while he ordered: 'Shoot! . . . Shoot! . . . Shoot!' over open sights. The Japanese were almost blown off the face of the hillside, so that when the Gurkhas stormed up the saddle with kukri and bayonet more than half the enemy battalion was destroyed, and the rest fled westwards. Had the Japanese been able to hold the saddle with a stronger force, the effect upon Cowan's division could have been most serious, if not disastrous.

The Japanese, meanwhile, were claiming that—

'the enemy forces in Tiddim, simultaneously with the fall of Tonzang, tumbled down and the main force of the 17th Division rushed in an avalanche to the river bank of Manipur in approximately one thousand and five hundred trucks. Lane (*sic*), commander of the 17th Division, together with his men, are now running stark naked to the Indian Border across the torrential stream of the river after throwing away all the weapons and munitions. Thus the 17th Division of the British Indian Army, which has been bombastically claiming to recapture Burma by continuing its futile guerrilla activities in the Chin Hills, has been completely exterminated within a short space of twelve days since the commencement of this operation. . . .'

* * *

Farther north at Milestone 109 the situation had become critical in the big stores depot, for intensified shellfire from the overlooking hills was causing many casualties in a congested area. Owing to the need for level ground and a handy supply of water, the depots had been established on low ground on the banks of the Kaphi Lui.

The Japanese occupied a spur and cut the road to Imphal. For lack of infantry, all efforts to re-open the road failed, and the situation began to deteriorate rapidly.

Throughout March 14th British mortars shelled Japanese positions opposite, until at dusk a tremendous volume of small-arms fire reverberated among the hills round the camp. Intermittent firing was heard all night, yet one American driver was still able to get his ambulance in from Milestone 126 at ten o'clock that night, even though he was heavily fired on over the last two miles of the hazardous journey.

Early on the 15th shelling was heavy, and so was the mortar fire later in the day on the ridge across the river. The night passed quietly, but soon after breakfast Japanese mountain guns opened fire, even while Dakota aircraft were dropping supplies by parachute. During the night of March 16th-17th five thousand non-combatants were led to safety along a bridle path by an Indian remount officer, who had used it many times as a short cut to avoid the traffic on the road! Surgeons were performing an operation when they received orders to quit the hospital. They finished their surgery before doing so. The few fighting troops held out longer, but then they too had to escape, leaving stores, immobilised vehicles and camp sites to the looting hands of exultant Japanese.

* * *

Cowan's next task was to reach Milestone 109 from the south, and this was entrusted to Cameron's 48 Brigade.

Brigadier Ronnie Cameron, with tall, well-built figure, strong chin, blue eyes, and pronounced nose, was a remarkable soldier. In the First World War he had served in Gallipoli with the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry. He had commanded 2/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles in the 1942 retreat and had had a particularly trying time at the Sittang River in February of that year, endeavouring to save as many as possible of his men and in particular his wounded. The bridge had been blown up to prevent its capture, and he had to make some very painful decisions involving Gurkhas whom he had enlisted and known for twenty years and more. As a result, Cameron's hair had turned pure white.

A bachelor, an adept fisherman, he was active, unconventional and forthright. He had a fertile mind, and was constantly devising new tactics or methods of equipment.

Cameron was a very good shot, and before the war had personally trained two winners of the King's Medal in the Indian Army Rifle Association contests, and many successful rifle teams.

He was an exceptionally brave man, and exposed himself freely among the forward troops, seeming to take little care of his own life. 'He's a bonny fighter' was his highest commendation when talking of some officer — and he most assuredly was that himself.

Now 48 Brigade brushed aside one small enemy party and then on March 24th encountered the main Japanese defences along a ridge running east from Milestone 110. First 9th Battalion, The Border Regiment attacked Sakawng, but were driven back. Then Hedley's Gurkhas took up the challenge, because to secure this village was vital in that from the ridge just beyond it one could look down upon the supply depots. The artillery support was superb, the guns and mortars plastered the ridge, and the infantry followed close behind. The first company was held up. The second company went on, the bren and sten gunners firing a concentrated *blitz* from the front rank. Over the top they dashed, to the heartening warcry of '*Ayo Gurkhali!*'

Suddenly the sound died away. Hedley wondered what had happened. Surely his men could not all have perished. At once the truth came to him. His Gurkhas had *captured* the hilltop! Here was a scene of disorder: bits and pieces of dead Japanese, equipment, dugouts, nearly forty bodies — and a few Japanese disappearing over the ridge: the first time the 2/5th had ever seen enemy soldiers running.

The village — a mere trio of thatched huts — was deserted. The view down on Milestone 109 was there as promised. One saw an open space and in it many tents and bashas and most of the characteristics of a military stores depot. But of signs of occupation, nothing. Two days earlier men of the 1st Battalion, The West Yorkshire Regiment had watched Japanese driving about in captured jeeps; now these had vanished. With the aid of binoculars Hedley and his officers quartered the area and saw nothing living except a mule, a chicken and a dog. Down in the camp they found signs of surprise and hurried departure. Beds were unmade. Bottles of gin lay about for the taking, though the Japanese had sacked the place. Two staff officers, who were among the first to enter, discovered the bodies of two Indian soldiers who had been

strung up naked and obviously used by the enemy for bayonet practice. 'It was quite the most horrifying sight I saw during the entire war,' recorded Colonel Miron.

The Japanese were holding another ridge by Milestone 105, and so, although they had relinquished the stores depot, their presence above it prevented its use by 17 Division. They had to be evicted, and time was pressing, so 2/5th were charged with the task.

Hedley had little information on which to base his plan. No route up to the ridge was visible, but there seemed to be two possible ways of approach: straight up the hillside — a mixture of scrub, small trees, undergrowth and outcrops of rock, and so steep as to be almost unscalable by soldiers laden with weapons, ammunition and equipment; or else up a spur and round the edge of a wide 'saucer', also very steep. Hedley chose the latter route. Major Martin's company went off at half past two that night, followed fifteen minutes later by a second company. The remaining company and battalion headquarters did not leave for another three hours, but within half an hour they had caught up the next troops ahead. In fact, the route proved a nightmare, for there was no track or path, and in places men could only heave themselves up the slope by hanging on to trees and bushes.

Martin's company had a most arduous approach climb, and at one place was faced by a vertical cliff some twenty feet high, and with no way round it. A young naik named Sunbahadur Gurung set the style of scaling this obstacle, making his section plunge their bayonets into the cliff face, and on this strange ladder the Gurkhas scrambled to the top. Although the Japanese were barely two hundred yards away, the company's attack took them by surprise at nine o'clock in the morning — a fact as uncommon as it was fortunate, since had they been properly alert, they could not have failed to prevent the Gurkhas from reaching them. Naik Sunbahadur Gurung was no less gallant than he was resourceful. Seizing an enemy machine-gun with his left hand he shot the gunner with a burst from his tommy-gun, and was then killed while exhorting his section to resist a Japanese counter-attack. A posthumous Indian Order of Merit was awarded for his conduct and example.

Meanwhile the rest of the battalion moved forward on the left up a very steep slope with visibility only twenty yards because of the thick scrub. C company put in one attack, but failed, the

commander, Major Alan Boswell, being wounded, and a Gurkha officer and several havildars killed. Hedley could not afford to wait until his B company came up, for if the Japanese attacked him he would have been unable to contain them on the hillside. Moreover, his communications were bad, and the mountain gunners had little ammunition. Reluctantly he sent Boswell's platoons into a second attack on the enemy bunkers. This time they suffered most severely, Boswell being killed, which left the senior unwounded rank, a naik, in command. When the Adjutant, Brian Kitson, walked up to take over command he was soon wounded, and only when B company arrived was the situation stabilised.

Even so, the troops had no food, no mules, no doctor, no regimental aid post, no reserve ammunition. So steep was the hillside that nothing heavy could be brought forward, nor could the mules scramble up; for lack of charged batteries the wireless sets began to fail; for lack of entrenching tools, digging had to be done with bayonets. The Subadar Major, Giriparsad Bura, formed a first-aid post in a hollow; but when the Japanese began to use their grenade dischargers more men were wounded in the open. That night they slept fitfully. Hungry, anxious, fatigued, they waited and kept watch lest the enemy should attack them downhill. Relief came with the new day, March 24th, when the Brigade Commando Group — two platoons from 1/3 and 2/5 Gurkha under Major Robin Parry — tramped over from the other side of the ridge, and the Japanese, deciding that they had held out long enough, slipped away.

The group had been obliged to hack a path through the dense jungle with dahs and kukris, to scramble up steep cliff faces on hands and knees. On the second day they had dumped all heavier rations so as to quicken their pace, and thereafter the men had lived on rice flavoured with the petals of white magnolia flowers which bloomed in profusion on the hillsides.

Many of the Japanese had, after the first demoralising charge by the Gurkhas, stumbled out of their trenches and fled, firing under their arms or wildly over their shoulders as they ran. Other Japanese soldiers held strongly defended bunkers, but after some hours of exchanging grenades and bursts of machine-gun fire, they too slipped away in darkness, leaving five bodies and many blood-stained bandages, and ammunition and equipment too.

Next evening, the enemy, seeking to regroup in the village of

Khawbem, were scattered and decimated by a most successful raid by Royal Air Force fighter-bombers.

When, on the 26th, 1 West Yorkshire marched into the Milestone 109 area in a deluge of rain, they dug trenches in rocky ground, recovered abandoned supplies, and dodged sacks of sugar and other stores dropped by our aircraft. Drivers and fitters busied themselves trying to start vehicles left behind. Fortunately, just before the enemy had overrun the camp, Lieutenant-Colonel Mohite, commanding a motor transport battalion, had ordered that the contact-breakers should be removed from every truck and lorry which could not be driven away. These breakers had been put in sandbags and carried out by Mohite and some of his men. Now, a fortnight later, the same contact-breakers were dropped by parachute, and many of the vehicles were made serviceable again, the rest being destroyed by the sappers, who also prepared the area for systematic demolition.

While the head of Cowan's division was thus fighting its way into Milestone 109 depot, the rearguard, comprising 63 Brigade, was attacked for seven nights on end by 214 Regiment, which had been reinforced by more troops brought up from Tiddim and now had strong support from artillery and even five light tanks. Thanks to barbed wire, mines, some medium machine-guns rushed up to strengthen the defences and the splendid artillery defensive fire, Burton's men beat off all attacks. Even on the night of March 24th, when the Japanese launched three most determined onslaughts upon the Tuitum saddle, the defenders killed over two hundred and fifty of their opponents: in all more than six hundred bodies were later counted. Next morning four of the tanks were seen to be wrecked on the minefield which the sappers had laid four days before. Of the thirty-five mines, mules had set off two, one proved to be a dud and the tanks exploded eight. Outstanding in this dogged defence had been 1/10 Gurkha and a company commander, Major A. Fairgrieve, who earned a Distinguished Service Order.

Before withdrawing, the rearguard blew up the Manipur River bridge.

* * *

It is now time to turn back to Imphal. Here General Scoones, faced with a developing threat from the east and with the fact that

Cowan's men had been cut off, decided to send first one brigade, then a second, from his sole corps reserve, 23 Indian Division, to fight down the Tiddim Road to help out the 17th. The first of these brigades, 37 Indian, composed of three Gurkha battalions, had been split in readiness for a training exercise near Kanglatongbi, but on the evening of March 13th was ordered to move up the Tiddim road at nine o'clock next morning. In command was Brigadier H. V. L. Collingridge, who had raised the brigade in Razmak and led it for close on three years. A civilian in India when the First World War broke out, he had gone to Gallipoli with 6 Gurkha Rifles and taken part in sticky trench fighting before serving in Mesopotamia and northern Persia. Between the wars Collingridge had campaigned on the Frontier and had commanded his Gurkha battalion as well as holding staff posts.

All that night maps of the road were unrolled and studied; stores, rations, equipment and ammunition were collected in a race against time, for the transport was due to arrive at half past six for loading. The officers knew too little. Had there been less secrecy, less vagueness, such a sudden move could have been better organised and supplied. Collingridge and a small advance party met Major-General Ouvry Roberts at Tulihal airstrip in the morning and orders were given for the brigade to go to Milestone 82 — and carefully, in case the enemy had got there first.

Vivian Collingridge had never been along the road before; nor had the half dozen men with him. All seemed quiet when they arrived at Milestone 82 as night was falling, to find a large transport and administrative camp scattered along the road for about a mile. Here a colonel was doing his utmost to organise a defence perimeter — a very difficult task, so spread out was the site. The Brigadier and his party took up a separate position to the east, and sat there uncomfortably till eight o'clock, when Lieutenant-Colonel F. R. S. Cosens arrived with his 3/10 Gurkha Rifles, later than expected because their lorries had been delayed on the steep hills. The 3/5 Gurkha Rifles were on the way up, and so were the guns of 6 Indian Field Battery, but many of these had stuck, because the old towing vehicles could not pull them up the hills.

The nucleus of 37 Brigade dug in for the night. Then Roberts telephoned to tell Collingridge that the Jat machine-gun company near Milestone 100 was in a tight corner and must be relieved next

day at all costs. Collingridge asked whether the General really meant 'at all costs'. He did. The Corps Commander had said so. Accordingly, a message was sent to 3/5 Gurkha twenty miles in rear, instructing them to spend the night where they were, and to come straight through in the morning to help the Jats. Collingridge met the battalion next morning as they climbed from their lorries and, with a troop of Stuart tanks of 7 Indian Light Cavalry, moved forward up the road under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel John Marindin, who descended from a family of ancient French nobility which, having fled to Switzerland after the massacre of St. Bartholomew in 1572, had in one branch settled in England during the eighteenth century. A bachelor, genial, rosy-faced, kindness itself, yet very tough and prepared to be stubborn, Marindin was the man required for the battle in store — a battle in which, by his resolute leadership, personal courage and resourceful conduct, he was to earn a Distinguished Service Order.

The situation was disquieting. For one thing, Collingridge still had only two of his battalions; 3/3 Gurkha, commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel G. M. Forteath, which had farthest to come, from down the Kabaw Valley, could not arrive till later. For another, there was no water between Milestones 82 and 100, so it all had to be carried forward.

At Milestone 98 a patrol commander from Cosens' 3/10 Gurkha, who had contacted the Jats, told Marindin that the road was blocked and that he had arranged for a Jat officer to lead the 3/5th forward through the jungle to their position. Marindin could in fact look down on it and just see a bivouac and hear a mortar popping away, very faintly. Local visibility in what was more like forest than real jungle was about fifty yards.

Leaving behind D company with rear battalion headquarters, Marindin and two companies with the guide went off through fairly open forest towards the Jats. Almost at once fire was opened, mostly tracer, and Marindin saw figures flitting through the trees about fifty yards away. He thought it must be a Japanese fighting patrol, and decided to push forward, diverting one platoon to deal with the enemy. In fact, the Japanese were running up the hill to occupy some prepared positions, more or less where the Gurkhas had started from, and the 3/5th were moving down in the direction from which the enemy soldiers had come. Such confusion was typical of this sort of warfare. Later this Japanese position was to

be attacked, first by two of Marindin's companies, and then by 3/10 Gurkha, each time in vain.

It was well that the 3/5th hurried forward, for the Jat machine-gunners were running short of ammunition. They had, moreover, been driven from part of their position, and would doubtless have been overrun during the next night if left without support. Had this occurred, the Japanese would have been able to dig themselves in with such strength — at this they were masters — that only a major, most costly and disastrously time-consuming battle could have evicted them and so opened that stretch of road.

The time was now half past five, and only an hour of daylight remained in which to drive out the enemy and restore the Jats' perimeter. All Marindin could do was to rush in attacks with Captain Robert Martin's B company and Captain James Arkell's A company. With a little machine-gun covering fire the Gurkhas attacked across the road, and after being held up and suffering severely they ousted the Japanese and so gained a respite and strengthened a situation which was still precarious.

Marindin, watching the engagement from a small observation post barely thirty yards away, could see the Japanese in their trenches, and Martin's men advancing through the jungle, though they were for the time being invisible to the enemy. 'I could have had a shot at a Jap who for some reason was standing outside the trench, but I was too fascinated watching B company sweeping into action — for the first time.'

In the morning C company tried very hard to break the enemy road block just south of Milestone 98, but the attack was repulsed, and John Hardy, the commander, was killed while leading his Gurkhas in a charge against a particularly damaging Japanese bunker. At the same time the main body of the 3/5th were being hard pressed after a most unpleasant night of jitter raids. Marindin was hoping that Hardy's men would be able to break through from the north and had warned the Jat machine-gunners accordingly. At nine o'clock some infantry came in sight on the road, moving south from the direction of Milestone 98. Marindin was in his observation post; below him was a Jat machine-gun in the charge of a jemadar. 'Japs,' said the jemadar as the dozen men were lost to view round a bend. 'No, they are C company,' said the colonel. The party came in view again. 'Fire,' said the jemadar. 'Wait,' ordered the colonel. 'Japs!' retorted the jemadar furiously.

Then, suddenly, some thirty yards away the situation became clear: the men were Japanese marching in formation, calmly, down the road. 'Fire, you —s!' shouted Marindin. Most of the leading Japanese appeared to fall from the burst of machine-gun fire.

That night the Japanese attacked fiercely, raiding Collingridge's headquarters as well as 3/10 Gurkha. By morning a squadron of tanks had reached Milestone 82, and a convoy came up with supplies for the troops who had left Imphal with only three days rations. At Milestone 96 the convoy was halted by a Japanese road block, and by the time this had been cleared and a larger convoy was ready to move off, rain had turned the road to mud and the lorries, without benefit of chains, churned and slithered and made such poor progress that the convoy was compelled to spend a night on the road, liable to attack at any time.

So were the 3/5th, who manned their trenches throughout the day in expectation of an onslaught. Not till nightfall did the enemy attack, this time with jitter raids. Next day, March 17th, after an attempt to break the road block had been repulsed — a flanking movement was impossible in such country with the time and troops available — the enemy attacked Marindin and his men with apparent desperation and the Gurkhas' situation became grave. Counter-attack, success, mortar fire, casualties, withdrawal from ground gained, renewed counter-attack, confusion, hand-to-hand engagements — and then the enemy quit. But the effort had cost the Gurkhas high in killed and wounded, so much so that Marindin realised that, unless help came from the north — and now this seemed unlikely for some long time — he would have to withdraw after dark. So few were his men that he could not spare any to collect those supplies which aircraft had dropped wide of his positions: he had barely enough to hold the ring of defence. For five nights his Gurkhas had slept but little. Food and water were exhausted, even for the forty stretcher cases. Twenty-one men had been killed. Enough ammunition remained to repel one more attack.

The main problem of this proposed withdrawal was to find a way up the hill through the forest which would be clear of enemy soldiers. Basu Rana, the Intelligence Jemadar, went off alone, reconnoitred a route and confirmed to the major commanding rear headquarters at Milestone 98 the plans for the night withdrawal.

That afternoon another small air drop was made, but again half the supplies fell beyond the forward posts. At last light Marindin ordered the Jats to fire all their remaining machine-gun ammunition on known enemy positions and then to bury their guns less locks.

'During the order conference I held — and it was a defeating moment as we were all very tired — when it came to "any questions?" the Jat commander who had had less sleep than anyone else woke up and confessed he had been asleep — poor chap. However, his Intelligence Officer had been there, and my orders had been given in English, Hindustani and Gurkhali, so by and large a brief outline sufficed to put him in the picture. The great problem was the wounded: we had forty or so stretcher cases, as well as walking wounded, and stretchers had to be improvised and then carried for about two miles up a steep, winding and narrow path. I think the most nerve-racking part of the performance was the final get-away at about two o'clock. I was waiting for the moon. The final withdrawal of the perimeter, with the Japanese about fifty yards away — at any moment one expected to hear a burst of fire. To get this lot moving, ever so slowly in single file, into unknown hazards ahead, with a menacing enemy lurking near by, was two hours of nerve-racking tension, because once the column was under way a serious attack would, through inevitable lack of control, have been hard to cope with. Did the Japs suspect an ambush? I wonder, for they must have heard us moving.'

When the 3/5th slipped away to the east they were not molested by the Japanese, who though only thirty yards distant did no more than lob a solitary grenade. The Jat machine-gunners carried the stretchers down a thousand feet and up another two thousand feet along a rough hill path. After five hours they came safely to rear battalion headquarters, and here the supply convoy collected the wounded and drove them to hospital.

General Roberts came up to Milestone 82 and gave orders that 37 Brigade was to exterminate the Japanese between Milestones 100 and 102, and then probe south towards Milestone 109, while Esse's 49 Brigade, which had arrived on the previous day with 6/5 Mahratta Light Infantry, would form a 'box' through which 17 Division would eventually withdraw. Once again all the water had

to be carried forward, once again stores and ammunition were assembled for the battle. A supply dropping zone was cleared in the jungle, and also a strip from which Auster light aircraft could evacuate casualties.

Time was short. Already a message indicated that Cowan's men might reach Milestone 109 on March 20th. Collingridge had orders to exert all possible pressure, but he could not send his Gurkhas into the attack until the Japanese positions, so well dug and concealed, had been located more precisely.

On the 20th, though 17 Division had progressed no farther than Milestone 114, Cowan and Collingridge were in direct wireless communication. Two days later 3/10 Gurkhas advanced to Milestone 98½ and formed up in readiness to attack a feature known as Fir Tree Hill, a few hundred yards south of the road. Despite the misfortune of a wrongly ranged gun and the consequent killing of five Gurkhas by our own shells before the correct target was found, Lieutenant P. P. Dunkley's company dashed forward and with tank and artillery support captured part of the hill. But on the rest of it the Japanese stayed in their bunkers. The tanks of 7 Cavalry crawled up steep slopes and brought their guns to bear. The Royal Air Force dive-bombed the bunkers. Still the enemy held on. They did even more, for they counter-attacked fiercely, only to be repelled. Then the troop commander's tank was put out of action by a small Japanese suicide party who were all killed in the effort.

For two hours the fighting raged. For two hours the Gurkhas tried to press home their attacks on the last remaining bunkers. And soon after nine o'clock they came to within ten yards, whereupon they threw grenades which burst within the bunkers. The enemy remained silent, but they were not finished. When Cosens' men tried to blow up the last bunker, snipers forced them off the hilltop, and when the Gurkhas dug in they were mortared and shelled.

Meanwhile the tenacious Japanese had reacted by forming a new road block near Milestone 97, and a patrol of carriers only just escaped from the trap. Three attempts to remove the block failed that day. On the 23rd a stronger assault also came to naught, in part because for once the air support was not only late but struck the leading Gurkhas, with the result that the attack had barely started before it petered out.

Thus on this short stretch of road both sides became sandwiched between road blocks and hill positions. All night on March 22nd-23rd, in cold and teeming rain, 3/10 Gurkha beat off Japanese attacks. The battalion's many wounded had no protection from the rain except to lie underneath parked lorries. For the serious cases a deep cave-like bunker had been built, and here the doctor performed wonders by emergency operations. Water, ammunition and essential food were dropped by Royal Air Force planes, but as the battalion was fighting on a long, narrow ridge, many of the parachutes could not be recovered, so on the evening of the 24th it was withdrawn from Fir Tree Hill to strengthen the position of the 3/5th at Milestone 98. Two of Marindin's companies had been attacking the enemy from the south at Milestone 96, aided by tanks, while 3/3 Gurkha Rifles and more tanks pushed from the north. Nevertheless, such was the enemy's resistance that the Gurkhas were pinned to the ground, the artillery officer observing for the guns was killed and within two hours the attack had come to a standstill.

It was decided to bring the tanks up the steep, log-strewn hillside. Against all the rules, they got up to the ridge, but then lost direction, and had to be directed back on to the correct line by Arkell, commanding the company, and Colonel Jack Barlow, the tank commanding officer, who, on foot and exposed to fire, ran after the tanks.

The day had been long, the heat exhausting, the casualties severe. As if to add gloom and strain there now came news that the enemy had cut off 49 Brigade by establishing a road block as far north as Milestone 72. Now both Roberts' brigades had to be supplied by air.

When the 3/10th took over from Marindin's Gurkhas on March 25th and set out to capture those bunkers in which the Japanese still held out, the enemy took to their heels — a day before our attack on Milestone 96 was due to take place. They had stuck it for a long time and had had enough. Early next day 37 Brigade was reunited, and on the 27th Cosens' 3/10 Gurkha occupied Fir Tree Hill. At five in the afternoon of March 28th a 3/3 Gurkha patrol linked up with the leading troops of 17 Division at Milestone 102.

CHAPTER X

'WELLINGTON'

TEN miles down the dusty road from Tamu to Kalewa, just where the Nanmunta Chaung crosses the road, was Headquarters 100 Brigade with a squadron — about sixteen heavy tanks — of the Carabiniers and some artillery; Brigadier 'Jimmy' James was its commander, and his Regiment was the Rajputana Rifles, whose First and Fourth Battalions had made such a name for themselves in the battles of the Western Desert and Eritrea. He, himself, had already seen active service during General Cunningham's victorious advance through Abyssinia against the Italians. His task now was to probe slowly southwards along the Kabaw Valley and at the same time prevent any advance by the Japanese northwards along the so-called motorable road.

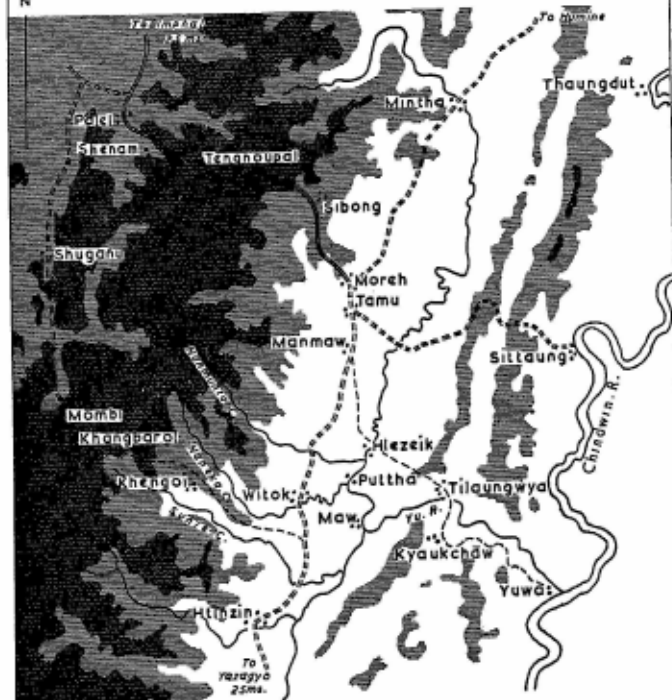
In front of him, around the village of Witok, a further six miles south on the Naneka Chaung was 114 Jungle Field Regiment Royal Artillery, for the time being acting as infantry. Because of the jungle and the wide area to be covered, infantry were in short supply; hence the use of the Jungle Field Regiment for this purpose. Its job was to block the main avenue of approach towards Tamu and the big supply dump of Moreh. Just behind and ready to support it were the guns of a battery of 9 Field Regiment.

In case the Japanese should try to by-pass Witok, another position, two miles in the rear at Milestone 16, was occupied by the carrier platoons of the 2nd Battalion, The Border Regiment and the 4th Battalion, The 10th Gurkha Rifles helped by another platoon of the Border Regiment, in all about one hundred men.

There were two Witoks, the 'Old' and the 'New', the latter having grown up after the 'Old' had been razed to the ground some time in 1943. The new village, a small collection of houses on stilts practically in the front line, was inhabited by about thirty souls. Efforts had been made to get the villagers evacuated to the Refugee Collecting Centre at Puttha on the Yu River, ten miles to

Lower Kabaw Valley

N



Metalled Road Other Roads Dry Season Jeep Track Footpaths

1000 to 3000 ft. 0 10 20 30 40 Over 3000 ft.

Miles

the east, but these had so far been unsuccessful. This was unfortunate, as their presence was to be a real embarrassment.

The Naneka Chaung was about three hundred yards wide, with low banks except where the water had scoured into them during the monsoon as the chaung took a turn. Here they were over twenty feet high and a definite obstacle to tanks. In most places at this time of the year (March) the stream was little above a foot deep and in the region of fifteen feet wide, except again at the bends, where the water rose to four feet. The rest of the chaung bed was covered in patches of lantana scrub as much as ten feet high; at ground level the visibility was not more than thirty yards.

It was in one of these bends, a thousand yards to the left of the Jungle Field Regiment, that 2 Border lay concealed in a defended position, ready to surprise any enemy who tried to work round to the east of the main track.

Beside them, also hidden in the teak forest, was 4/10 Gurkha Rifles, not in defence but ready to move at short notice to raid any Japanese columns that might come up the valley. With them they had rations for three days and an extra allotment of mules to carry these and their reserves of ammunition. Each of these two battalions had a company farther forward watching the Sunle Chaung, six miles to the south.

East of 100 Brigade was Mackenzie's 32 Brigade, with battalions at Maw and Kyaukchaw, watching the jungle tracks leading into the Kabaw Valley from the Chindwin.

To the west, guarding the track, known as the 'Mombi' track, that led from the valley into Imphal Plain itself, was the third battalion of 100 Brigade, the 14th Battalion, The 13th Frontier Force Rifles — men from the North-west Frontier of India and the Punjab — led by a very resolute, tough soldier, Lieutenant-Colonel Tim Denholm-Young.

The country in which this battalion was operating was a tangled mass of steep mountains covered with thick jungle and towering trees. The battalion had arrived at Shuganu during the previous November, and by March, after much exhausting work, had improved the track up to jeep standard most of the way from Shuganu through Mombi, Khangarol and Kengoi right up to the Kalewa-Tamu road a few miles north of Htinzin. This was a truly remarkable effort, as previously there had existed only the vestige of a narrow, twisting path through this 'Lost World' country.

But it was not only road-making that kept these fit and hardy men busy. Like other battalions, their patrols had been scouring the countryside to find out all they could about the enemy, ambushing him and suffering casualties in the process. Small and large patrols, remaining away from base for as long as six days, ranged far and wide in the Kabaw Valley and penetrated as far south as Yazagyo, a real hive of enemy activity, dumps and vehicles. During February one patrol returned through the village itself in moonlight, passing huts filled with Japanese soldiers relaxing with gramophones and accompanied by their lady friends — far too occupied to worry about what was going on in the 'main' street.

Because of the reports concerning Yazagyo, a small standing patrol with a wireless set had been positioned ten miles south of Htinzin to give warning should the enemy move out of the village. This precaution paid a rich dividend.

On March 4th, while keeping its lone vigil, this little party had a short and very sharp brush with some Japanese tracked vehicles. It was forced to pull out, but not before it had immobilised one of the light tanks, the first to be met in Burma. The fact that the enemy had brought tanks into the valley was an ominous portent. Two men who were unable to escape with the others were forced to hide for twenty-four hours quite close to the knocked-out tank. When they eventually managed to creep away they brought back the report that the enemy had made no effort to advance farther.

Denholm-Young's reactions were immediate. Fighting patrols slipped through the jungle into the valley to harass and delay the enemy, forcing him to move with caution and thereby upsetting the timetable that Yamamoto had set himself. By March 13th, 14/13 Frontier Force Rifles, having killed or wounded a large number of Japanese, were withdrawn into the shelter of the mountains once more. But the object had been gained, since a captured map revealed that Yamamoto had expected to be in Witok by March 10th, and now it was March 13th.

Meanwhile 4/10 Gurkha Rifles were standing by in their hide-out near Witok awaiting orders to move south for a raid on Htinzin. These arrived on March 13th to say that the battalion would go that night, but were quickly followed by more orders to the effect that, since enemy tanks had been reported in the village, they were to await the arrival of some new infantry anti-tank weapons

called PIATs.¹ This was great news, but nobody had ever heard of a PIAT except Lieutenant-Colonel Godfrey Proctor, the commanding officer, and he had never *seen* one.

What did it look like? How did one fire it? Could a man carry one, or had it to be loaded on a mule? These were the sort of questions asked, and nobody could answer them. Enquiries were made from the Borders to see if they could help. 'Oh! Yes', they had a lance-corporal who had been on a course, but he was at the Milestone 16 position and would have to be sent for. Unless these PIATs were simple to handle, it did not look as if the proposed raid would take place for some time.

Smothered in the jelly in which they had been preserved in the Arsenal, the PIATs arrived the following morning in five large lorries. With them came a mass of ammunition boxed up and greased. To make them fit for use was bound to take a long time, and after that the Gurkhas would have to learn how to handle them.

Forward on the Sunle Chaung was B company under Major 'Mike' Roberts. Towards evening on March 13th the rumble of tanks could be heard approaching from the direction of Htinzin. Everybody 'stood to', and the mules were loaded up in case a quick move became necessary. All eyes scanned the opposite side of the Chaung for the first sight of the enemy armour. The minutes rolled by, and though the noise got louder, nothing appeared. Instead, the tanks moved up on the right, clashing with the company of 2 Border, who were forced to pack up their traps and get back.

Then a big gun opened up, the shells passing over the heads of the Gurkhas in the direction of the guns of 9 Field Regiment farther in the rear. These were the first enemy shells which the men had heard, and together with the first Japanese tanks, they came as something very new and slightly disconcerting.

When the moon rose the company started to move back along the jungle path towards Maw, the enemy tanks moving parallel on the main road. They seemed very close, particularly when the Gurkhas had to hack at the bushes flanking the path to widen it for the mules bulging with their loads of ammunition and baggage. At times only fifty yards separated the two columns, but the noise of the kukris cutting away at the branches was drowned by the roar of

¹ The PIAT was a portable anti-tank grenade-discharger.

the tank engines. By four o'clock the following morning B company had drawn away and the men were able to snatch a few hours sleep before joining up with 3/8 Gurkha Rifles of 32 Brigade at Maw.

Meanwhile the main body of 4/10 Gurkha Rifles near New Witok were still standing by to move forward. The PIATs had been unloaded and short courses of instruction arranged with the lance-corporal of the Borders, so that each company could have two PIAT teams.

It was during the unloading that an unfortunate incident occurred. A Japanese aeroplane, the first and only one that Proctor saw, flew along the chaung below tree-top height, about twenty feet from the ground. The pilot could be seen distinctly, and there was no doubt that he saw the Gurkhas on the ground, because three-quarters of an hour later the first shell arrived. The hide-out had been disclosed. It remained to be seen what further use the Japanese would make of this discovery.

Communications in this wild dense country had always been difficult, and there were long periods, particularly at night, when the wireless faded out completely. As a result, it was not until late in the morning of March 14th that the Borders and Gurkhas heard that the enemy armour had crossed the Sunle Chaung. Their sudden appearance so close was entirely unexpected and came as an unpleasant surprise.

Slit trenches had been dug by 4/10 Gurkha Rifles, and these formed an outer perimeter to the defences manned by 2 Border. The right flank facing towards Old Witok was protected by the twenty-foot bank of the Naneka Chaung.

All was quiet until about five o'clock, when three Japanese medium guns began to shell our own guns behind the Jungle Field Regiment. The sound of tanks could also be heard distinctly as dusk was falling. On came the tanks, determined to destroy the guns, while Japanese infantry hurled themselves against the Old Witok defences. The battle had really begun.

For three or four hours pandemonium reigned. The Bofors light anti-aircraft guns, together with the 25-pounders of 9 Field Regiment, pumped shells into the Japanese tanks as they tried to over-run the guns or reach the north side of Old Witok. At the same time the defenders in the ruined village fired point blank with all their weapons, the red of the tracer bullets flying about like jet-propelled fireflies.

Then some of the enemy trying to filter round the left flank of the Jungle Field Regiment unexpectedly bumped against the right of the position held by the Gurkhas, who at once let fly. The noise grew even louder until about ten o'clock, when it died down altogether, and the tanks could be heard withdrawing southwards. It looked as if the enemy had had enough for that night.

But no. At about two o'clock on the morning of March 15th tank engines could be heard starting up, running for a short time and then stopping as if somebody was reconnoitring the way. Then they would start again and move nearer. This time it seemed as if the enemy was trying to find another way round and that this way led straight towards 4/10 Gurkha Rifles and the Borders.

The men in their slit trenches waited tensely. Japanese voices could be heard shouting, and there was a great deal of noise as they hacked at trees bordering the track. Closer and closer they came, until they halted only a hundred yards from the leading Gurkha positions. Complete silence followed for the next two hours. Incredible though it seemed, the enemy had decided to spend the rest of the night there.

Inside the Gurkha position all was silent too, despite the fact that one hundred and forty mules were standing harnessed up. Only once did Proctor hear the jingle of a chain as one of the animals shook itself. It was a great tribute to the Regimental and R.I.A.S.C. mule leaders, who kept their charges so quiet.

A naik crept forward to see what he could find out. There were the Japanese sentries a bare seventy yards away!

A hurried plan was made to send the one and only trained PIAT team behind the Japanese, while a company of Borders was held ready to charge under a hail of Gurkha mortar bombs when the PIAT opened fire. To call down all the available artillery fire seemed an obvious answer, but in a previous similar situation when the enemy had been so close some of our own men had been killed by tree bursts. For this reason it was decided not to use the guns.

Just as the plan was about to be put into effect, the gaff was blown. A Japanese patrol going down to the chaung to fetch water ran into a Gurkha standing patrol. Firing began, and immediately the tanks started up, the crews shouted and yelled, and the whole force beat a hasty retreat, helped on their way by the rapid fire of the Gurkha mortars. The rest of the night was quiet, and so were the daylight hours of March 15th.

During that morning six tanks of the Carabiniers joined the two battalions as a very heartening reinforcement. At Milestone 16, however, the Japanese put in a strong attack, which was beaten off only with the help of other Carabinier tanks and the best part of a company of the Borders. Yamamoto was bent on finding a way through somewhere.

As usual, with the coming of darkness the Japanese started to move again. At first any noise that might have been heard was drowned by the crackling of the teak leaves stirred up by a strong wind that had sprung up. Even so, although nothing could be heard above ground, sitting in their trenches, the men could feel the vibrations as the enemy tanks lumbered along the jungle tracks.

About midnight, when the wind had died down, Proctor called for artillery fire on a pre-selected spot where he thought the enemy might assemble for an attack. His forecast had been right, because immediately tank engines started up, but this time, instead of pulling out, the tanks roared forward, swerved past the position eastwards and then turned north. A Border patrol who saw them in the moonlight counted no less than ten medium and twelve light tanks accompanied by seven or eight lorry loads of infantry. Now the enemy were well behind them.

It was while this fighting was in progress that Mike Roberts and B company created a record on 4th Corps front, and almost unique up to date in Burma. During his withdrawal up the Yu River from Maw he had laid a particularly successful ambush in which a number of the enemy were killed, with few casualties to his company, and they had also captured an *officer* prisoner. For this spirited action Roberts gained the first of two Military Crosses he was to be awarded during the campaign.

Next day, March 16th, a long time was spent liquidating small enemy parties round the perimeter. Towards evening two Gurkha companies and two tanks blocked the track taken by the Japanese tanks the night before, in the hope of preventing them from either being reinforced or from withdrawing by the same route. There was no news of them, because telephone communications with 100 Brigade Headquarters in the Nanmunta Chaung had broken down, and the wireless was working very badly.

When darkness fell the two companies were kept extremely busy until the moon came up. Large parties of Japanese made frantic

efforts to break through, and very severe fighting resulted, the Gurkhas using their kukris to great effect. The tanks rumbling up and down the track sprayed the jungle with machine-gun bullets; mounds of dried teak leaves within the road block were set on fire, lighting up the whole scene and silhouetting the defenders between the enemy and the flaming teak leaves. At one time the tanks were nearly surrounded by flames, but luckily these died away before they could set the tank fuel ablaze. As the moon came up so the enemy relaxed his efforts and began to melt away into the jungle. Four Gurkhas had been killed and fourteen wounded.

The morning of the 17th was hot and stifling in the teak forest. The two battalions had had little or no sleep and the strain was beginning to tell, though everybody was in good spirits as a result of the successful action of the previous night.

The six tanks which had done such good work over the past two days had now to return to squadron headquarters in the Nanmunta Chaung to refuel and to replenish their ammunition. Here was an opportunity to send back the wounded under tank escort. At the same time it was decided to ask for a sweep to be made southwards to eliminate the enemy tanks now between the Naneka and Nanmunta Chaungs. Accordingly, Lieutenant-Colonel Godley, the commanding officer of 2 Border, went back with this party to see the Brigade Commander, explain the situation and send out a relief for the returning tanks.

The morning dragged on uneventfully until, without warning, firing broke out in the Jungle Field Regiment area and heavy columns of dust were seen on the main track leading back to the Nanmunta Chaung. This was followed by a message from the Gurkha carrier platoon at Milestone 16, to the effect that 114 Jungle Field Regiment was passing through them.

To Proctor, who was still out of touch with brigade headquarters, this came as a complete surprise; no orders had come for him and the Borders to withdraw. The arrival of the relief tanks helped to solve the riddle.

'I have just had the cryptic word "Wellington" from my squadron commander on my wireless,' said the troop commander, addressing Proctor. 'I haven't a clue what it means, but was told to pass it on to you. Do you know anything about it, sir?'

'Yes,' replied Proctor. 'I know, and you will be getting your orders shortly.' Now 'Wellington' was the code word to be sent

by Douglas Gracey when the time had come for all troops to pull out of the Kabaw Valley and concentrate on Moreh. It was highly secret and had been divulged to no one below battalion commander level, so naturally the subaltern commanding the tanks was not aware of its meaning.

A pre-arranged plan had been made should it be necessary to withdraw from Witok. In short, it was that 4/10 Gurkha Rifles and 2 Border would move first to Milestone 16 and then the Jungle Field Regiment with the battery of 9 Field Regiment was to withdraw through them to Moreh, leaving the two battalions also to follow. Proctor, who had been put in command of the whole party, realised that there must have been a change in the original plan. This meant that some quick action was necessary, since with the right flank now open, the Japanese had a clear run through Witok.

Orders for the withdrawal to Milestone 16 were issued. Such baggage as could not be carried was put in a heap in the centre of the position and glum-faced Gurkhas watched the tanks set fire to it with tracer bullets, while the enemy, who had got into the houses of New Witok among the inhabitants, was sniping into the position. The outlook was depressing.

At half past twelve midday, after the men had eaten a meal, the withdrawal began along the jungle track to Milestone 16. The Borders led, followed by Proctor and Column Headquarters with the long string of mules, and finally 4/10 Gurkha Rifles.

All went well until the Japanese suddenly opened fire on the mules from an ambush position close to the track. A period of utter confusion followed. The Japanese could be heard yelling in the jungle. Bullets tore into the wretched mules, which, with their loads awry, stampeded back along the track, tearing the reins out of their leaders' hands and breaking up the column.

Godfrey Proctor, already handicapped by a previous injury, was knocked down by two mules and toppled over the bank of the chaung. The mules came over with him, trampling on his head as they did so, but fortunately his pack, which had fallen over his head, gave him some protection. He found himself almost upside down, half in and half out of the water. A Border corporal pulled him out just as a Japanese grenade exploded behind the colonel, peppering him with splinters.

Picking up a small party of twenty-two armed and unarmed men, and making their way independently through the jungle, they

eventually arrived at brigade headquarters the following morning, where Proctor collapsed and was sent back to hospital.

Some time went by before order could be restored. The coming of darkness added to the difficulties. Battalion headquarters and one company of 4/10 Gurkha Rifles were missing, but did succeed in finding their way back to the Nanmunta Chaung by the morning of March 18th.

At half past seven, when the enemy had been driven off, the Borders with the two remaining companies of Gurkhas set off slowly along the winding jungle path, carrying about fifty British and Gurkha wounded on improvised stretchers. The noise of the men and mules as they crunched over the dry teak leaves was deafening.

When the moon rose at half past eleven, casting a dim light on the track, the Japanese opened fire again and, because of the many 'S' bends in the track, bullets from both sides arrived from all directions and the column broke up into small parties. The larger part eventually reached the Nanmunta Chaung on March 18th, one company of 4/10 Gurkha Rifles joining brigade headquarters at Manmaw during the afternoon.

The wounded had a gruelling time. Captain A. J. Pinto, medical officer of the Gurkhas, was in charge, the Borders' doctor having been killed. Hiding away in the thick undergrowth for the whole of March 18th, they moved slowly and painfully for the two succeeding days by jungle paths until they reached a point on the main track just south of Tamu. Here a relief party picked them up in transport and took them into Moreh. For his resolute leadership in these difficult conditions, Pinto was awarded the Military Cross.

Not until the next day, March 19th, were the two battalions finally concentrated in Moreh, tired and hungry after their exhausting experiences. This had not been an auspicious start, but Yamamoto's timetable had been thrown farther out of gear and 100 Brigade had delayed the Japanese for a week.

CHAPTER XI

A SUITCASE—AND CHARING CROSS

IN the days immediately preceding the Japanese offensive, Gracey's Headquarters had been hidden in the jungle just beyond Tamu village on the track leading to Sittaung. Close by was the headquarters of the Civil Administration, headed by the Deputy Commissioner, through whom went all the requests for labour, for the evacuation of civilians and for help from the police, of which there were some two hundred and fifty armed men. Forward on the Sittaung track leading to the Chindwin the elephants of Lieutenant-Colonel Williams, 'Elephant Bill', were building culverts, and bridges across the chaungs.

At the time the fighting around Witok was taking place, G.R.E.F. — the Engineers and their labour force with all their machinery — was moving back to Imphal, as also were the elephants. Although a move of over twenty thousand unarmed pioneers in transport and a great deal of slow-moving mechanical equipment was involved, it took only four days to complete, due largely to the fact that the plan for the move had been rehearsed.

It was a great relief to everyone that the road back to Imphal was clear, since, should a withdrawal become necessary, the fighting troops would now have only themselves to look after.

The plan for getting back to Shenam, the all-important bastion which was to prevent the Japanese breaking into the Imphal Plain from the east, was simple on paper but required careful timing.

First, 80 Brigade on the Sittaung track, with two battalions overlooking the Chindwin, was to get back to the eastern end of the Shenam Pass, and at the same time protect the very important bridge at Sibong, which, if destroyed, would make the withdrawal extremely difficult.

The next to move would be 100 Brigade, which was to pass straight through to Moreh, and thence to Tengenoupal and the Shenam position.

The two outlying battalions, 14/13 Frontier Force Rifles and

9/12 Frontier Force Regiment, were to make their own way back independently, the former along the Mombi track to Shuganu, and the latter by way of Yangoupopki and Sita.

Finally, 32 Brigade, strung out along the Yu River towards Yuwa, was to occupy prepared defences at Moreh, cover the evacuation of all stores and eventually come into reserve behind Shenam.

It was on March 16th that Scoones had given the order for 20 Division to withdraw to Shenam, and the code word 'Wellington' had been sent to brigades from Gracey's headquarters on the following day. Now the planned moves were in progress.

Brigadier Mackenzie, the commander of 32 Brigade, stood on the banks of the Yu River at Tilaungwya watching the baggage of his tactical headquarters being shipped across by raft. A few officers and men were standing with him when the moment came for the Brigadier's personal baggage to be brought over. This consisted only of his bedding and one suitcase, and the latter, to prevent it being crushed, had been placed on top of the pile. In it were packed all his 'Lares et Penates' — personal treasures that accompanied him on active service.

It was a precarious position for this important package. Mackenzie watched anxiously as the raft was steered by local boatmen across the swiftly running river. To his horror the suitcase began to slide from one side to the other with the movement of the craft. A particularly violent lurch caused it to overbalance; slowly it slid down the side of the rest of the baggage, and he saw it disappear into the water.

It was a bitter blow. Talking half to himself and half to those around him, he said:

'Now that's a real loss to me — a real loss. I would willingly give anybody a month's pay and a month's leave if I could get it back.' With that he started off down the track.

A few days later, in the middle of the withdrawal, a tall, bearded Sikh soldier came to him, suitcase in hand.

'Suitcase, Sahib,' he said, grinning.

Having seen the incident and heard his brigadier's lamentations, he had continued diving and diving, after everybody had left the scene of the calamitous loss, until at last he had surfaced triumphantly with the suitcase.

On opening it, Mackenzie was delighted to find the water had

not penetrated and that instead of being a sodden mess, his cherished possessions were undamaged.

He thrust his hand into the pocket of his bush shirt and, pulling out his wallet, handed the Sikh some notes and said: 'Thank you, Jawan. This is a great day for me. Here is your month's pay, but I'm afraid I cannot give you a month's leave now. You must wait until this party is over, and then you shall have it.' Later, when the opportunity offered, the Sikh got his leave.

When 32 Brigade had come up originally from Moreh they had often been obliged to cut their way through the jungle from Hlezeik onwards. In this huge country the enormous ridges, sometimes bare, sometimes jungle covered, entailed a climb of anything up to a thousand feet. The track had been about a yard wide, and jeeps could go no farther than Hlezeik itself. Behind the brigade had come the engineers, widening and improving the track, but progress had been slow. Mules were still the main means of transport for most of the way along the Yu River.

At the time the order for withdrawal arrived the brigade was occupying Kyaukchaw, the scene of bitter fighting a few weeks previously, during which Lieutenant A. G. Horwood of the 1st Battalion, The Northamptonshire Regiment had been awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross. Since other important points farther along the river towards Yuwa on the Chindwin had also been occupied, the brigade was widely dispersed.

For many, a return to Moreh meant a march of thirty miles up and down in the close and humid atmosphere of the forest. To do it in two days would be very good going, and the brigade was lucky in that the Japanese made no attempt to follow up the withdrawal, which was carried out in leisurely fashion and took the best part of a week.

1 Northampton made their way directly back to the prepared defences at Moreh, while by March 20th Mackenzie and the other two battalions — 9th Battalion, The 14th Punjab Regiment and 3rd Battalion, The 8th Gurkha Rifles — had occupied a position known as 'Charing Cross', astride the track to Kalewa and two or three miles south of Tamu. Here they awaited the arrival of the unsuspecting Yamamoto advancing up the valley.

A few miles south on the Nanmunta Chaung, six tanks of A squadron The Carabiniers, under Major E. R. Pettit — shortly afterwards awarded the Military Cross, but killed later — had been

fighting the only tank versus tank battle of the whole campaign. During the afternoon, with their tails right up, they came clattering and creaking into the position to join Mackenzie's two battalions, having disposed of five out of six enemy tanks without loss to themselves. Never again did the Japanese armour try to pit itself against the tanks of 254 Brigade.

The position that had been chosen was in flat country with good visibility, the only obstacle to view being a few bushes. Road blocks had been made with felled trees, and patrols were well forward to give warning of the enemy's approach. Although it appeared likely that the Japanese would launch their main attack straight up the track, a strong post had been established half a mile to the north, in case they attempted to by-pass the main position.

A hiatus took place after the tanks had come in, enabling the Indian and Gurkha soldiers to improve their slit trenches and to prepare for what was likely to happen.

At dusk, when the patrols returned, all was quiet. There was no wind to raise the dust or disturb the silence. Time dragged on and darkness fell. The moon had not yet risen, but it was not pitch dark, as the sky was clear and the stars shone brightly. The men waiting in their trenches and the Brigadier with his gunner officer beside him could hear the unmistakable sound of tank engines in the distance.

To ensure that as big a 'bag' as possible would be obtained with the opening shots, Mackenzie had given orders that no one was to open fire until the enemy had reached a certain distance from the position where he felt that every bullet and shell would take its toll. The anti-tank gunners, in suppressed excitement, watched eagerly for the first sight of the advancing tanks.

Slowly they lumbered forward without showing any lights. Suddenly the ear-splitting crack of an anti-tank gun reverberated in the valley, followed by a loud explosion as an armour piercing shell hit the leading Japanese tank. The noise became deafening. The men in the leading trenches fired with every weapon they possessed. The enemy too began shooting; and the gunners were called upon for the pre-arranged defensive fire. From the rear could be heard the dull thud of the guns of 9 Field Regiment and then the 25-pounder shells whistled over the heads of the two battalions. Even though it had not been possible to register the guns beforehand, so accurate was the fire under the direction of

their commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Roger Lupton, that the shells were bursting within twenty-five yards of the most forward troops. It was not possible to see much, but there could be no doubt that the enemy were having a very rough time.

The detachment on the northern flank was unmolested, but, seeing the flashes and explosions in front of the main position, they kept calling on the telephone: 'Are you all right? We're all right here.' Brigade headquarters was able to assure them that all was well.

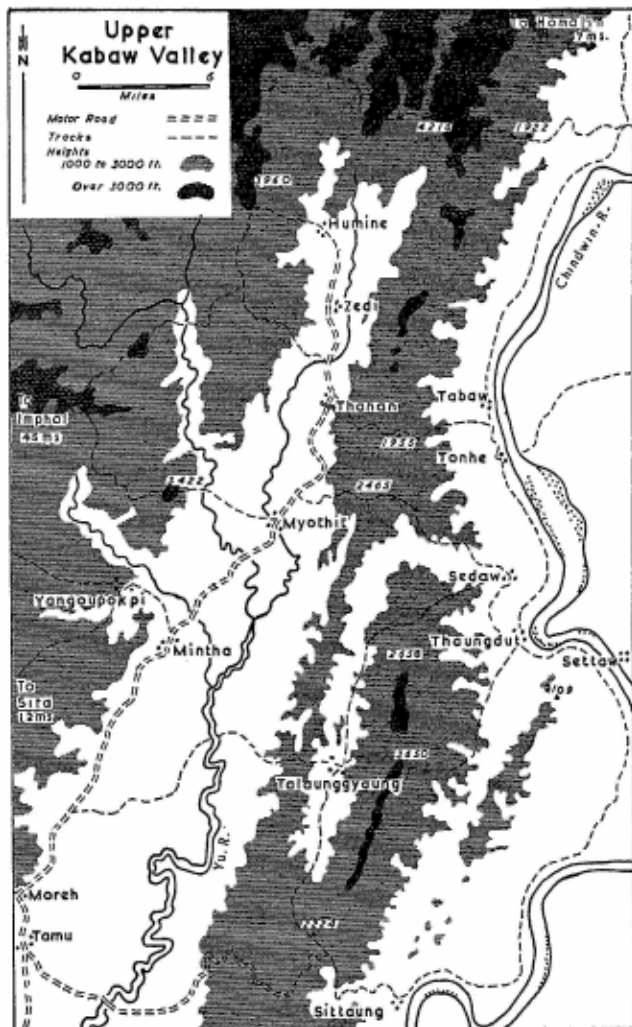
The whole action lasted half an hour, and then silence reigned again. In the morning there was the tank knocked to smithereens and many dead Japanese lay around. When patrols went out later they found signs that more bodies had been dragged away, and a few small parties of the enemy were milling about in the bushes.

During that morning 32 Brigade moved back to Moreh without trouble, joining Douglas Gracey, his division headquarters and 100 Brigade, which was preparing for its next step back to Tengenupal. On arrival it took over the defences of Moreh ready for the Japanese should they advance farther. Everybody was in high spirits.

While all this had been going on, 80 Brigade, without its 9/12 Frontier Force Regiment, who were watching the Thaungdut area to the north, had withdrawn from the Sittaung track to positions on 20 Division's lifeline, the Palel-Tamu road, close to Sibong and Khongkang. The important bridge at Sibong was firmly held.

Since one of its ambushes had revealed the presence of 15 Japanese Division at the end of February, 9/12 Frontier Force Regiment had had an exciting time. In early March, 1 Brigade from 23 Division had been sent down to the north Kabaw Valley to simulate a crossing of the Chindwin in the area of Thaungdut and Tonhe, in order to distract Japanese attention from Wingate's fly-in, which was to take place on March 5th. For several nights it had been exhilarating to see the aircraft towing their gliders as they roared over the Chindwin in brilliant moonlight at between three and four thousand feet.

This move had undoubtedly had a local effect, as 15 Division, which until then had remained comparatively quiet, was stirred up to the extent that when 1 Brigade left the Kabaw valley to return to its own division about March 10th the task of 9/12 Frontier Force Regiment was made more difficult. Whereas before it had been an easy matter to cross the river into enemy territory, now



the Japanese were much more alert and had even sent patrols to the west bank.

From early March it had been evident from intelligence reports and from captured documents that an enemy offensive was pending. March 15th had even been the forecast date, so that everybody was particularly on the *qui vive*.

Mizen's headquarters, concealed in the jungle just off the track, was at Myothit, twenty-five miles north of Tamu. It consisted of about seventy men, who lived in holes in the ground which were covered with bamboo and leaves to keep out the weather. On the Chindwin near Thaungdut was B company, made up of Pathans, while between Tonhe and Tabaw was C company — Dogras from the north Punjab. Each was a good three hours' march away but connected by telephone to battalion headquarters. Other small detachments in touch by wireless were at Talaunggyaung in the mountains to the south-east and at Zedi at the northern end of the valley. To visit either meant a hot seven hours' walk through the jungle. Thus all routes leading west from the Chindwin were under careful observation.

After the evening meal on March 15th Mizen went to his dug-down tent with a novel. He had had a difficult decision to make that day: should he send up the replenishing column to the forward companies — their rations, more ammunition and other stores? If he did so and the Japanese crossed the river they would all fall into enemy hands, because the companies could never carry them out should they have to withdraw. He had decided not to send it but to await events, and was now wondering whether he had been right.

At eleven o'clock, when engrossed in his book, he heard a voice at the entrance to his dug-out. It was the adjutant.

'You're wanted on the telephone, sir,' he said. 'It is Major Fraser. He says that something is happening on the river bank.' Fraser commanded B company at Thaungdut.

Mizen hurried to the telephone.

'Hullo, Fraser, what's up?'

'There is a certain amount of tizzy going on in front, sir. We've heard firing on the river bank near Thaungdut where I had a patrol. I am not getting worried yet, and have just sent out a fighting patrol to find out what it's all about. As soon as I get any information I will let you know.'

'All right, old boy, let me know at once when you have any news,' was Mizen's reply, as he inwardly congratulated himself on not sending the mule column that morning.

He sat down in the headquarters dug-out. It was only a question of waiting.

Forty minutes later the telephone rang again. This time it was one of the many Indian officers of the battalion, Captain Kiani, the commander of C company near Tonhe.

'Yes, Kiani, how are things?' began Mizen.

'I have just heard a good deal of shooting from Tabaw,' said Kiani. 'You know I have got two platoons there, sir, and I am going off to see what's doing. Haswaran Singh will be in command here, and I will get in touch with him so that he can give you the form.'

'Good luck, Kiani,' said Mizen as he rang off.

Turning to the adjutant, he said: 'It looks as if this is "it",' and gave his orders for the remainder of the battalion to get into the prepared positions from which they could help the withdrawal of the river companies. This meant that D company had a three-hour night march to its place a few miles north of Myothit, from which it could block the track from Thaungdut and help the withdrawal.

As the night went on so the telephone rang incessantly. First Fraser confirmed that some five hundred Japanese with mules had crossed at Thaungdut and were being engaged. Then, Kiani came up with the information that large numbers of Japanese and Indian National Army had crossed three miles north of Tabaw, and that confused fighting was going on there.

By dawn on March 16th the situation was becoming clearer. The Japanese had moved far and fast during the night. They were closing in on D company north of Myothit; C company at Tonhe was fighting its way back to Thanan, but only after heavy casualties and the loss of Captain Bhatt, the medical officer, and Lieutenant Haswaran Singh as prisoners. Kiani himself was later killed.

The Japanese who had crossed at Thaungdut had cut off B company's line of retreat so that it had to be directed on Talaungyaung, where the detachment watched the track. Touch had been lost not only with this little party but also with the outpost at Zedi, so that nobody knew their fate. As it happened when the time came to clear out altogether, a light aeroplane was sent from

division headquarters to drop a message telling them to come back to the pre-arranged rendezvous. Fortunately the pilot found them still in position, and after an adventurous journey they rejoined the battalion.

Throughout all these exciting moments Geoffrey Mizen had been in telephone communication with 20 Division Headquarters. He had been able to give a running commentary on events, and this had proved of the utmost value to Gracey and corps headquarters in deducing the enemy plans.

At eleven o'clock on the morning of March 16th the situation was threatening, as the last message to get through from D company showed that the enemy had got past them and were heading for battalion headquarters. The company commander said that he was about to withdraw.

It was now clear to Mizen that he could do no more, so ringing up division headquarters, he spoke to the Chief Staff Officer, 'John' Eustace.

'John,' he said, 'the company I put forward during the night can hold on no longer and is pulling out. The Japanese are only four miles away. Everybody knows where to go, and I propose to go there myself. We can do no more by staying here.'

'All right,' replied Eustace. 'Well done, old boy. Clear out to Yangoupopki as arranged.' Yangoupopki, seventeen miles south of Myothit, was the pre-arranged collecting place for the whole battalion before they withdrew to Shenam.

It was half past one by the time the loading of everything that could be carried on the few mules available was completed. Because all motor transport had been sent back earlier to Moreh, it was impossible to take everything; surplus rations, officers' kits, tentage and the officers' mess had to be burnt on site. So the march back to Yangoupopki, in the boiling sun, began on a depressing note with the added uncertainty about what was happening to the rest of the battalion.

That night the few men of battalion headquarters manned their slit trenches, expecting the enemy to appear at any moment. Nothing happened until the early hours of March 17th, when D company arrived from Myothit, tired but in good heart, bringing all its casualties with it. It reported that the Japanese were now in occupation.

During the next two days the Dogra company from Tonhe and

the Pathans from Thaungdut rejoined, very exhausted and considerably depleted. Altogether two hundred men were either killed, wounded or missing, although several of the missing caught up with the battalion later in the battle after some hair-raising experiences. One officer, who had been on the Japanese side of the river when they crossed, had joined one of their columns in the darkness, and made escape when daylight came.

On March 20th Geoffrey Mizen and his men pulled out from Yangoupopki and after another exhausting hot march through the mountains to Sita rejoined 80 Brigade on the Tamu road. 9/12 Frontier Force Regiment had given an excellent account of itself.

CHAPTER XII

'WHERE ARE WE OFF TO?'

'To ensure that your whole host may withstand the brunt of the enemy's attack and remain unshaken — this is effected by manoeuvres direct and indirect.'

Sun Tzu

To Lieutenant-General Mutaguchi, in his headquarters at Maymyo two hundred miles in the rear of his forward troops, the situation on March 17th must have looked very satisfactory. His plan had got off to as good a start as he could possibly have hoped for; his Army was pouring towards Imphal from many directions, while the British, as usual, were conforming to practice and withdrawing on all fronts. Much of the Kabaw Valley was now in Major-General Yamamoto's hands and, very shortly, Lieutenant-General Yamauchi's 15 Division would begin to make its weight felt north of Tamu; and that would help Yamamoto to get on. He must have had a feeling of satisfaction at how right he had been to press this plan on his superiors; in a few weeks Imphal would be in his possession.

An impartial observer of the general situation at this time could hardly have found fault with this appreciation. Everything seemed to be going in favour of the Japanese.

On the night of March 15th, in accordance with the plan, 15 and 31 Divisions had begun to cross the Chindwin at Thaungdut and Homalin respectively. 15 Division had conceived a most ingenious method for carrying out the main crossing. Towards dusk on March 15th, when it was difficult to see both from the ground and the air, local boats had been collected along the Japanese bank. When darkness fell these boats were lashed together in sections, decking was laid across them, and one end secured to the bank. When a sufficient length of boats had been obtained to span the river the top end was let loose to float down with the current until it lodged against the opposite bank and it also was made secure.

When all was ready the mules, horses and bullocks, laden with

guns, ammunition and other stores, began to cross and continued to do so throughout the hours of darkness. As soon as dawn began to break and before it was light enough for aircraft to see, the farther end of the boat bridge was dragged back upstream by motored craft to the Japanese bank, and the boats were concealed. The next night the procedure was repeated and the crossing accomplished without incident.

Yamauchi had begun the operation under a handicap, in that it had not been possible to concentrate the whole of his division by 'D' Day. Three battalions of infantry and one battery of artillery had yet to complete the long march from Siam.

His plan was to advance in two columns with two detachments. The Right column, amounting to three thousand men with two thousand horses and bullocks, was to move on Sangshak along the track from Humine, then west to Kanglatongbi to attack Imphal from the north and north-west. On its right was a lone battalion with some engineers whose task was to cut the Imphal-Kohima road if not required to help the right column. Engineers were to follow this column to improve the jungle track for the move-up of supplies and ammunition.

The Left column, consisting also of about three thousand men with a number of horses and bullocks, having crossed the Chindwin, was to advance as rapidly as possible on Kanglatongbi. Yamauchi himself and 15 Division Headquarters travelled with this column. Crossing with it also was another lone battalion and a troop of artillery whose job, once the Kabaw Valley had been reached, was to turn south and attack Tamu from the north under the orders of Yamamoto.

All these columns were accompanied by detachments of the Indian National Army, commonly known as JIFS (Japanese Inspired Fifth Column), who spent much of their time calling on the Indian and Gurkha troops to defect. Needless to say, their efforts were entirely unsuccessful, and they were looked upon with contempt and dislike.

The task given to 31 Japanese Division was to capture Kohima. To do this, Lieutenant-General Sato had planned to cross the Chindwin in three main columns, of which the Right and Centre columns were to move directly on Kohima from the north of Homalin. The Left column, behind which Sato and his headquarters moved, was to cross the river at Homalin and at two places

a few miles south of it, capture Ukhrul and then advance north-west on to the Imphal-Kohima road so as to destroy the British as they withdrew from Imphal. At the same time they were to give every assistance to the other two columns in capturing Kohima.

All along the Chindwin from Tamanthi in the north to Thaungdut in the south, the enemy crossings had been successful since there was nothing to oppose them except 9/12 Frontier Force Regiment and a few small detachments of 'V' Force. By the morning of March 16th the two divisions were streaming forward towards their respective objectives.

During this time, the operations of Yanagida's 33 Division were being crowned with success. On the Tiddim road the blocks had been established and the road had been cut in several places. 17 Division was in a precarious position and much of Scoones' reserve had been committed.

In the Kabaw Valley Yamamoto had received some rough handling, but by March 22nd he had gained touch with the defences at Moreh. Here he had decided to wait to see the effects of certain other plans he had made for the discomfiture of 20 Division.

Earlier in the battle he had despatched the best part of a battalion to chase 14/13 Frontier Force Rifles on the Mombi track and, having disposed of them, to help the advance of the main column of 33 Division on the Tiddim road. In conjunction with this he had also sent another battalion with some engineers to cut the Tamu-Palel road at Tengenoupal, to destroy the bridge at Sibong and to harass the Moreh defences from the north. Once these moves had begun to make themselves felt, together with the diversion by the battalion of 15 Division from the north, he considered he would be in a position to launch a strong attack against Moreh.

This was the situation on March 22nd on the Tamu and Tiddim roads, while to the north-west, around Sangshak thirty-five miles from Imphal, some of the most bitter fighting of the campaign was about to take place against the Japanese advancing on Ukhrul.

But, unknown to the Japanese, reinforcements in the shape of 5 Indian Division were being flown in from Arakan to join 4th Corps.

Major-General Harold Briggs, the commander of 5 Indian Division, sat in a chair outside his caravan at his headquarters close to Maungdaw in Arakan.

He was a dark, heavily built man in his early fifties, who had been on active service almost continuously since the end of 1940. In fact, when the time came for him to give up command of the division in July 1944, he had probably been in close contact with the enemy in the field as long, if not longer, than any other commander in the Army. At the outbreak of war he had been commanding a battalion of the Baluch Regiment, when he was posted to lead 7 Indian Brigade of the famous 4 Indian Division through the Battle of Keren and General Auchinleck's Western Desert offensive at the end of 1941. Thence he had risen to the rank of major-general and the command of 5 Indian Division just before the critical period of Rommel's thrust on Tobruk in 1943. After a short break from active service in Iraq, he had brought the division back to India and on to Arakan in September 1943, having already been awarded the Distinguished Service Order and bar, to which he was to add a second in the Arakan fighting.

With his twinkling dark eyes, his winning smile, not only was he extremely popular with all with whom he came in contact, but he also had the complete confidence of his seniors and the implicit trust and deep affection of all in his division.

'Briggo', as he was known to everybody, seemed to have an uncanny knowledge of what the enemy was likely to do next. His arrival at a brigade headquarters, when things were bad, had an electrifying effect. Problems that had seemed insoluble became easy, and when he left to return to his own headquarters 'you felt that you had been reinforced by at least a couple of battalions', as one harassed brigadier put it.

On the conclusion of the war, after a period as Commander-in-Chief in Burma, he retired to Cyprus, but returned to active duty in 1950 as Director of Operations against the Communists in Malaya. After two years he returned to Cyprus, where he died within a matter of months, greatly mourned by all who had been privileged to know and to serve with him.

5 Indian Division was a highly experienced division, having taken a prominent part in the Eritrean campaign and in the withdrawal from Libya in 1942. It had also had six months' very heavy fighting in the jungles of Arakan. Most of the officers and men had

served for some time either with it or with 4 Indian Division, and in consequence had seen a great deal of active service. Its sign, worn on the shoulder and painted on vehicles, was a flaming red ball on a black background — 'The Ball of Fire'.

As Briggs sat there, he was thinking of the rapid change in plan that had just taken place. He knew already that on account of the Japanese offensive his division, when relieved by 25 Indian Division, was to move by road and rail to Imphal. Now all that had been altered. A signal had arrived that morning to say that as the situation at Imphal was so serious, the division was to *fly*. What was more, it was to take its guns, mules and jeeps by air and be prepared to go into action on arrival. The remaining transport, and such equipment as could not be taken in the aircraft, was to travel by road and train as originally intended.

Some of 25 Division had arrived and was in the process of taking over, so that part of the plan presented no difficulties. But to get into the aeroplanes with correct loads was a very different matter. Never before in the history of the Army had such an operation been carried out.

In peacetime the move of even a very small force had required a great deal of preparation: the compiling of exact load tables for each aeroplane; the careful marshalling of the aircraft; the timing of the arrival of the troops at each airfield; and a hundred and one other things. All this had meant weeks of special training for the staff, both Army and Air Force, and for the troops themselves. It was always regarded as a most complex operation.

How different things were going to be this time! Nobody knew how many aircraft were going to be available, or of what type. The staff of the division had no previous experience of a move by air. The troops had seen an aeroplane in the sky, but had never travelled in one — nor for that matter had the mules; and one could not explain the intricacies of air transport to mules! Finally, the first brigade was to be in its aircraft and on the way almost at once, with Dohazari, the nearest take-off airfield, one hundred miles to the north towards Chittagong. The journey to Dohazari, already slow because of two waterways to be crossed by ferry, would be along a poor road, so poor that hundreds of coolies were employed all day to throw water on it to keep it from disintegrating into dust. The actual flying distance would be a little over two hundred and fifty miles to Imphal, partly over



A 'Wasbie' canteen



Persuasion fore and aft!



enemy-held territory and all the way within reach of Japanese fighters.

A staff officer flew down from 14th Army Headquarters at Comilla, armed with an enormous parcel of paper which contained loading tables for each unit. These had, in fact, been prepared for a specialised air-landing division and showed exactly which officers and men would travel in each aeroplane and the stores and equipment that would accompany them. This was to make sure that if an aircraft crashed or was shot down, the unit would not lose all its specialists, all its wireless sets or other pieces of equipment at one time. But as 5 Indian Division was not an air-landing division all these tables had to be modified when the time came to load the aircraft.

Having given the general outline of the plan, the staff officer said: 'Now I have no doubt you will have a lot of questions, but I'm afraid I shall have to ask you to be quick as I've got to be off in half an hour.' There were no questions, as the staff, at that stage, were in no position to ask any off the cuff. The problem was far too complicated.

So quick was the move to be that the timetable for an artillery unit ran something like this:

Monday 2.0 p.m. — Guns taken out of action and the unit moved to concentration area.

Tuesday — Unit moved by road to Dohazari arriving about 4.30 p.m.

Tuesday 6 p.m. to Wednesday 5 a.m. — Guns dismantled for loading into aircraft.

Wednesday — Flight to Imphal and guns reassembled on or near the airfield.

Thursday — Guns in action somewhere on the Imphal front.

The fly-in began on March 18th with Brigadier G. C. Evans' 123 Infantry Brigade. Secrecy was of the greatest importance, so only a few had been told of what was about to happen. So secret were the plans kept that some officers, when they arrived on the airfield, were under the impression that the division was being flown out for a rest and refit.

With the mules travelling in lorries, the brigade began to concentrate at Dohazari at midday on March 17th. A colonel of the United States Army Air Force and a major from the Movement

Control organisation of 14th Army, both of whom did wonderful work throughout, were waiting to help the brigade staff to organise the troops, jeeps, mules and equipment for the move the following day.

There was only one strip — an earth one — beside which four or five Dakota aircraft were standing. Round the airfield were a few bashes used for offices and accommodation for the ground staff. The sun shone. It was exceedingly hot and very dusty. There was a peaceful air about the place which made it seem very remote from the critical fighting in the north.

'What time do we go?' asked the Brigadier.

'The first aircraft takes off at first light tomorrow morning — say six a.m.,' was the reply.

There was no time to lose. The Staff Captain, Roddy Wetherall, aged about twenty-one, and the Quarter-Master of 2/1 Punjab Regiment, the first battalion to move, sat up all night modifying the load tables to suit the special circumstances. They had to have them ready in time for each aircraft load to be organised before daybreak. It was a monumental task, but they finished it in time.

The aircraft were a mixture of Dakotas of 194 Squadron, R.A.F., and Commandos, flown by United States Army Air Force pilots. Despite the fact that this 'Do-it-yourself' operation was entirely new to all those taking part, there was an atmosphere of quiet, cool efficiency among the airmen and soldiers. The Indian soldiers were excited at the thought of going in an aeroplane for the first time in their lives, but with so much to do and so little time to do it in they had few opportunities to think about it.

By dusk a few more aircraft had arrived to raise the dust on the earth strip. Before dawn on the following morning the noise of engines starting up began — the troops, mules and baggage were being collected into the aircraft loads, against the doors of the aeroplanes ramps were being placed up which the jeeps were to be driven and the mules led into the fuselage. Incidentally, the last travelled very well by air, but were apt to 'short' the intricate electrical wiring under the passenger floor. These connections were so sited because in normal circumstances they would be dry in all weathers, but the mules were not house-trained!

Because of the serious state of affairs at Imphal, this unprecedented operation had been ordered with little preparation and

briefing of pilots, especially those of the U.S.A.A.F., who had been hurriedly taken off other duties.

'Say! where do you want to go?' asked one pilot of the jemadar in charge of the troops in his aircraft.

'*Maum nahin, Sahib*' ('I don't know'), replied the jemadar.

'Where are we off to?' asked another pilot when he was airborne, '... and what's the name of the place we've just left?'

'I thought we were going to Imphal,' said Roddy Wetherall.

'And which strip?' called the pilot.

'I don't know, I had the impression that there was only one.'

'Never mind,' said the pilot. 'We'll take a chance.'

And they got there.

Between March 18th and 29th, flying two sorties a day, these pilots moved 5 Indian Division without a single casualty from Arakan to Imphal (with the exception of one brigade, which was flown direct to Dimapur and fought in the defence of Kohima). But even they could not have done it without the outstanding work of the staff and the soldiers themselves on the ground.

At Imphal the reception of the aircraft carrying 5 Division was not as easy as the despatch from Dohazari. Because the Imphal main strip was chiefly needed for the landing of supplies, it was not possible for all the troop-carrying aeroplanes to land there. In consequence, they were distributed over three strips, which made matters a great deal more difficult; of necessity it was not unusual for a battalion commander to find that his companies had landed at different airfields. But the 4th Corps Headquarters were prepared for this and had established control posts on all the airfields which quickly sorted out the arrivals and got them on the way to their proper destination. So critical was the situation when the division arrived, the nearest Japanese being only a little over thirty miles away from the airstrip, that some units were sent straight into battle as soon as they touched ground. One brigadier found, on landing, that one of his battalions had gone into action at Litan, while another was on its way to Kohima, two entirely opposite directions — while a battalion commander who arrived after two of his companies was amazed to find them both on their way to the front up different roads!

But beyond one or two small contretemps the whole move went remarkably smoothly. One hitch occurred with the gunners. For dismantling their guns to load into the aircraft they had needed

one or two special types of spanners — when they arrived at Imphal there were none of these spanners. An emergency signal was sent to Dohazari and the spanners were flown up in a fighter plane, but even then as the guns were dispersed on three different airstrips, the tools had to be rushed round by jeep from one to another.

When at last by March 26th the two brigades of 5 Division, together with engineers, artillery, field ambulances and workshops, had completed their move, 123 Brigade found itself on the road that led north-east towards Ukhrul and Sangshak, holding a position near Kameng, some eight miles from Imphal. 9 Brigade was partly at Kanglatongbi on the road to Kohima, thirteen or fourteen miles north of Imphal or near the town itself.

Brigadier J. A. Salomons, nicknamed 'Sally', commanded 9 Brigade. He was a bald-headed Scot in his early forties who had already seen much active service during 1940 in the Western Desert and later in Arakan, where he had commanded first a battalion of his regiment, 7th Rajput, and afterwards a brigade. Universally liked, shrewd, never put out by misfortune and always ready to speak his mind frankly, he led his brigade with skill for many months. When the war ended he had twice been awarded the Distinguished Service Order.

Later, on April 6th, when Briggs was able to bring 9 Brigade complete round to the Ukhrul road to join up with 123 Brigade near Nungshigum, he then became responsible for the operations against the Japanese 15 Division advancing from the direction of Sangshak. It was not long, in fact less than a week, before he became involved in one of the crucial actions of the whole siege — the Battle of Nungshigum.

CHAPTER XIII

SANGSHAK—A BLOODY BATTLE

'Fight your way out. Go south then west. Air and transport on look-out for you.'

H.Q. 23 Indian Division

DURING all the excitements that had been taking place at the sharp end, much had happened to alter the face of the Imphal Plain.

Corps Headquarters had changed from a town to a country life by moving from its bungalows in Imphal to a new position in a re-entrant among the jungle-clad hills north of the town. Most of this new site, consisting of basha huts, was hidden from view from both the ground and the air. Round the bottom of the foothills ran the one and only road, and to get from the road to the various offices on the hill, steps consisting of bamboo slats had been constructed, but these became very slippery once the monsoon started. Many were the expletives that issued from staff officers as they fell flat on their backs outside the Corps Commander's office.

The plain itself was a hive of activity. Men were digging and re-digging defences, firing for the first time the weapons with which they had been issued, and in general preparing to take on the Japanese when they appeared. From all reports it seemed to many that this would not be long delayed.

Until officers and men got used to this entirely new atmosphere, spirited patrol clashes took place between the various units, between the Royal Air Force and Heavy Anti-Aircraft Artillery and between them and troops of monkeys. Alarms were reported at all hours of the day and night and the capture of two JIFs had the salutary effect of making everyone more security minded.

In the 'Keep' alone — that part of the Plain which included the main airstrip and Corps Headquarters — there were at one time no less than fifty-one thousand souls, ranging from generals and air-marshals to Indian followers. Of these, sixteen thousand were unarmed and seventeen hundred had never fired their weapons in

their lives. But when all the *bouches inutiles* had been evacuated by land and air, this colossal figure was to be reduced to a mere twenty-five thousand.

It was just as well that all the military inhabitants of the Plain had gone into battle positions when they did, because by March 19th the enemy were within thirty-six miles of Imphal and in contact with 50 Parachute Brigade near Sangshak, eight miles south of Ukhrul, the first objective of the Japanese 31 Division.

Until 50 Brigade had taken over at Sangshak, 49 Brigade from Roberts' 23 Division had been positioned there to keep a watchful eye on the approaches to Ukhrul and Kohima from the east. Now it was urgently wanted elsewhere.

50 Brigade had only arrived at Kohima from North-West India at the end of February 1944 in order to gain experience of jungle warfare. At a later date it was hoped that sufficient transport aircraft would become available for a parachute operation to be carried out wherever required.

The brigade, which was commanded by Brigadier M. Hope-Thompson, a thirty-six-year-old British Service Officer who had raised and trained it, was made up of 152 and 153 Para Battalions, a medium machine-gun company, a squadron of sappers and a field ambulance. All the men were volunteers and all were fully trained in parachute dropping, but less than half had seen active service. 153 Battalion was composed entirely of Gurkhas, while 152 was made up from most of the martial races of India. The officers were British, drawn from all over the Indian Army.

On March 10th the brigade was ordered to move with all speed to Imphal to take over from 49 Brigade, but owing to the scarcity of motor transport it could only do so in dribblets, with the result that the move took several days, and the whole was only concentrated at the same time as the enemy appeared on the scene.

152 Battalion, under Lieutenant-Colonel P. Hopkinson, arrived at Sangshak on the afternoon of March 14th, to hear that evening that 49 Brigade was at twelve hours' notice to move to the Tiddim road, leaving behind as reinforcement to the Parachute Brigade, 4th Battalion, The 5th Mahratta Light Infantry under Lieutenant-Colonel J. H. Trim and two companies of the Khalibahadur Regiment, a battalion of the Nepalese Army. 49 Brigade moved out two days later on March 16th.

Jack Trim, a sound and experienced commanding officer who

Sangshak

0 1 2 Miles

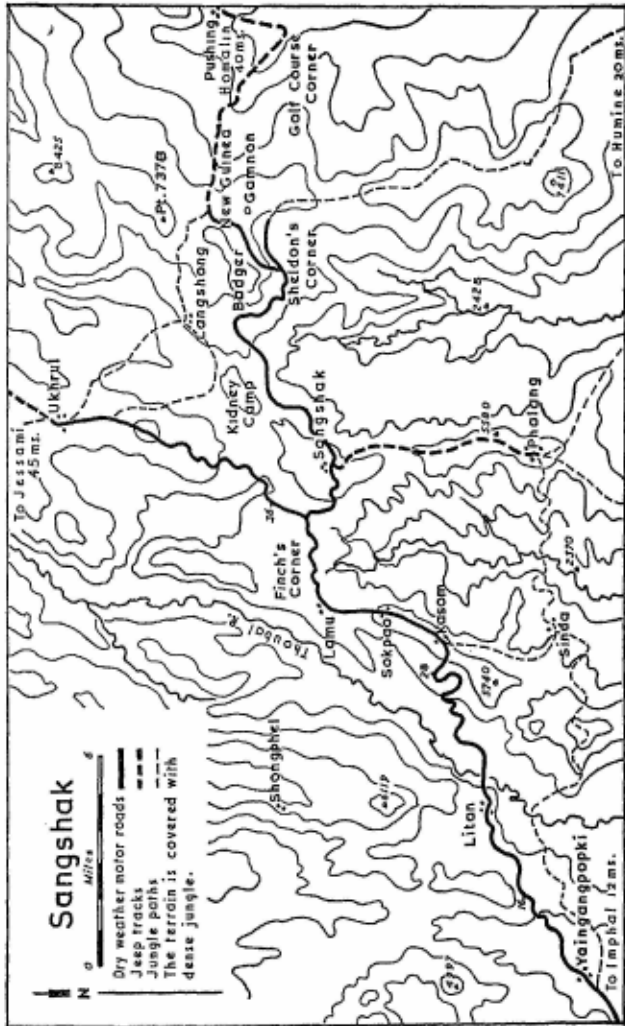
Dry weather motor roads

Jeep tracks

Jungle paths

The terrain is covered with

dense jungle.



was to play an important role in the next few days, was one of the few who had already seen active service, having taken part in the fierce and memorable Battle of Keren in Eritrea. He was forty-three years old, shortish and slightly built, and his keen sense of humour did much to relieve tension in critical situations. In addition to his soldierly qualities, he was an artist of ability.

On its way up, 152 Battalion had passed through Litan, twenty-five miles from Imphal, situated in a bowl surrounded by high hills. In Litan were mules, rations, ammunition, fodder and a field ambulance — the administrative base for the brigade. By the evening of March 15th, the same night as 15 and 31 Japanese Divisions began the crossing of the Chindwin, the battalion had taken over the positions of 4/5 Mahratta Light Infantry, who came into reserve at Kidney Camp. There were two main forward positions, one just east of Sheldon's Corner, manned by B company, the other, occupied by C company, at Point 7378, south of Pushing, both covering the approaches to Ukhrul.

At this time the news was by no means disturbing, and not until March 17th, when 50 Parachute Brigade Headquarters reached Sangshak and 153 Battalion was still on the way, did information from 'V' Force come in to the effect that one of their posts near Ongshim, twelve miles south-east of Ukhrul, had been attacked by about fifty Japanese.

The morning of March 18th passed uneventfully, with a conference at brigade headquarters to discuss further training programmes and patrolling. Forward positions were being completed, obstacles were being erected, reserve ammunition and water were being stocked up.

During that afternoon some Nagas came up the track from Pushing to report that the enemy were in the village. They were unable to say how many. C company, at Point 7378 astride the direct route between Pushing and Ukhrul, stood to and waited. The night was quiet, and standing patrols out in front had nothing to report until just before eight o'clock the following morning when an officer's patrol saw about two hundred Japanese coming up the track from Pushing. An hour later Jack Trim and Hopkinson, standing in an observation post near Sheldon's Corner could also see the enemy moving up the track, and estimated the force to be a battalion of between seven and nine hundred strong. The appearance of such large numbers came as a great surprise to

everybody. Shortly afterwards firing could be heard from the direction of C company, who later sent word that the enemy were closing in from both flanks.

Action had to be taken quickly to help C company and also to block the jungle tracks by which the Japanese could advance on Ukhrul, where the machine-gun company was in position. By now it was so hot and sticky that the companies sent to counter-attack on the flank had a weary time forcing their way through the thick jungle, up and down precipitous hills.

Hope-Thompson came up during the day to see the situation for himself, but as 153 Battalion had still not arrived, there was little he could do to help. All day the enemy remained comparatively quiet, but C company spent the night repelling determined efforts to penetrate the perimeter. By dawn the situation had become very serious. Twice the enemy had got into the position and twice he had been driven out, but at heavy cost, including the company commander and another British officer killed. There was no news of the company which had been sent to help C company.

On the morning of March 20th Colonel B. E. Abbott, the brigade second-in-command, having walked all the way from Sangshak, a distance of nine miles, came up with Jack Trim to Hopkinson's headquarters at Sheldon's Corner. Lieutenant Easton, the only British officer left alive in C company, had just reported that he was gradually being overrun and was withdrawing on Sheldon's Corner. Only twenty men got away to rejoin some weeks later. Japanese documents, subsequently captured, revealed that a whole battalion had been used and had suffered over four hundred casualties in this action alone.

As soon as he had seen the position and heard Hopkinson's report, it was clear to Abbott that little would be gained by keeping this small force dispersed over the countryside. He felt that their only hope lay in making for Sheldon's Corner, and he issued orders to that effect before leaving for his rather eerie walk back to brigade headquarters along a track which might well be ambushed by an enemy patrol.

Strange though it may seem, in this mountainous country with its luxurious vegetation, one of the major problems to be faced throughout this battle was the shortage of water, which, in the days to come, was to prove critical. As Abbott left, so Hopkinson asked for an air drop of water, rations and ammunition.

Dawn on March 21st saw the greater part of the two battalions concentrated round Sheldon's Corner, together with 582 Jungle Mortar Battery who had joined them. Trim had taken over command.

Patrols going out towards C company's old position found a battalion of the enemy digging in and carrying their dead away to be dumped at the side of the track.

Around midday a wireless message arrived from brigade headquarters ordering a withdrawal that night to Kidney Camp, approximately half-way between Sheldon's Corner and Sangshak. Previously a liaison officer had visited Trim to tell him that Hope-Thompson intended forming a brigade 'box' at Finch's Corner and to ask him whether he felt that the two battalions should withdraw to it within the next twenty-four hours. Trim's answer had been that both he and Hopkinson considered that if they did not get out within twenty-four hours they would probably not get out at all, as in their opinion the Japanese were only waiting for the arrival of their artillery and more reinforcements before completely surrounding them and making an all-out attack.

As in many of the withdrawals on other fronts, it was a question of carrying out what they could and destroying what had to be left behind, and much of the afternoon was spent in this melancholy occupation. Just as it was completed before dusk, the requested supply drop took place and the troops had to start again to blow up the new ammunition to prevent it falling into enemy hands. Both brigade headquarters and the two battalions had forgotten to cancel the drop.

This error may well have proved their salvation, since although it meant more sweat and fatigue for the soldiers, the Japanese probably gathered the impression that the force was going to stay in their positions for at least another twenty-four hours, and did not interfere with the withdrawal when it took place.

At two o'clock on the morning of March 22nd the march began. The mortar battery had moved in daylight because of the difficulty of piloting its long string of mules along the narrow track in darkness. Just after three o'clock the last of the rear parties left, having driven off two inquisitive enemy patrols.

The night was as black as pitch, and the going was very rough, particularly for heavily laden men; sounds of rifle and automatic fire from the Sangshak area indicated that some of the enemy had

got ahead. But beyond the fact that the men were thirsty, hungry and tired after three days without rest, the small force was in its new positions by ten o'clock, improving the defences and doing such cooking as was possible.

However, there was to be little respite, for at half an hour after midday an emergency operation message was received from brigade headquarters which read: 'Join me here at all costs—way clear.' Trim assumed that 'here' meant Finch's Corner, so with 152 battalion leading, the column set off again.

Events were moving rapidly, because shortly before starting, a patrol from 153 Battalion, which had recently arrived, came from Sangshak to report that Hope-Thompson was there and that the road was clear. 'But,' the patrol commander added, 'there is a large force of the enemy moving from Ukhrul via Finch's Corner on to the brigade position.' The enemy had cut the road back to Litan, and the sound of guns could be heard from the direction of Sangshak. With ever-increasing fatigue the men of 4/5 Mahratta Light Infantry, 152 Battalion and the mortar battery marched into Sangshak at half past four that afternoon to find that the battle had begun.

Although most of the country was thick jungle, the tops of the hills were bare and covered with grass similar to that of an English bowling green; gentians and other Alpine flowers grew in profusion, and orchids sprouted in the trees. Standing some six thousand feet above sea-level, it was an ideal place for a camping holiday, with cool, clean air and beautiful views all round.

Sangshak, a big village for that part of the world, was now deserted. It stood just below one end of a narrow elliptical strip of bare hilltop, perhaps eight hundred yards by two hundred yards, and it was on this hill that 50 Parachute Brigade stood to fight.

From the northern edge of the hill a wooden church overlooked the whole position. This American Mission Church, seating about one hundred persons, was now as deserted as the village, the missionaries having been evacuated. In the early stages it formed an excellent observation post from which the artillery could see the whole countryside for miles around, but in time it was to be the focus of the most bitter fighting.

In this small area Hope-Thompson concentrated his force of three battalions, two companies of the Khalibahadur Regiment, 15

Mountain Battery with all its mules, 582 Mortar Battery, a detachment of sappers and part of a field ambulance, approximately three thousand men with several hundred mules.

It was not surprising, therefore, that when the Japanese began to use their artillery and mortars, any shell or bomb landing in the position was almost bound to hit something. But one of the chief snags was the lack of water. Inside the perimeter there was none, and such springs as existed outside were so small that they dried up quickly. As the enemy closed in they covered the water points with snipers, who had to be chased away before a meagre supply could be obtained.

The forward trenches were sited on the fringe of the jungle which formed the outer edge of the perimeter. In the open space, brigade headquarters was a series of slit trenches, except for the wireless sets, which were dug down and protected with overhead cover. More trenches had been dug for the field ambulance, but there was no splinter-proof cover for the wounded or for the doctors while they did what they could to relieve the pain of badly wounded men. All that could be done was to provide a shelter from the burning sun by making a canopy of leaves.

The holes were shallow, because when digging began a stratum of rock was revealed three feet below ground level, and only in exceptional cases was it possible to go any deeper. This was to prove most serious as days went by, since a bursting shell would often disinter a buried body, and it was impossible to bury a dead mule. The stench of corpses was to become intolerable.

Throughout the night of March 22nd, and indeed through every night, the Japanese made fierce attempts to break into the position. By day, except for an occasional suicidal attack, they confined their activities to sniping. So carefully were these snipers concealed that it was often impossible to spot them and to retaliate.

It was in the early stages, during one of the daylight attacks, that the defenders had a piece of good fortune. A few Japanese, including an officer, had penetrated the perimeter and all had been killed. They were much bigger than the ordinary Japanese soldier — perhaps some of the Imperial Guard? A search for documents produced a marked map in the officer's haversack. A Japanese interpreter, a Burman in the Intelligence section at brigade headquarters, on examining the map, found that it showed the enemy's intention to attack Imphal with one division and Kohima with a

second. It was, in fact, the plan of campaign for 15 and 31 Divisions.

What to do with this valuable information? Obviously it was of the utmost importance that it should get back to Corps Headquarters with the least delay. But how?

Despite the fact that the enemy had almost surrounded the position, it was decided that the map must be sent by hand. Two copies were made, one of which was given to the Brigade Intelligence Officer, Captain L. Allan, and the second to a member of the Intelligence section. As soon as it was dark these two crept out of the perimeter on their perilous journey, and after a number of narrow escapes from being captured they reached Imphal with their precious document.

For the next four days the battle went on almost continuously, with the Japanese shelling and mortaring the defenders in their overcrowded position. Ten yards from brigade headquarters was a mortar, the crew of which had been pumping out bombs at the yelling Japanese in the jungle. Suddenly an enemy shell landed directly on the mortar. There was a deafening explosion as the ammunition blew up, killing all the crew and smashing the barrel. Miraculously, nobody in brigade headquarters was hit, although spattered with the ghastly remains of the gallant men who, seconds before, had been serving their mortar.

The 3.7-inch guns of 15 Mountain Battery under Major Lock had done excellent work in taking toll of an enemy column some two or three hundred strong who were spotted moving in the open from Kidney Camp towards Finch's Corner. So quick and accurate was the fire that the Japanese were caught unawares, and bodies could be seen flung into the air as the shells landed among the marching troops. They rapidly disappeared into the jungle, leaving behind a large number of motionless figures. Transport elephants were also reported near Sheldon's Corner, but it was not possible to engage them.

On one occasion the enemy got right in among the guns and killed the two battery commanders. Abbott, kneeling in his slit trench at brigade headquarters, was firing his sten gun at some Japanese who had killed or incapacitated all the men in a gun pit only twenty yards away. It looked to him as if there was nobody left, when from the bottom of the pit emerged a havildar, the No. 1 of the gun crew. Apparently he had only been stunned, for Abbott

saw him seize the ramrod and with it start laying about the Japanese. In a matter of moments he had killed the seven or eight of the enemy who had entered the gun position, and the gun was recaptured. This was a magnificent effort, and the havildar lived to receive the Indian Distinguished Service Medal for his supremely gallant action. In the words of one infantry officer: 'The steadiness of the British and Indian Gunners was an example to us all.'

During lulls in the battle efforts were made to collect the dead and the dying. In the field ambulance, under the direction of Lieutenant-Colonel Davis, later to gain the Distinguished Service Order, the medical officers were doing exceptional work. After four days' fighting no less than between two and three hundred wounded lay in shallow slit trenches or in the open only a few yards from brigade headquarters. Morphine was the chief antidote to allay the pain and suffering, as it was not possible to perform any major operations. Day and night the medical officers did all that was possible in the circumstances.

Food, water and ammunition were urgently wanted. Air drops were called for again and again, but so small was the dropping zone and so difficult was the country for accurate flying that very little reached the garrison. In spite of gallant efforts by the pilots in the face of heavy small-arms fire, the greater part of the parachutes floated down the mountainside to be picked up later by the enemy. It was a frustrating sight for the soldiers to see, in particular, the containers, drifting out of their reach.

If heavy rain had not fallen on two occasions the water situation would have been a great deal worse. Such containers as did land within the perimeter were sent to the hospital, while many officers and men drank from puddles left by the rain, fouled by blood and filth though these were.

Lack of sleep also affected the defenders; regardless of the noise of the exploding shells and the crack of rifle and automatic fire, men fell asleep where they stood from sheer exhaustion.

After changing hands several times the church was deliberately set on fire, thereby denying this valuable observation post to the Japanese. Captain Cowell of 152 Battalion was ordered to attack and set it alight with the phosphorus cartridges from a verrey pistol. The onlookers watched while he and his men fought to get inside. At last an entry was made and shoots of flame began to appear

from the windows. Within a few minutes the church ceased to be the vantage point for which it had never been intended and became instead a charred and smouldering ruin.

On the morning of March 26th the enemy put in a strong attack on that part of the perimeter held by 152 Battalion, which had been considerably weakened by casualties since the fighting began on March 19th. Their success in making a deep penetration meant moving the hospital, putting several guns out of action and moving the mortars. Rallied by their officers, with voice and hunting horn, 153 Battalion went into the counter-attack. Captain Hutton of the mortar battery exhorted his men to sing. In the words of Trim: 'They made a dreadful noise, but it served its purpose.' Most of the lost ground was retaken and, except for a small corner, the perimeter was restored.

At six thirty that evening the commanding officers were called to brigade headquarters and shown a wireless message that had come in clear from 23 Division. It read: 'Fight your way out. Go south then west. Air and transport on look-out for you.'

The thought which immediately came into the mind of everybody present was what was to do with the wounded. There were some who could not walk. Others would never survive the journey to Imphal through the jungle and mountains, others again had been so badly hit that it could only be a matter of hours before they died. It was a difficult decision to make, and only after a great deal of anxious discussion was it decided that anyone who could make the journey should have a friend to help him. There was no alternative but to leave the remainder where they lay and hope that the enemy would do what they could for them.

The next question was how should the withdrawal be organised and when? It was obvious that it would have to take place that night, and half past ten was the starting time fixed.

It was decided that the break-out should be made through the southern part of the perimeter, held by 4/5 Mahratta Light Infantry, to which the Japanese had paid less attention than they had to the north and west. The whole force was to move out in a kind of 'box', or roughly in the same formation as it then was. Having got clear of the position, small parties were to be made up to find their own way to Imphal.

The next three hours were spent in rendering the guns useless

by taking away the breech-blocks and sights and doing everything possible to leave no equipment in a serviceable state.

At ten thirty the move began in complete darkness, the men slipped out of their trenches, crossed the track on the south side of the perimeter and headed into the jungle. A three-day march over very tough country with the chance of meeting enemy patrols awaited them. There was little firing, presumably because the Japanese were taken by surprise, and no attempt was made to follow. A clean break had been made.

Many were the extraordinary experiences that came to light when officers and men finally reached safety. Jack Trim and his small party had an arduous march, which included two climbs over ridges four thousand feet high, parts of which had to be scaled on hands and knees. Stumbling up water courses, clambering over wet and slippery rocks made the going extremely difficult, but there was, for a change, plenty of water, for which they were very thankful.

Emerging on to a track they ran straight into a Japanese officer accompanied by a JIF. Both sides were surprised. The Japanese officer shouted in Urdu: '*Fire mat karo*' ('Don't fire'), which for a moment nonplussed the Indian soldiers. Then a British officer drew his revolver, only to find that it was full of toothpaste! However, one of the others polished off the Japanese officer and JIF with a burst of automatic fire.

The journey took three days, during which their daily ration was half a handful of raisins, washed down with a drink of water from a stream. On the last night they had a feast consisting of half the dried emergency ration which every man carried and half a cup of coffee.

On the third day Trim and his party, which had now increased to over three hundred thanks to chance meetings with other small groups on the way, arrived on the front of 123 Brigade of 5 Division holding the eastern approach into Imphal round Yain-gangpopki. Included was Havildar Sambaji Bhuingde of 4/5 Mahratta Light Infantry, who, in spite of having been shot in the stomach during a particularly gallant action on March 25th, had managed to walk the whole way. He lived to be awarded an Indian Distinguished Service Medal later on. Exhausted as they were by fighting and the long march back, the men arrived in high spirits, each carrying his personal arms.

Abbott and Hopkinson, who had been contemporaries at the Staff College and were old friends, came out together with ten soldiers. Hopkinson having been badly wounded—an arm and one foot were in plaster—the little party had to move very slowly, taking six days to reach Yaingangpopki.

They had many close shaves which might have ended disastrously, including one which entailed rolling down the mountain-side to avoid capture by a Japanese patrol. Miraculously Hopkinson, beyond a few bruises, was otherwise unhurt.

When they eventually reached safety it was to come in on the front of a Dogra battalion, commanded by another old Staff College friend. Rum helped to make a very satisfactory Staff College Reunion.

Perhaps the most extraordinary story was that of a badly wounded British officer from 152 Battalion. Lying in a shallow trench, shot through the jaw and throat, he had been temporarily relieved of pain by a strong dose of morphia. It seemed to both the doctor and his friends that it could only be a matter of hours before he died, so before the withdrawal began they made him as comfortable as they could and left him.

It was dark on the following night when he recovered consciousness to find a Japanese soldier sitting beside him examining his personal belongings. This was too much. Cautiously he felt for his knife and, whipping it out, he slit the throat of his enemy before he had time to realise what was happening. The Japanese died without a sound. Then the officer sank back to think out his next move.

Straining his eyes through the darkness, he could see other Japanese figures moving about. Obviously, he thought, there was no future for him if the enemy found a still warm Japanese corpse lying beside him, so he decided that the sooner he got out of the way the better, and slowly getting to his feet, he staggered away into the jungle unnoticed.

Several days later he turned up in Imphal, badly knocked about, but very cheerful. When asked how he had managed about food, he replied that he had thrown a grenade into a river which contained some small mahseer type of fish, and when they surfaced he had caught them and sucked them raw. This must have been a most painful process, because when he was taken to hospital he had to be fitted with a complete set of bottom teeth. Even so, it was

only a matter of months before he was back with his own battalion ready to fight again!

As the days and even weeks went by, so more stragglers and also some men who had been prisoners of war rejoined their units. Indian soldiers who had been captured and escaped said that the Japanese had not treated them too badly. They had been made to do chores of various sorts, and their boots had been taken away to prevent them escaping — but then the Indian soldier could move just as well without his boots, as many of them did when they got away.

But however grim and unpleasant the situation may be, there are now and again one or two lighter moments to relieve the tension. For example, the incident involving an officer who was brought to a division headquarters suffering from severe nervous and mental exhaustion. A junior staff officer was despatched to the nearest field ambulance to fetch a powerful pill to help the officer to sleep, and, since he himself was suffering from a headache, he took the opportunity to get some aspirin at the same time. On his return he unfortunately mixed up the potions, took the pill himself and gave the aspirin to the officer, and after having passed into a deep sleep for thirty-six hours came into the Mess for a meal only to sleep soundly through it!

Another incident concerned a pack carried by one of the Mahratta company commanders who had joined up with Trim's party in the jungle. As they stumbled up a six-thousand-foot ridge, he was obviously very exhausted and was having much difficulty, as indeed were they all, in getting himself along.

At last Trim said to him: 'Why don't you get rid of that great pack of yours? It can't be important.'

'Sir,' replied the company commander, getting his breath with difficulty, 'I have a dozen squash balls in this pack which I promised to a girl in South Africa, and I am going to carry them until I get a chance to post them to her.'

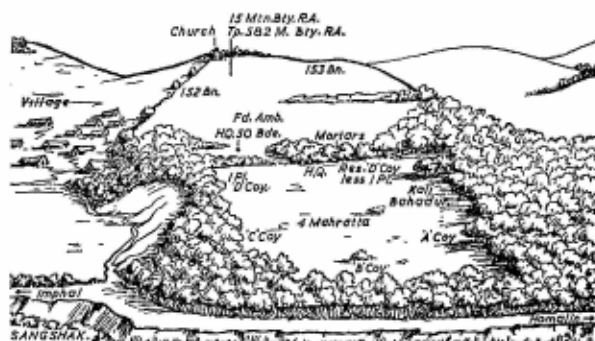
So ended the Battle of Sangshak. To the troops who had taken part it seemed just one of those incidents with which so many of the British Army had already been acquainted. They could never have realised at the time the strong repercussions that their stand at Sangshak had on British and Japanese plans alike.

To the Japanese it meant that their timetable had been thrown out of gear. The Left Column of 31 Division, which had been

chiefly engaged, and the whole of 15 Division had been held up. Not only had they been held up, but they had also received a very bloody nose in their efforts to destroy 50 Parachute Brigade. The casualties, which had been heavy, could not be easily afforded at this early stage of the campaign.

To the British this delay was a heaven-sent gift. Its effect was threefold. Not only did it allow Scoones more time to reorganise, but even more important, it allowed for 5 Division to be flown in and take up their positions before the enemy closed in on Imphal. Finally, it permitted the use of the Imphal-Kohima road for a few more days than the enemy had intended, thereby giving time for unwanted labour units to be motored out to India and for urgent supplies to be motored into the plain.

The defenders of Sangshak had made a fine contribution towards the successful outcome of the battle.



CHAPTER XIV
'FIRE THE OIL'

THE evacuation of all the supplies, petrol and ammunition for the administrative base at Moreh had been a colossal task. To stock it up with all that would be needed to supply two divisions required an area two and a half miles long by one and a half miles wide, and perimeter defences of no less than six miles. Covered from view from the air, it was hidden in the jungle on the left side of the road coming from Shenam.

Inside the perimeter stood a number of bashas to house the troops working in the base; there were also 'Dutch barn' bashas to protect foodstuffs from the weather, the less-perishable goods being covered by tarpaulins. In addition, there was a pen of cattle — about two hundred rations on the hoof — which were to become a problem when the time came for Moreh to be evacuated.

Since March 17th the staff of the dump had been toiling to remove everything that could be of possible use to the Japanese; lorry loads of stores had been streaming back along the mountainous road to Imphal. All had gone well, even though not exactly according to plan, which was not surprising considering the number of dumps to be cleared so quickly on all the roads leading back to Imphal. For instance, the look on the face of the officer in charge of the back-loading must have been well worth seeing as he watched forty lorry loads of petrol begin the journey back to Imphal, just as forty lorries carrying the same commodity drove triumphantly into Moreh!

Gracey himself had arrived there a day or two before Mackenzie and 32 Brigade had marched in after their successful action against the enemy at Charing Cross. His headquarters had come in late in the evening, and everybody had immediately started to dig their local defences, but they were hardly prepared for what happened later in the night.

At ten o'clock the General had gone to bed in one of the bashas. His camp bed had been erected, and, perhaps a little too confidently, he had got into pyjamas.

The preceding days had been anxious ones for him, as they invariably are for a commander during a withdrawal. Many conflicting reports concerning 100 Brigade had come through: one was to the effect that both the Borders and 4/10 Gurkha had been cut up. There had been requests for escorts to retrieve wounded from many miles in the jungle to the east. There had been the worry as to whether the scattered detachments of 9/12 Frontier Force Regiment had ever received orders to come back. He had even had to tackle the problem of what to do with twenty thousand eggs which had arrived just as the withdrawal began!

Not surprisingly he felt tired and was soon fast asleep. But not for long. At ten thirty, without any warning, shooting broke out from all directions, the bullets passing through the roof of his basha.

Gracey jumped out of bed, remembered to put on his slippers and popped his head out of the door. His first thought was that possibly some of the men had been a little 'trigger happy'.

'What the hell's going on?' he shouted, dropping into his slit trench as tracer bullets flew all over the place. His exclamation was addressed to his senior staff officer, 'John' Eustace, who was already in the trench together with the General's personal escort of five or six Gurkhas.

In the darkness nothing could be seen of any movement or of the other defenders. Gracey took the opportunity of a slight lull to slip back into his basha to get his dressing-gown. He dropped his torch, the light went out, and he was unable to find it or the dressing-gown. As he returned to his trench, having given up the search as a bad job, the firing, which had been going on for half an hour or more, died down.

A few minutes later footsteps were heard approaching. It was the General's driver.

'Are you all right, Sahib?' he enquired.

'Certainly I am,' said Gracey. 'And where in heaven's name have you been?'

'I went down to have a look and then organised a small party,' replied the driver quite coolly. 'We drove them out all right.'

The following morning a lot of empty Japanese cartridge cases were found near by, obviously from a couple of automatics brought up by an enemy patrol, probably from the battalion of 15 Division.

At the same time as Japanese patrols were 'jittering' the Moreh

defences, other actions were being fought up the road towards Shenam, against the battalion and engineers sent off earlier by Yamamoto to cut the road and destroy the bridge over the Lock-chao River at Sibong, now held by 80 Brigade.

A move of this sort had always seemed likely to Gracey, so to provide early warning he had positioned a standing patrol at Laiching, a small village on the track leading from the valley to Sibong. This had served its purpose, since just about the same time as the battle of Witok took place, the patrol had been attacked and driven in, the survivors reporting that they had been engaged by at least a company of the enemy.

The battalion of 213 Japanese Regiment, for this was the one ordered to cut the road, having disposed of the standing patrol, had pushed on along the track running parallel with the road. Unknown to each other, 100 Brigade was moving back along the road at the same time.

On March 22nd the enemy engineers appeared out of the jungle close to the Sibong bridge, eight miles north of Tamu, only to run straight into the defended positions of the 3rd Battalion, The 1st Gurkha Rifles of 80 Brigade, who were responsible for the close defence of the bridge.

After unsuccessfully trying to outflank the Japanese, the mortars and supporting artillery were turned on to fire a mixture of high explosive and smoke. Down came the phosphorus bombs of the mortars, some bursting in the trees and spattering their inflammable contents among the dried-up leaves and scrub, setting them alight. This was unusual, because although time and again efforts were made all over the theatre of war to set the jungle on fire, they were seldom successful. But on this occasion the result was highly satisfactory: the scrub burnt freely and the enemy was flushed. As the Japanese sappers ran to escape from the flames they were shot down by the Gurkhas, cheered on by a number of spectators who had a front rank view from the officers' mess.

When it was all over and such Japanese as had not been killed or wounded had vanished into the jungle, a number of bodies remained on the ground, including one officer. On closer examination they were found to be much bigger than the normal Japanese, some over six feet tall and heavily built. Further investigation showed that they needed to be big men, as each carried a load of one hundred pounds of explosives. Captured documents, when

translated, proved them to be a force, forty strong, with orders to blow the bridge.

The rest of this detached force came on to the road at different places farther up towards Shenam, but were driven off except at 'Nippon Hill', four miles south-east of Shenam, where, on March 26th, they succeeded in establishing themselves overlooking the road. When 20 Division finally withdrew, this party, although a nuisance, did not interfere seriously and two Carabinier tanks, on permanent watch, kept them quiet while Gracey's men went by. Later, 'Nippon Hill' was to be more than a mere nuisance.

By March 25th only 32 Brigade, some guns and some sappers remained in the Moreh 'box'. 100 Brigade had left that day for Shenam; Gracey's small tactical headquarters had also gone to rejoin the main headquarters near Pael. Before leaving, Gracey had a long talk with Mackenzie and heard him give out his orders for the final withdrawal. He then set off back in his carrier with an Indian driver and his Gurkha gunman. In his own words: 'We felt very lonely going up that road caged in the carrier,' he recalls. 'There was nobody to be seen for long stretches. The carrier could only take the hills very slowly and we felt that at any moment somebody might pounce on us. Except for the noise of the carrier there was absolute silence. The whole thing was very eerie.'

The enemy, quick to realise that a large part of the division had moved, began to attack the Moreh perimeter, particularly on the northern side. In doing so they succeeded in overrunning a company position so that they overlooked part of the 'box', but as they hardly interfered with the brigade, Mackenzie let them stay there. Of course it had been quite impossible to man the whole perimeter; it was far too big. Instead, the defence was made up of a series of posts that could support one another, with other troops ready to counter-attack when and where required.

What ensued is best described by Mackenzie himself: 'A fair amount had been evacuated, but there was a tremendous lot still left. Most of the ammunition had been got away, although I had plenty to amuse myself with. There was a vast amount of petrol there, and this was destroyed before we left. I doubt whether the Japs got a single thing out of Moreh; my own opinion is that they never occupied it.'

'We got the orders that we were to withdraw on a certain day (March 31st). My sappers had been very busy getting everything

ready for demolition. I gave orders that the last thing to be set on fire or blown was the oil. Obviously, once you had fired the oil, all chance of making a surprise get-away was gone.

'The chaps were in splendid form, their tails right up, but as the brigade had more or less made Moreh, they were rather hurt at having to give it up, so much so that I did suggest that we be allowed to stay and make a scrap for it as we'd done at Charing Cross. For a day or two it looked as if this might be the case, but then we were definitely told to withdraw.

'We got everything ready and then had orders to stay. Finally the orders came that we were to clear out on the Wednesday.

'Just before you get into Moreh from the north, the road bifurcates, and between is a lozenge-shaped ridge, a perfect position for a lay-back and the rear guard. I got 3/8 Gurkha Rifles in position there the day before, in a series of lay-backs.

'I kept two or three guns to the last minute. These guns were trying to make out they were twenty-two guns! The Jap was shelling me and I was shelling him. There was plenty of ammunition. We booby-trapped the place right, left and centre.

'There was an enormous pen of cattle, about two hundred. I thought to myself: "If I release that lot they might go towards the Japs, who'll get the breeze up that something's happening." At the same time, I didn't like leaving them there from a humanitarian point of view. I certainly didn't want the Japs to get them.

'On the morning before we withdrew, I got hold of Ted Taunton, the Commanding Officer of the Northamptonshires, and said: "Have you got any butchers?" He replied: "Yes." So I said: "Go down and slaughter those cattle. No shooting, use knives only."

'I thought: "With the blood all over the place and the flies, it'll help to make Moreh very unpleasant for the Japanese." So the butchers went and did their stuff.

'There was still not a sign of movement on the part of the enemy. Patrols were out, but could find no trace.

'Even that very morning a message came through that there had been a change of mind and I was to stand. I replied: "It's too late, I am already on the move." A message came back: "All right, carry on." The withdrawal was under way.

'Every morning the Jap could have seen us cooking, and he must have thought we were having a particularly good breakfast

that morning, whereas nearly all the smoke was coming from the grain we had fired.

'The Northamptonshires got clear away. Everybody converged on the "Lozenge" and pushed up the road past 3/8 Gurkha Rifles.

'Eventually, we reached the situation when 9/14 Punjab had all gone except for half a dozen or so really good runners in the advanced positions, who kept up the firing until the last minute and then beetled through as fast as they could.

'I was standing with Victor Whitehead, the commanding officer of 3/8 Gurkha Rifles, in his forward company position, when I gave the order: "Fire the oil."

'By then everybody and everything possible was out of Moreh except our gallant sappers who were waiting to make quite sure that this was going to be a really good Guy Fawkes show. Up went the oil and within five minutes a dense pall of smoke was pushing its way through the trees.

'Very shortly afterwards the Japanese guns opened up from somewhere near our old position: at Charing Cross, I think it must have been. They pumped over quite a lot of shells, but the ridge in front protected us so that they fell clear of the road.

'The breakaway was complete, as we were not followed, nor did we have a single casualty to man or beast. But I suppose there couldn't have been much less than a million pounds worth of stores of all descriptions destroyed there.

'What struck me most was the silent efficiency of everyone. Before the withdrawal I had impressed on all the need for silence. It was almost eerie to see the hundreds of men and the regimental mules coming along the road and not a sound.'

By April 1st, 20 Division had successfully completed the move back to its positions at Shenam, with 80 and 100 Brigades on or around the saddle and 32 Brigade in Corps reserve at Palel. 14/13 Frontier Force Rifles, the battalion on the Mombi track, had shaken off the enemy and was established a few miles south of Shuganu.

On March 29th Gracey heard that the Japanese had cut the road between Imphal and Kohima and that 4th Corps was surrounded and deprived of its land life-line.

The siege had begun. The only link with the outside world was by air.

By the afternoon of March 30th the whole of Cowan's 17 Division, with nearly eight hundred wounded, had reached Milestone 82 on the Tiddim road. The next, and almost the last, obstacle was the Japanese road block at Vanglai near Milestone 72, three miles north of the Burma-Indian frontier. On the last day of March, 9 Border moved up the Vanglai ridge, while 1/7 and 2/5 Gurkha went along the road. Once this had been broken, a column of tanks, carriers and Gurkhas in jeeps headed north, meeting no opposition, but picqueting the road as it went. The troops of 17 Division went through in transport, followed by Esse's 49 Brigade. The 3/3 Gurkha brought up the rear, and blocked the road at Milestone 89 while the rest of 37 Brigade covered the evacuation of the administrative 'box' seven miles farther north. On the night of April 1st/2nd the Japanese, apparently under the impression that the Gurkhas had already withdrawn, sent a column marching down the road. This was fired on and dispersed with great noise. Among the many killed was the commander of the enemy's artillery, whose suitcase was found to contain, besides a diary, documents and clothes, a new suit of uniform complete with medal ribbons and epaulettes. Had this rig been intended for the anticipated triumphal entry into Imphal? Perhaps.

As soon as most of the stores had been ferried back from Milestone 82, Collingridge decided to withdraw without even waiting for nightfall.

Meanwhile 49 Brigade, in particular 6/5 Mahratta Light Infantry and 2/19 Hyderabad, had been ordered to take up positions, poor ones and exposed on the flanks and even overlooked by hillocks, astride the road near Milestone 38 — an area in which Brigadier Esse had, some years before, enjoyed one of the Governor of Assam's shoots in his capacity of Military Secretary. He saw no black partridge this time! On the night of April 6th, 3/3 Gurkha repulsed a strong enemy thrust, and during the following days the other battalions suffered considerable casualties from Japanese 75-millimetre guns and heavy mortars, some of which they managed to get up a rough jungle path among the hills to the west, thereby enfilading the positions.

When orders came for 49 Brigade to withdraw, the motor transport got away unheard, and the enemy did not follow.

Cowan's division reached Imphal on April 4th, and from the airstrip the Royal Air Force during the next few days evacuated

some twelve hundred wounded men who had been brought back along the road from Tiddim and Tongzang. When Major Yarrow arrived in the plain of Manipur he noted in his diary: 'The second time the Company has arrived in Imphal after a withdrawal from Burma'.¹ He spoke for many in 17 Division who had done likewise.

¹ When Yarrow came out from Burma in 1942 one of his jobs was to sink all river craft belonging to the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company. He found that some of these vessels had been built by his family firm, Yarrow & Co. Ltd., Glasgow, of which he is now Managing Director.

CHAPTER XV

FROM HOSPITAL TO HOSPITAL

'I have never seen so much pain and suffering, and we had so little with which to relieve it all.'

A Sister, Q.A.I.M.N.S.

AND what of Imphal at this time? In Manipur there has always been a general belief that a great fight would take place and involve the state. Some of the old pandits said that this war in 1944 with the Japanese was the struggle mentioned in the Hindu *purans* (mythological books); but others maintained, and still do, that the war was yet to come, for the *purans* speak of three armies, and the winner will be the army or party dressed in red which will come from the east. Manipuri children were brought up on the saying that 'when the eastern gate is opened, Manipur will be the *Handre Hunfam*'—these last two words being used in Manipuri polo when the starter throws the ball in the air to open the game.

Whether or not this was the prophesied war, the Maharaja's court astrologer had proclaimed that the year 1944 would be one of great distress to the inhabitants of Manipur. The Maharaja himself, on March 1st, married as his second rani a Manipuri lady named Smi Kamalabatti Devi. This marriage, the court astrologer had assured His Highness, would infallibly be followed by the rout of the Japanese, and as usual the court astrologer was perfectly right.¹

In peacetime Manipur, because of its isolation, had been almost independent economically. The people grew their own food and cotton and silk, they wove their own clothes, and provided their own entertainments. Food was plentiful, money was scarce, prices were low. Then came the Army with, to the Manipuris, fabulous sums of money and the desire to buy. Wages rose from four annas to five rupees a day, rice from one and a half to forty or even sixty rupees a maund (eighty pounds). At one stage there were two soldiers to every three of the Manipuri population, and all food-

¹ *Enough of Action*, by Edward Lydall.

stuffs were in the greatest demand, every mess and food depot competing for them, just as every branch of the Army and Royal Air Force competed for labour and materials for building offices, roads, airfields and hospitals.

Seeds were issued free to the headmen for distribution among their villagers, who were guaranteed a fixed price for all kinds of fresh vegetables available. These they grew in their gardens or along the river banks and delivered in remarkable quantities to Royal Indian Army Service Corps depots scattered about the valley. Prices soon went up, and eggs which had formerly cost a fraction of a penny each rose to sevenpence; and women vendors in the bazaar charged ever-increasing prices for their vegetables.

The prices of some commodities was controlled, but it was hard to enforce them, and if messes wanted to buy eggs at eight annas each when the correct price was two, they did so, though inflated prices could not produce any more eggs.

In the case of oranges grown in the hills to the west of Imphal, it was possible to keep the price down to four for one anna. Purchasing officers would go out to the foothills and pay for them on the spot when the hillmen came down with their loads, and usually the growers were ready to sell to the Army rather than spend another day's journey going on to the Imphal market and back.

The Manipuris had always grown their own sugar-cane, and with the aid of some sugar crushers introduced by Gimson when he was President of the Darbar they produced a coarse raw sugar, brown in colour. But when the troops came to Imphal in their thousands and were seen to be using refined white sugar the Manipuris found they could sell their sugar-cane to the soldiers at a few annas a stick for chewing. With the profit derived from this sale they then bought or procured white sugar, for which, having never touched it before, they developed a permanent taste. Afterwards the local shopkeepers found it worth their while to import this white sugar. The wartime taste for atta did not last for long after the troops departed.

The villagers had at least a year's supply of rice when the siege began, so they were not afraid of running short of this basic food-stuff. Though some kept it in granaries, the most common method was to make long ropes of straw, as thick as one's wrist, and then wind these round and round and round until a big-bellied vessel had been formed, and in this the rice was stored. If a rat nibbled

through the rope the rice would trickle out, and the rat's activities would soon be noticed, which would seldom have been the case in a granary.

Though many Manipuris stayed in their villages even when the Japanese came on the scene, hundreds came in towards Imphal and, since the Army had taken over several whole villages and scores of houses, these refugees had to take shelter and double up with relatives who were more fortunate in the position of their homes. Two, three and even four families might be living together, and they took the inconvenience and the upheaval in excellent part and there was a minimum of grumbling.

As the enemy came closer, the bullock-cart loads changed from sacks of grain to the household goods and chattels of some family which had either fled or been evicted; and their carts were piled high with furniture, pots and implements, with mattresses and huge wooden bedsteads fastened above. The women and children walked gloomily in the dust, or sat aloft among their belongings, while father whacked the lazy bullocks and gazed placidly forward.

Some glimpses of the events and tensions of this period are derived from the terse diary kept by Lieutenant-Colonel Rex Tattersall, commanding the medical division of 41 Indian General Hospital. On March 9th orders were received to evacuate all patients and nursing sisters by lunch-time, as a Japanese attack was imminent, so four hundred patients were sent out by road and all medical equipment was packed. Then came a reversal of policy, by which the hospital was to be reopened with five hundred beds next day, being now the only functioning hospital in Manipur for the equivalent of more than four divisions.

March 12th. 'Complete muddle. Trying to run the hospital with the stores packed. Flew out the neuro-surgical team to Comilla. Small earthquake.'

On March 17th all sisters and other British women were sent away from Imphal, either by air or by road, much to their disgust; but the authorities were not prepared to take chances against such an enemy as the Japanese had shown themselves to be. Sister Monica McDonnell of 24 Casualty Clearing Station was up on the Saddle above Palel at the time. For several nights sleep had been disturbed, and at breakfast someone was sure to ask: 'Did anybody hear all the noise last night? Where were all the tanks and trucks going to?'

Here, day by day, the Manipuris had passed on their way to work, often stopping to put a grinning face round a tent door. Down in the fields they worked in preparation for the rice harvest, cows tugging the wooden ploughs. Women carrying water-jars on their heads swayed past, but the children, like children the world over, used to find and pick up and fiddle with metal objects, and sometimes these would explode, and the damaged children would be hurried into the theatre tent. On the Saddle all water had to be brought up from the valley, much of it in pakhals slung on each side of a mule. There was never enough, and the inadequate supply had to be used over and over again for less and less hygienic jobs.

That morning of March 17th the four sisters were called to the mess tent at mid-morning coffee-time, and there found Mrs. McDougall, the sister in charge, and Major John Dillon, commanding the medical division, and several other doctors. Outside waited four ambulances. The sisters were to pack at once, but could take only their hand luggage. It was explained that they would be a hindrance and a danger if the fighting came close, and it was better that they should go out before it was too late. So they drove to the airstrip and were flown to Dimapur, leaving their patients to the excellent but masculine care of medical orderlies.

Other women who were sent out from Imphal on the same day were the 'Wasbies' — the Women's Auxiliary Service (Burma) — which had been formed early in 1942 to work on cipher duties in Rangoon but had almost at once been compelled to take ship or retreat over land when the Japanese invaded Burma. Back in Simla the unit was re-formed by Mrs. Ninian Taylor as a canteen service for the troops of Burma Command, and in September 1942 the first canteen was opened in Shillong to sell tea, cakes, sandwiches and other stores much needed by soldiers moving through in road convoys or on troop trains.

The plan was to set up tea counters and canteen shops at all the major staging posts between base camps and the forward fighting zones, and having shown a fine record in Assam and the Brahmaputra valley, the Wasbies were allowed to move into Arakan and Manipur with their mobile canteen lorries. It was in October 1943 that the first such canteen opened in Imphal, and by Christmas ten girls were staffing two lorries.

Cigarettes were always in tremendous demand. The Indian sepoy bought hair oil and Oriental balm. One Gurkha battalion

beyond Palel queued for writing-paper and envelopes — to the amazement of their officers who declared that only about one Gurkha in a hundred could write. The Wasbies went to camps and gun sites and to casualty clearing stations, visiting units within a forty miles radius of Imphal. Troops would hopefully hang out on trees the notice: 'Wasbies, please call!'

They also took over the organisation of 'The Elephant Arms' — a rest camp for men of 4th Corps. This attractive club, with its own tailoring and laundry service, was a short-lived success, because of the Japanese offensive. Another Wasbies' innovation was the mobile library which visited widely scattered units in 23 Division and left or exchanged a box of books for the British troops.

And then, at twelve hours' notice, the Wasbies were ordered to leave Imphal, driving north in their canteen vans and settling in again to work just as hard in places like Dimapur and Jorhat. They could not return to Imphal until July.

* * *

And now back to Colonel Tattersall's diary. On the 22nd he wrote: 'Flew out 360 patients. Hospital just a large refugee camp with bits of at least six medical units, all without their clothes and equipment.' Next day has this entry: 'Evacuating sitting cases by air all day, but admitting fast, more casualties coming in. Opened resuscitation ward. Japs still about thirty miles away. Now all very military, with defence forces round the hospital, passwords, etc. Air evacuation going smoothly.'

By March 28th he was writing this: 'Continuous stream of ambulances and trucks, chiefly with sick and a few wounded. Hospital overflowing and verandahs already full.'

This day was also vital in the life of 14 General Hospital, which, under the command of Colonel H. F. Humphreys, had travelled two thousand miles from Bareilly (between Delhi and Lucknow) to Kanglatongbi, with four hundred and fifty tons of equipment for six hundred patients. In the past few weeks native labour had been cutting and burning the jungle, preparing plinths and building brick theatre and X-ray block, and hacking down thorn, grass and creepers. Tented wards and medical departments had sprung up amid trees brilliant with scarlet, smoky blue and misty white, for the great valley was bursting into spring leaf and flower. How far away the war seemed.

The day fixed for the hospital to open was Saturday, April 1st. Four days earlier the medical staff had been informed that the hospital was well protected and that, as no Japanese could approach within miles of the plain, there was no cause for anxiety. Yet on that very day all the native labour bolted; and all too appropriately, a mobile cinema showed a film about infiltration and forest warfare: 'The Last of the Mohicans'!

On Tuesday night, March 28th, a telephone message reached the hospital, ordering everyone to pack and get out within three days. So much for the reassurances of 'no cause for anxiety'. By noon on the 29th the hospital, poised ready to receive five hundred patients, was loaded along the roadside, awaiting lorries to take everything to Dimapur, and thence to Comilla. As night began to fall, the last lorries set off, and a sergeant who left at seven o'clock with the dispensary equipment was the last British other rank to travel up the Kohima road for three months. At half past eight that night the enemy cut the road.

Colonel Tattersall's diary covers the next few days.

'*March 29th.* Provisional warning of removal within 48 hours into "the Keep".

'*March 30th.* Order to evacuate over 1,000 patients and ourselves before dusk. Got the last of the patients away soon after mid-day and some valuable equipment in trucks. Finally arrived in Box Mussel about 11 p.m. Impossible site in a small hillside valley with seepage under foot. No tents. Slept in the open, rained all night.

'*March 31, April 1st.* Went back to the site with trucks and evacuated 150 loads of equipment. Site improving, but no water and no latrines.

'*April 2nd.* Order at lunch time to move to a new site in the Box. To have 100 beds ready by 9 a.m. tomorrow and 400 by evening.

'*April 3rd.* Ready for 360 patients by evening, 200 of them in beds.

'*April 4th.* Put up tents all day. Casualties coming in and a fair number of sick. Not an ideal site. River runs across it. Ack-ack guns 100 yards behind, artillery on the other side and a large ammunition dump on the third. 25-pounders in action much of the time. Very noisy.

'*April 5th.* Got sleeping quarters dug in and also operating theatre. Awake most of the night with air raids and artillery.'

These 25-pounders, separated from the hospital by no more than a mud track, fired a good deal at night, and inevitably proved disturbing. At one time, indeed, when the guns were swung round and fired over the hospital, a medical officer had to walk across the track and ask the commander if he would mind taking the sharp end of his guns out of the hospital wards, as they were upsetting the patients.

As for the occasional low-level Japanese air raids, they were not without their entertaining side, since everybody not otherwise occupied fired at the planes, even the troops on sick parade outside the Medical Inspection room.

Evacuation of patients from Imphal was normally by air in the early morning. Sitting patients would be taken down to the air-strip in three-ton lorries and stretcher cases in ambulances. They were accompanied by a medical officer, and if some particular problem patient was being flown out, then the doctor would go with him to Comilla or Calcutta. Occasionally a plane, or even an entire evacuation, was cancelled, and at about midday the patients all returned to the hospital, causing considerable chaos, because their beds or stretchers had usually been occupied by someone else in the meantime.

Captain John Patrick of the American Field Service has left us a picture of these April evacuations from hospital. 'Sweet Jesus but it's magnificent what the Tommy puts up with, lying on the muddy ground in stretchers, waiting patiently for someone to give them attention. An overworked orderly, both hands bloody up to the wrists (with neither the time nor the water to wash them), trying to do as many things as possible to help. We loaded the lying patients and started for the air strip — the only way left to take them out. The ambulances park and they wait. And wait. All day. . . . And when the planes fail to come, our boys haul them back over the difficult roads to try again the next day.'

No aircraft were permanently and exclusively engaged on the evacuation of casualties; instead it was done mainly as a sideline by transport aircraft which had brought in supplies and then returned to base with sick and wounded. Each Dakota could take sixteen stretcher cases and between eight and a dozen sitting patients. The loading process took not more than twenty minutes — a vital point for those about to be flown out, because the interior of an aircraft waiting on the ground in such a climate became

intolerably hot within a few minutes, and soon one began to sweat as in a Turkish bath. Casualties could be flown to base in about two hours, whereas the journey, even had it been possible to avoid the encircling Japanese, would have taken a week by mule, sampan boat, motor ambulance and railway.

It was to the brick buildings of a former Botanical College in Gauhati, transformed into 52 Indian General Hospital (commanded by an Australian colonel named Cawthorne, with Miss Summerfield as matron, and a score of British staff, with a few Anglo-Indian Auxiliary Nursing Service girls), that many of the wounded soldiers from Imphal were first evacuated. During the most critical weeks several hundreds were admitted every afternoon, and a hospital intended to accommodate a thousand patients was sometimes crowded by an extra five hundred. The men would arrive by ambulance or Army truck in a bad state, their dirty first field dressings unchanged for several days and, in some cases, for up to two weeks past. Wounds were too often septic; many had, through exposure to flies, become infested with maggots; and the prevalence of gas gangrene led to numerous amputations.

'I have never seen so much pain and suffering,' wrote one sister of long experience, 'and we had so little with which to relieve it all.' Conditions were primitive. Much had to be improvised. The operating theatre had been a latrine. Sterilisation was, as usual, done with Lysol for the sharp instruments and, for the rest, in fish kettles on Primus stoves. For lighting the surgeons and theatre staff had to rely on intermittent electricity and on pressure lamps. All night in the wards hurricane lamps burned to give light and also to help keep away the rats, while outside fireflies danced through the shrubs and under the scarlet flame of the forest trees.

Because of the stream of new wounded and sick arriving every day, only the very ill were kept at Gauhati; the others were sent farther back into India by river steamer down the Brahmaputra. One hospital to which many soldiers were sent was at Sirajganj, a hundred miles west and another hundred miles to the south, built beside a great river, which as it drew nearer to the sea changed its name from Brahmaputra to Jamuna. Here, beyond green paddy fields, could be seen the thin brown stalks of jute, great bales of which, glistening in the sunlight, moved in boats down a sluggish stream towards the wide Jamuna. Between the wards mango and breadfruit trees cast their shadows into irrigation tanks, where the

villagers, coming early in the morning and plunging into the water, would agitate the surface with sticks till small fish flapped against the sides of each tank and were caught by hand or in small nets.

Two matrons and six sisters had to care for about a thousand patients in twenty-three basha wards and in one stone building for the dangerously ill. The sick and wounded came by air, train and steamer. Many had lain on deck for days on end as they travelled down the Brahmaputra under the care of a sister. The men said little about the nerve-racking journeys, but when one sister admitted to the wards her share of the first convoy — sixty surgical cases — she discovered from sullen looks and signs of impatience that they had borne all they could take. With some difficulty, because at that time all water had first to be boiled and then cooled, she had prepared fruit drinks and ordered food from the kitchens. But the patients, when encouraged to speak out, confessed that they would much rather have had their wounds dressed first. Some had been five days without having the dressings changed, and a few had ants and maggots in their wounds. The sister learnt her lesson, and in future took care to have a dressing-trolley ready for each convoy, and as soon as a surgical convoy arrived, all available trained staff set about renewing dressings as a first priority.

One day-sister was astounded to be told, by a colleague who had been on night duty and made her report over the breakfast table: 'You have a ward of Japs this morning.' Dirty, ragged and smelling offensively, these forty men had been badly wounded and left uncared for. Having no interpreter and no officer or N.C.O. who could speak a few words of English, they indicated their needs by signs, and were disinclined to speak at all. To begin with, at meal-times the nursing staff had to show the Japanese different kinds of food until they discovered what they would agree to eat — mostly eggs and rice. When a nurse entered the ward they at once stopped any scrap of conversation among themselves and looked stoically dull and expressionless; while to the doctors their reactions were apprehensive, almost as if they expected ill-treatment. The sister on duty had orders to delegate all nursing of the Japanese to her male orderlies, and to make them comfortable. And then, quite suddenly, the enemy soldiers were transferred to a destination which remained a secret to the staff.

Of the few Japanese prisoners taken on the battle-front, most of them were weak from illness. In the words of one doctor: 'They

were in an appalling condition. The bones stuck through their skin so that the outline of the skeleton could be seen; and often their skin was transparent. You could almost have a transparent view of such tissues as were left. I haven't seen a person in the last stages of cancer as emaciated as those chaps. Their wounds and sores had been covered not with dressings but with paper, which didn't have to be tied on but stuck to the mess underneath.

'Some of these Japanese were suffering from beri-beri caused by lack of vitamin B, in this case due to eating polished rice, where the husk has been removed. Their legs were bulbous, wet and doughy, and shaped something like those of a grand-piano. Many a Jap was found starving to death, with his bag of rice in the husk still hanging round his neck — he was too weak to eat it.

'Several Japanese patients, at the approach of a doctor or orderly, would pathetically point at or tap their arm, as if to request a lethal dose from a syringe. One or two tried to kill themselves in the ward.'

Such was the shortage of trained orderlies that the few sisters had often to train most of their assistants as they went along, and if the work was neglected or badly done they did it themselves. Plagued by flies, their baggage infested by white ants, tormented by mosquitoes — at night the white frocks gave way to khaki shirts and slacks tucked into socks as a malaria precaution — the staff were also a target for large kites, which would swoop suddenly as from nowhere and snatch a sandwich or even the food being taken to the ward kitchens to be cooked. Sometimes these fierce kites would go so far as to claw a sister's face.

Those who worked in such hospitals will recall the midnights when, as they sat in a ward trying to snatch a few minutes in which to write the first lines of a long report for perusal by the commanding officer and matron next day, the mosquito 'prongs' penetrated the ankles of their socks, the shoulders of their bush-shirts and the backs of their hands; when, during the monsoon, doors and window-shutters flapped noisily in the wind, and rain drove through glassless apertures to the beds, so that the stronger patients had to comfort the helpless and drag beds away from the walls. And the sister had to pull on rubber boots and gas cape and stumble from ward to ward through puddles or along flooded tracks. There would be a gasping man with a severe chest wound whose comrade was supporting him and saying: 'Never mind, I will stay with you.'

And the Indian orderly who, draped like a ghost in a white sheet, brought messages of crisis to 'Miss Sahib'. And the two vultures which stood outside like sentinels with their forecast of death, while inside the ward a British sergeant, his thigh shattered by shrapnel, was bleeding to death. And the wild-eyed Indian patient from the mental ward who, clad only in short nightshirt, appeared before the sister flanked by two Gurkha guards. And the pariah dogs which dug themselves into the dust round the hospital at night and, when alarmed, would wake the patients soon after they had settled off to sleep. Then the jackals would have every rubbish bin tipped over by daybreak, thus adding further disturbance to a chequered night. Sisters will recall, too, how when doing a round of the wards by night they had to take the *bhisti* (water carrier) to light their way with a lamp and to escort them with a stout staff.

How futile the whole business of war seemed! If it was depressing to witness such wastage of young men, it was also a reward when the health of some improved under their care, especially, perhaps, those who had arrived almost like skeletons from malnutrition, dysentery and other tropical debilitating diseases. Tempted stage by stage from fluid to light to solid diet, the men gained sufficient weight to enable them to stand on their own feet and walk around. Of those who died, more were Indian than British, in proportion to their total numbers, because the former, above all the Hindus, were often in poor condition and anaemic for lack of eating meat and eggs.

CHAPTER XVI

ALL-WEATHER SUPPORT AND SUPPLY

'Enemy aircraft are over in all weather continuously. We can do nothing but look at them!'

A Japanese Soldier

SINCE February the Air Officer Commanding 221 Group had been Air Vice-Marshal Stanley F. Vincent, who had already fought against the Japanese while in command of another group in Singapore, Sumatra and Java. Educated at King's College Choir School, Cambridge, and at Lancing, Vincent was at the age of nineteen in 1916 an officer with the Royal Flying Corps in France. Soon after the First World War he was posted for three years to the Cadet College at Cranwell as an instructor. The next decade he spent in Palestine, Transjordan and various parts of Iraq as well as at Tangmere and Northolt, and it was at this latter station that Vincent, then a group-captain, began the Second World War and won the Distinguished Flying Cross. After a nerve-racking departure from Java in 1942, he was successively Air Officer Commanding Fighter Operations in Australia and Deputy Chief of Air Staff in New Zealand.

A good singer who was ready to take part in a Christmas pantomime; a good pilot who often flew off on a raid or reconnaissance, Vincent was a familiar and popular figure.

The Army, as well as 221 Group, was most fortunate to have in its support throughout the fighting for Imphal an Air Force commander of such wide experience, buoyant and likable personality, with a firm hold alike on the developing situation and on his splendid squadrons.

Throughout the crucial year 1944 the Royal Air Force and United States Army Air Force maintained superiority in the air over the Japanese, whose strategy was based upon the tip-and-run policy of the admittedly weaker side. Until November 1943, when Spitfires first arrived in this theatre of war, the Japanese Oscars had proved very tough opponents of our Hurricanes, which had

also been outflown by the enemy's *Dinahs* on reconnaissance flights over our forward areas. But within the first three months on the scene the Spitfires shot down forty-four Japanese aircraft, possibly destroyed another thirteen and damaged forty-nine, for the loss of seven, the pilots of two being saved. The Japanese pilots became more and more afraid of the Spitfires, and before very long their chief idea was not to shoot any down but to get safely away. When, early in the year, American long-range Mustang and Lightning fighters began operating in force, they attacked Japanese forward airfields at places like Shwebo, and owing partly to the enemy's ineffective warning system, the Americans destroyed over a hundred Japanese aircraft on the ground before they could take off, and, in aerial combat, they accounted for another seventy-six.

The effect of this aerial supremacy upon the course of the Imphal campaign can hardly be overestimated. For one thing, the damaging fighter sweeps against forward airfields forced the enemy to withdraw his fighters to the Rangoon area and try to support his troops in Manipur from a distance of nearly six hundred miles. For another, the Japanese supply routes as far back as bases in Siam were under constant attack along their entire length, and eventually it took six weeks for reinforcements to reach the Imphal front from a base like Bangkok. Then again, this superiority made possible the tremendously effective direct support of 4th Corps by dive bombers, fighter bombers and tactical reconnaissance planes, in a way that would not have been in question had the danger of interception by enemy fighters been pressing. Above all, this predominance ensured the delivery of airborne supplies almost to the maximum permitted by the weather and by the number of aircraft available.

Although the position varied from month to month, it was usual for one of the three Spitfire squadrons to be on the plain — for instance, 136 Squadron at Wangjing, a *kacha*¹ dusty strip — and two based on airfields one hundred miles away in the Surma Valley, westward from Silchar. In order to diminish the number of men at Imphal, and on account of the difficulties of providing guards for the planes at night, the Spitfires were often flown out in the evenings. Squadrons took turn and turn about, and those chiefly involved were 81, 607 and 615, besides 136 Squadron mentioned already. Number 1 Squadron of the Indian Air Force, flying

¹ In this context *kacha* = 'unmade-up.'

Hurricanes on tactical reconnaissance from Imphal, one of the three all-weather strips, was under the excellent command of Squadron-Leader Arjan Singh. In addition, Numbers 42 and 113 Squadrons of Hurribombers were at Palel, another all-weather strip, and at Kangla, Number 11 Squadron of ground-attack Hurricanes at Imphal, and the Beaufighters from 176 Squadron at Tuliha airstrip. All these squadrons on the plain formed 170 Wing, which was led with dash and gallantry throughout the battle by Group-Captain Henry Goddard, an architect in peacetime.

In order to make the last-named landing-ground all-weather — it was never intended that these airfields should be of London Airport standard with concrete runways several thousands of yards in length: lack of materials would have made this impossible, nor was it necessary — Dakotas flew in three hundred and seventy tons¹ of a valuable and adequate substitute called 'bithess'. This bitumenised hessian was like a thin oilcloth made up in rolls fifty yards long and three feet wide. Given good conditions, it did not take long to make an earth airfield all-weather with this material; the preliminary work took the time, and the ground *had* to be dry when the bithess was laid.

First the soil was shaped by local coolies, under engineers' supervision, so as to make a slight camber that would allow the rain to run off into a ditch either side. Then the fifty-yard lengths were stretched out and ironed flat with a roller until eventually a strip two thousand yards long and fifty wide had been completed. If the ground was really dry and the soil properly packed for the camber, then the surface would remain flat and smooth, since no water could get through the bithess. But given any wetness underneath, then large hollows would appear, and these could damage the undercarriage of a moving aircraft. Constant repair of the runway was imperative in such conditions, and the strip might well be out of action just when it was most urgently required. By force of circumstances, this is what happened at Tuliha, which gave continual trouble. The hard standings in particular were of doubtful firmness in heavy rain, simply because the bithess had been laid too late, when the earth underneath was already sodden.

Tuliha strip was four thousand yards long, owing to a mistake. The Americans always talked in feet, not yards, and one of them

¹ A bulky cargo which had to take its place in the priority list along with other vital stores that were also wanted urgently.

asked the engineer officer for a strip 'about four thousand long', so down it went as British yards! This error, however, proved of great value during the second Chindit 'fly-in', when the Dakotas were loaded up with troops, mules, etc., in the centre and took off outwards in both directions, subsequently landing inwards from each end — a very impressive sight in the moonlight.

At Imphal the R.A.F. laid a second strip at right angles to the main runway, aiming towards two opposite dips in the nearby hills, so that when the wind was blowing *across* the airfield a plane could still fly in through one dip and take off through the other.

Long before the start of the battle the R.A.F. had set up radar outposts, observer units, filter and operation rooms and other ground installations required for the effective handling of the fighter squadrons. But the difficulties of operating radar in this mountainous country were tremendous, and they became even greater when several outlying posts had to be withdrawn at the time of the Japanese advance, in particular the station at Tamu, on which much reliance had been placed for detecting the approach of enemy aircraft from beyond the Chindwin. With a land-line back from Tamu 221 Group had well over 100 miles' warning of Japanese aircraft approaching on a broad front between Homalin and Kalembo; but when Tamu was given up the R.A.F. received no warning till the enemy were on the edge of the Imphal plain, because the hills stopped the radar signals. Before long other stations out on the roads to Ukhrul and to Moirang had to be withdrawn, thus leaving several blind spots.

To detect aircraft if they chose to fly low was well-nigh impossible in such country. Moreover, the Japanese, when mounting a fighter sweep which was their favourite type of offensive, would send over the aeroplanes either singly or in sections as soon as they came near to the valley. They reckoned that by so doing they would cause the maximum confusion to the R.A.F.'s defence system, as well as to the anti-aircraft gunners, since it was impossible to keep a continuous check on a score of enemy aircraft all flying low and reported simultaneously from a score of different places. To the problems facing the men who plotted movements in the filter and operation rooms was added the fact that, at the same time as the Japanese planes were about, there might also be two squadrons of British fighter-bombers returning from a mission and transport aircraft on their way in with supplies from the base.

For Spitfires to fly defensive patrols from airfields on the plain proved too costly in petrol, all of which had to be flown in. However, a Beaufighter went out over the Chindwin each day on weather reconnaissance, and the pilot was able to provide up-to-date information as to whether the meteorological conditions were likely or not to favour a Japanese fighter foray. If the enemy did make a raid, then one of our fighter sections would be sent to each of the main low exits from the plain — at Palel and at Churachandpur — in order to intercept the intruders when they tried to make good their escape. This system was known as 'Stop-gap', and that one word was sufficient instruction on the telephone from the operations room to get it working. These tactics bore fruit, notably on June 17th, when the Japanese sent twenty Oscars over the southern part of the valley. Spitfires scrambled to meet them along the Tiddim road, and six Oscars were shot down, another four probably so and three damaged, for the loss of one Spitfire, and the pilot was saved.

By day the Japanese were most chary about risking their bombers, and on the few occasions when they appeared they were always escorted by a disproportionate number of fighters. Even their night-bombing attacks achieved poor success, and the Beaufighters of 176 Squadron were able, despite the extreme handicaps of night interception, to shoot down three enemy bombers out of four on one night.

The effect upon the Japanese of the efforts of the R.A.F. crews is eloquently reflected in the pages of captured diaries. The frequent strafing and bombing attacks caused one Japanese officer to write during the approach march before the siege opened: 'Owing to my carelessness as a commander I have suffered losses even before an engagement with the enemy. I offer apologies to the Emperor.' One soldier who had been in the campaign on Guadalcanal complained that the fighting round Imphal was much fiercer. Another recorded pathetically in June: 'Enemy aircraft are over in all weather continuously. We can do nothing but look at them.' And yet another, this time a transport officer referring to the Hurribombers, declared: 'Everybody back from the front speaks of the frightfulness of these attacks. . . . Everywhere there are burnt-out vehicles which have crashed down into the valleys, their drivers riddled with bullets.'

A Japanese source reveals that Number 5 Japanese Air Division

lay idle back in Burma while the three divisional commanders attacking Imphal and Kohima were crying out for assistance from the air. But Mutaguchi had decided that such support was unnecessary, and General Tazoe, the Air Force commander, knew that he was heavily outnumbered, so no air supplies were sent and no air bombing to help the ground forces. This inactivity aroused deep resentment, but Tazoe had no adequate supply planes and he was desperately short of bombers.

* * *

One of the major problems was how best to protect aircraft on the ground and transport aircraft on their way to and from Imphal from a base airfield. The defence of airfields was primarily in the hands of the R.A.F. Regiment, though the 'boxes' in the 'keep' were sited with a view to helping in this defence. Only once did the Japanese get through — on the night of July 3rd/4th an officer and seven men raided the Palel strip and, with magnetic mines and Bangalore torpedoes, destroyed eight parked aircraft — a bold and successful stroke. As for the transport planes, they flew singly or in small groups in order that the even flow of freight should be maintained, and it was thus impossible to provide fighter escorts. The Japanese knew this, and now and then sent their fighters to lurk and pounce. At first they met with some success, in that on April 25th two Dakotas were shot down on their way to Imphal. To foil this the R.A.F. devised an air corridor extending roughly from the Khopum Valley towards Palel. During daylight the corridor was patrolled constantly by fighters of 81 Squadron with assistance from other squadrons, and the plan proved most successful. Indeed, the only aircraft lost thereafter was a Wellington bomber being used for supply work, which took a short cut out of the fighter-patrolled lanes and fell a victim to the last Japanese fighter sweep of the season.

Air Supply had had its modest beginnings on the Burma front in May 1942, when 31 Squadron of the R.A.F. and the 2nd Troop Carrier Squadron of the U.S.A.A.F. maintained outlying detachments, isolated radar stations and, later, Army units which had been cut off by the monsoon. They had dropped small quantities of supplies, mostly food and clothing, to refugees coming across the hills and also, on a more regular basis, to the native levies in the Kachin and Chin Hills. The former, operating forward of their

base at Fort Hertz, were maintained by air as far as the capacity of the aircraft available for this work. But there were not nearly enough aeroplanes, the country to be flown over was very mountainous and the jungle-covered ridges provided no landing grounds, even for an emergency. Only Fort Hertz had a landing strip. Hitherto it had never been thought possible to maintain flights regularly during the monsoon months, but now all that had changed, though the strain imposed upon crews and aircraft alike was formidable. Hudson aircraft dropped salt on the villages of the Kabaw Valley, and this precious commodity was wrapped in Union Jacks so that the Burmese would know whence it came. Colonel Philp recalls that 'when we dropped to anyone, instead of saying, as they had done in the Middle East, "one thousand yards long and three hundred wide is the only dropping ground we can use", the country obliged us to say "If you can play football on it, we'll drop on it."'

In 1943 the first Chindit expedition was supplied by air, and thereby a wealth of experience was built up, and later expanded as a result of training and experiment in the use of aircraft at the Airborne Forces Research Centre in the Punjab. It soon became clear that besides transport aircraft and their crews an extensive network of administrators was needed. On the Army side the basis of the organisation became the Air Supply Company, of which five were operating by the end of 1943 — each a specialised unit with separate sections for storage, packing, signals, supplies and loading. Two questions were pertinent. Could the nearest railway line stock base airfields to the full load-carrying capacity of the aircraft using them? Could enough people be trained in the art of packing and housing parachutes?

All the time more and more need was being felt for supply from the air. To the north Stilwell's Sino-American forces, for example, were dependent to an increasing extent upon the services of transport planes. Indeed, by the end of February 1944 eight transport squadrons of Dakotas were operating, four of them British, the others American, and also some Commandos lent as an emergency measure by the India-China Wing of the American Air Transport Command.

Once the Japanese had cut the road between Imphal and Dimapur, and the troops of 4th Corps were compelled to rely upon air supply, fortunately most of the supplies could be landed on one

of the several airstrips and did not have to be dropped by parachute. Had the enemy been able to capture or put out of action these vital airfields on the plain, it is hard to believe that it would have been possible to manufacture enough jute parachutes in the time.

At an inter-service conference held on April 17th at 14th Army Headquarters it was agreed that 4th Corps' daily requirements for air supply should be four hundred and eighty tons, while the R.A.F. units around Imphal would need a further sixty. The Corps' needs were stated weekly, the list reaching Army Headquarters on a Tuesday for requirements to be met from the following Monday onwards. It was also agreed that a balanced reserve of thirty days' stock should be built up by the end of April, after which the reserve would be consumed down to an amount lasting fifteen days. In fact, these plans soon went awry for a number of reasons. The Dakota squadrons were never up to strength either in aircraft or crews. The commitment with a West African division, dependent upon air supply for everything, in the Kaladan Valley two hundred and fifty miles to the south-west lasted longer than anticipated, while the needs of Wingate's forces increased in weight and urgency. As for the weather, it was exasperatingly capricious.

Early in April the scale of rations to the troops of 4th Corps was reduced to sixty-five per cent of the regular field standard, and had it not been for the wise decision to fly out during May alone thirty thousand men not considered absolutely vital for the defence of the plain¹ — this standard might well have been lowered from sheer necessity. Two hospitals were also evacuated, and the administrative sections of 221 Group Headquarters were sent to Silchar.

The target for supplying Imphal was three hundred sorties a day, but this total was reached only on two days, and then after the Japanese encirclement of the plain had been broken. Standard sorties were worked out at five thousand pounds each, but sometimes this was increased to seven thousand especially when 'bagged' supplies were sent.

Whereas the losses on bagged supplies were two per cent, those for stores dropped by parachute amounted to five per cent, with well-trained crews. To begin with the 'kickers out' who pushed or

¹ Even here difficulties arose. For example, there was trouble because Indians were loaded into a plane which had just brought into Imphal a load of bully beef: to Hindus the cow is a sacred animal.

kicked the supplies through the open hatch door of the aircraft were provided by the R.A.F., but as sorties became more numerous, Indians in air supply units were used, and later volunteers, among whom the West Africans were particularly keen and good, did the job.

Everything required by a division fighting in the jungle could be dropped, other than very heavy equipment, but even so, the engines of jeeps and Chevrolets and Bailey Bridge girders were dropped on cluster parachutes, and as an experiment, mules came down without mishap. Live sheep, goats and hens for the Indian troops could be dropped, provided their legs were tightly bound so that they could not move them while descending from the aircraft. Drums holding forty-four gallons of either petrol or oil were dropped, and more successfully than two- or four-gallon cans.

It often happened that whereas the skies were relatively clear over the first part of the flight from base airfield, the pilots flew into impenetrable storm clouds above the high mountains and were compelled to turn back, either to their own base or to the nearest serviceable airfield. Over the Imphal plain the skies might also be clear, so that the troops simply could not understand why it was that aircraft failed to bring in supplies that day. To reduce to a minimum the waste of flying time by transport aircraft thus forced to turn back, a staging post was established by Kumbhirgram, the most easterly landing ground west of the mountains. Here Dakotas could land and their freights be unloaded. These stores were then flown over the mountains at the next favourable break in the weather.

Despite this and other measures, the situation overall remained serious. Thanks, however, to the granting of permission for the Commandos belonging to Air Transport Command to be retained on loan for a further period, and to the arrival from the Mediterranean theatre of war of five American and one British Dakota squadrons early in April, the position improved just in time to combat the onset of the monsoon. Even so, a backlog began to mount up during April, and already the borrowed Commandos were required urgently for taking supplies to China, while the squadrons on loan from the Mediterranean — for one month only — were needed back in time for the launching of the Allied invasion of Europe. To have dispensed with any of these squadrons would have made it impossible to supply the troops defending

Imphal. Fortunately Admiral Mountbatten, the Supreme Commander, succeeded in gaining a further extension of the loan, and this turned the scales.

Another vital contribution was the withdrawal of Wellington bombers from operations to ferry to Imphal bombs which were later dropped on the encircling Japanese by Hurribomber squadrons, and of Mitchells to carry ammunition for the gunners and infantry. Other bomber crews were transferred, after brief training, to handle Dakotas which came in as replacements, and they did extremely fine work in their new role.

Besides carrying out their supply duties and the evacuation of casualties, the pilots occasionally flew out men going on leave or on posting to another unit. A certain brigade major due for leave managed to hitch-hike a flight aboard one of the returning freight planes. As he boarded the aircraft he noticed that the crew numbered five, and soon after take-off four of them invited him to join them in a game of poker. As he had recently played a good deal in the mess, he agreed and sat down to play. He was winning very satisfactorily when he suddenly became aware that *six* men were now playing — himself and all five members of the crew. He queried this disturbing fact and was calmly told: 'It's quite all right. George is in charge.' The brigade major should have been reassured, but he was not; and unable to keep his mind on the game, he began to lose heavily. Only later did he learn that 'George' was the automatic pilot!

In the allocation of priorities in aircraft loads between the Army and R.A.F. at Imphal the criterion was the urgency of the need. For example, when the Air Force were down to a two-day reserve of petrol, aircraft meant to ferry reinforcements were diverted to carry aviation spirit instead. And when General Scoones' stocks of ammunition ran low, bombs and fuel for Vincent had to give way to the requirements of the artillery.

Tact, improvisation, a spirit of conciliatory co-operation were always in demand among those who had to face the manifold perplexities and find solutions to the problems which beset them day by day. There were seldom enough lorries. Sometimes the pioneers or coolies could not cope physically with the lifting of heavy packages. The Indian lorry drivers taking freight from an air supply depot to a transport aircraft had often never seen a Dakota or any other plane on the ground, and they used to bump into a wing or a

tail, thus causing untimely postponements while the damage was repaired. Methods had to be worked out by which loading parties could after nightfall find dispersed aircraft; and coolies had to be told not to rush across an airstrip just when a plane was about to land or take off. Speedy refuelling was another problem, since pumping machinery was insufficient.

Weather was always an imponderable and usually unfavourable factor, so much so that during the monsoon all the supply trips had to be squeezed into the fair intervals when it was possible to navigate over the otherwise clouded hills. Then it was that quick loading and unloading became imperative, and air supply companies and rear airfield maintenance organisations were put to the strain. They did wonders, and so did the air crews.

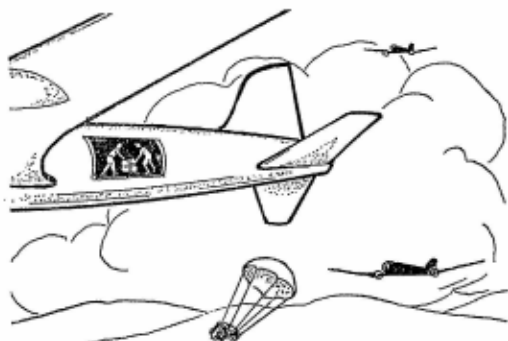
Once the planes had been loaded, all depended upon experience and individual flying skill. Most of the flights were done blind, on instruments, and despite the weather the number of abortive flights was very low: under six per cent in May, the worst month. Although fixing stations were set up at Tuliha, Kangla and Palel to pass bearings which might guide aircraft to the plain, it was not for some time that a homing beacon was established near Tuliha. One day the clouds and weather were so bad that only four planes got through to Imphal with supplies; and the astounding thing was that a young New Zealand pilot, whose determination matched his daring, made three of the trips. For this courageous feat he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Even after reaching Imphal safely, the pilots' troubles were not over, for the airstrips allowed little taxi-ing space, and it was the practice for incoming aircraft to land in one direction while outgoing planes took off in the other, the traffic being reversed every few minutes. To add to the difficulty, the runway was very narrow and ran closely parallel to a ditch which flanked the main road embankment. It is surprising that more accidents did not occur; but on one occasion a Dakota landed and severely damaged three Spitfires near one side of the bithess strip.

In the actual unloading much help was afforded by the cheerful, laughing, gaily clad Manipuri women who were delighted to give a hand. The collection and distribution of all incoming stores was the responsibility of the Imphal Ground Control, who also supervised the coming and going of troops. That this was no mean task is shown by the fact that during the siege the reinforcements flown

piecemeal into Imphal totalled over twelve thousand, while ten thousand casualties were evacuated by air.

As for the stores, supply aircraft delivered to the troops 14,317,000 pounds of rations, including 423 tons of sugar and 919 tons of food grain, five thousand live chickens and 27,500 eggs (solely for use in hospitals), 5,250,000 vitamin tablets, 1,303 tons of grain for animals, 835,000 gallons of fuel and lubricants, 12,000 bags of mail from home and 43,475,760 cigarettes.



PART FOUR
4TH CORPS BESIEGED

ONLY EIGHT MILES AWAY

'He who can modify his tactics in relation to his opponent and thereby succeed in winning, may be called a Heaven-born Captain.'

Sun Tzu

IN some battles of long duration there comes a time when the tide turns decidedly in favour of one side or the other. Indeed, it may be possible to say in retrospect that it was on a specific day, long before the end, that the battle was either won or lost.

April 4th, 1944, was such a day in this long-drawn-out battle, for on that day all the divisions of 4th Corps were at last concentrated in and around the Imphal plain. The front they occupied was horse-shoe shaped and stretched for approximately one hundred miles, from Kanglatongbi in the north, through Nungshigum, Kameng, Shenam and Shuganu to Torbung on the Tiddim road.

Briggs' 5 Division, split between Kanglatongbi and Kameng, was holding off the Japanese from the north and north-east; 20 Division was firm at Shenam and the approaches into the plain from Tamu and the south-east; 23 Division kept the enemy at bay in the south; while 17 Division was in reserve, recuperating after its withdrawal from Tiddim.

Now that the Kohima road had been cut, the whole of this vast assembly of men, animals, guns and vehicles had to be kept going on air supply on to the airfields in the Imphal Plain — the greatest operation of its kind in the story of war.

The enemy, conversely, was not so fortunate. No air supply had been arranged for his divisions fighting their way through the jungle, carrying their rations with them and collecting what they could from the villages through which they passed. There were no airfields from which their sick and wounded could be flown out; it was along jungle tracks, hastily improved, that a trickle of fresh supplies and ammunition came up on limited transport and that

stretcher-bearers carried back the wounded. Barely a month remained before the monsoon would burst in all its fury.

Nevertheless, Mutaguchi was still confident that Imphal would shortly be his, and that when this happened, all his administrative troubles would be over. In Imphal he would find more vehicles and food than his army required.

On the other hand, Geoffrey Scoones was experiencing a sense of relief because he had completed the first part of his plan, the concentration of the Corps. No longer had he the anxiety of wondering whether 17 Division would return intact and fit to fight, and the defences of the plain were still unbreached. Although many complex problems remained on his hands, he could now determine how best to put into effect his second object: the destruction of the invading Japanese.

From the information available through identifications, documents, maps and the interrogation of prisoners, the enemy's whereabouts and his probable future moves were becoming a great deal clearer.

In the south 33 Division had suffered many casualties at the hands of the divisions commanded by Cowan and Roberts, but even so, it was still a force to be reckoned with and, given adequate reinforcements, it would shortly be ready to come forward again.

15 Division was obviously scattered between Kanglatongbi on the north side of Imphal and Litan to the north-east. Two of its regiments had been identified, but the whereabouts of the third was not yet known (it was still struggling up to the battlefield). The headquarters of the division had been discovered to be forward at Kasom, and this indicated that an attack from this direction could be anticipated shortly.

The position of 31 Division was obscure, but everything pointed to the fact that it was directed on Kohima and not on Imphal.

Other interesting intelligence that had come to hand indicated that the theme running through the Japanese plan was that communications were the main objective. Commanders had been told not to worry about what was happening on their right and left, but to push on relentlessly to the areas to which they had been told to go. Undoubtedly the British and Indian troops had been expected to withdraw when their communications were cut, and they had not done so. Might this cause a revision of the plan?

Further information pointed to the fact that at least some Japan-

esc were even by this date beginning to feel that the operation had failed, that they had lost the war, and that all that could be hoped for now was to destroy at least half of what was up against them.

From all this Scoones concluded that the enemy's aim might well be to cause sufficient casualties among his divisions to prevent him from making an offensive during the monsoon. He felt also that they would operate extensively against all his communications. It did not appear to him that the Japanese were yet suffering from lack of food, but he was sure that lack of ammunition was a problem that they would have to face up to shortly. He made up his mind that the time had come when he could turn to the attack and that the destruction of 15 Division, the centre division, should be his first target.

In deciding when he should start to strike out, he had to bear in mind that 17 Division, which had suffered some twelve hundred casualties since March 7th, needed a few days to rest and refit before being ready for action again. Consequently, he estimated that his new plan could not begin before April 12th. Even then, because of the necessity to make certain of the Imphal Plain, the loss of which could be catastrophic, he felt that only two divisions at a time could be allowed to operate at any distance from the Plain. He also considered that the enemy must be sought out in his present positions in the hills and jungles. This meant that brigades would have to change from motor transport to mules and, if necessary, be supplied by air, thus denying to the Japanese their usual tactics of cutting communications.

When summing up the question of supply for both forces, he was of the opinion that although the Corps could operate on a full scale of rations up to May 5th, it would be wise to reduce the scale by a half to allow fighting to go on until the end of May.

As far as the enemy was concerned, he estimated that provided the Japanese remained dispersed they should be able to find sufficient food from local sources until the end of April, after which, if they failed to capture Imphal, they would be in dire straits.

With all these various thoughts as a background, Scoones decided on his plan, which was that 20 and 17 Divisions should hold the ring from Shenam to the Imphal-Tiddim road, south of Bishenpur, and supply a mobile brigade with some tanks in the Plain itself; that 5 and 23 Divisions should hunt out and destroy

15 Japanese Division to the north on either side of the road to Kohima, and to the north-east in the direction of Litan and Ukhrul. The former task he gave to 5 Division and the latter to 23 Division.

But before this plan could be put into effect, the enemy sprang a surprise which caused considerable consternation and a real threat to the whole operation.

During the time that the left column of 31 Japanese Division had been fighting at Sangshak, the remainder of the division had held to its objective and was advancing on Kohima. It was here that Scoones' appreciation at the end of February had been out of step, for in estimating the size of the force that the Japanese would put against Kohima, he had felt that because of the indifferent tracks leading from the Chindwin, it was unlikely that more than a brigade would be committed. Instead it was a whole division. Except for this, his forecast of what the enemy would do had been entirely correct — a big factor in subsequent events.

It was on March 30th that 31 Division reached the Kohima-Imphal road, a few miles south of Kohima, and though a series of attacks was immediately made on the village, it was not until the night of April 8th that the first of many heavy assaults was launched.

On the southern flank of 31 Division the Japanese 15 Division, although it had not actually fought at Sangshak, had been very near it during the battle. A part of the division was heading for Litan, the administrative area for the troops at Sangshak, which was protected, as far as it ever could be, by 2nd Battalion, The 1st Punjab Regiment, the first battalion of 5 Division to be flown in. On landing, it had been rushed up ahead of its brigade, 123 Brigade, which, after moving from place to place, eventually took up position near Yaingangpopki, twelve miles from Litan, with its two other battalions, one of which, the 2nd Battalion, The Suffolk Regiment, had already been to Kohima and back since its aircraft had touched down at Imphal.

During the morning of March 26th Brigadier Evans, with his battalion and artillery commanders, had been up to see Lieutenant-Colonel W. G. Smith, commanding 2/1 Punjab, an imperturbable Irishman and a fine Rugby player in his earlier days. Smith and Evans had been in the same company at Sandhurst twenty-five years previously and had only just met again.





Spectators watching the action at Kameng. *Left to right:* Brigadier Evans, Major-General Briggs, Lieutenant-Colonel Woods



NUNGSHIGUM — Tanks and Infantry advancing to the attack

It was quite obvious to Evans that with one battalion, Litan was untenable and, with Briggs' permission, orders were given to Smith to withdraw that evening. It was lucky that this decision was made so quickly, as the Japanese put in an overwhelming attack that night on 2/1 Punjab just as it had cleared the perimeter, causing heavy casualties to the rearguard.

That afternoon had seen the field ambulance, mules loaded with stores and ammunition, and the few vehicles in Litan falling back through the front of 123 Brigade. The smoke of burning dumps was an indication to the enemy of what was intended.

It was a good thing too that the Japanese did not follow up closely, because time was given for the brigade to prepare a strong position astride the valley through Kameng. When, a few days later, it became a trial of strength, the Japanese learnt to their cost that they could make no impression on it.

The valley was about eight hundred yards wide at its narrowest point. Through it ran the road from Ukhrul, bordered on either side by bone hard, dried-up paddy fields. From the small village of Kameng, consisting of a dozen or so houses, most of the occupants had fled to take refuge in Imphal, leaving behind only two or three families and a few buffalo and local cattle which roamed around, scraping what food they could from the dying grass and stubble. From the hills on either side one could see right up to the Saddle beyond Yaingangpopki and a long way back along the road to Imphal, eight miles away. The hills were covered with long grass, scrub and a few trees, but the farther one went north or south so the jungle thickened.

In the hills on the south side of the valley was 1st Battalion The Dogra Regiment, commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel E. J. Woods, a very popular and well-known officer in the Indian Army, known to all as 'Lakri'¹. He was small in stature, as thin as a lath, with fair hair. He had an ingratiating smile and was held in deep affection and respect by his officers and men. He had already proved himself to be a first-class staff officer in the Middle East and a very practical teacher at the Staff College. This battle, the longer it went on, was to give evidence that he was an equally fine commander in the field.

On the north, also in the hills, was 2 Suffolk, commanded by

¹ *Lakri* is the Urdu word for 'wood', so that all Indian army officers bearing that name were inevitably nicknamed 'Lakri'.

Lieutenant-Colonel H. R. Hopking, another delightful personality, who had only recently taken over command.

To make it more difficult for the Japanese to come straight down the valley, a large barbed-wire fence, several yards thick, had been erected to join up the flanks of the two battalions. Extensively sown with anti-personnel mines, and covered as it was by the fire of heavy machine-guns firing along it from either side, the fence completely blocked any advance down the road.

Two miles farther back towards Imphal was a very strong position in a wood astride the road to which 2/1 Punjab had withdrawn. Farther in rear were brigade headquarters, the guns of 28 Field Regiment, a squadron of Carabiniers, a squadron of 7 Cavalry and a field squadron of Indian Engineers. Dug down and covered with splinter-proof protection was the field ambulance. Mines of many types strengthened the perimeter.

But overlooking this position from the north-west was the enormous feature of Nungshigum, almost four thousand feet above sea-level.

The weather was hot and sticky, and in bright sunshine this was quite an attractive stretch of country.

Since the withdrawal from Sangshak, patrols from the Dogras and Suffolk Regiment had been very active all along the front to find out what the enemy was doing. There had been small clashes and one or two successful ambushes, but nothing to indicate that the Japanese were coming forward in any strength.

Then, at about midnight on April 4th, things began to happen. Heavy firing was heard along the Dogra front on the south side of the valley. Up into the darkness flared the S.O.S. lights calling for the fire of the guns of 28 Field Regiment, which opened up in response just behind brigade headquarters. This fine regiment was commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel 'Alf' Collins, a big man with a determined jaw and a ruddy complexion. Always cheerful and confident whatever the circumstances, this very experienced gunner and his regiment were popular with whomever they supported.

The noise of bursting shells, mortar bombs and grenades, and the rat-tat-tat of the automatic bren-guns increased. Evans telephoned the Dogras' commanding officer.

'What's happening, Lakri?' he asked.

'It's my left forward company, Rex Mace's company. All's well so far. I have just been talking to Rex on the phone. Quite a large

number of Japs are attacking, but the guns and mortars are smartening them up in no mean way. I have got Pat Meek's company standing by to go out as soon as it is light.'

'All right, hang on,' was Evans' answer, 'and I'll get some tanks up to you first thing.'

Mace's company occupied a spur which ran parallel with the road towards the enemy, and some three hundred yards from it. His main strength was at the highest point covering the approach up the spur. All round the position and about twenty to thirty yards from the foremost trenches, barbed wire had been hidden in the long grass and bushes, so that the enemy would run into it without warning.

When darkness fell at seven o'clock the men had settled down for the night. Sentries watched and listened while the remainder lay asleep in the sheltered part of their trenches.

Shortly before the shooting started, one of Mace's platoon commanders had come to company headquarters to tell him that he had heard noises and movement in front of him. He said: 'Sahib, I don't think it's a patrol — it is something bigger.'

Then the battle began. The Japanese fire was heavy, and their grenades fell all over the defences, but in the dark little could be seen. This went on in varying degrees of intensity until about three o'clock in the morning, when the men could hear the enemy digging in just beyond the wire.

Collins' guns were firing on the enemy's end of the spur, two to three hundred yards beyond the wire, for owing to the shape of the ground the layers could not put their shells as near the leading troops as they normally did.

As dawn broke, Rex Mace went to inspect the night's work. There had been few serious casualties among the defenders, but in the wire he could see several dead Japanese and more corpses lying about in the rear. No live enemy were visible, but any movement above ground drew fire from snipers hidden in the bushes.

A few minutes earlier the tank engines of a troop of Carabiniers and a troop of 7 Cavalry had been heard starting up, and as soon as it was light enough to see to drive, they pulled out on to the road, making for the Dogra positions.

'Stay where you are while I get the tanks and Pat Meek's company to clear the spur from the roadside,' were Lakri Woods' orders to Mace.

The arrival of the tanks was the beginning of a most unpleasant experience for such Japanese as remained. One troop positioned itself on the roadside of the spur, while the other went to the opposite side.

The scrub made it difficult to see any specific targets, but the tank machine-gun and high-explosive fire forced the enemy to scurry continually from one side of the spur to the other.

Briggs, who had been kept informed of what was happening, arrived to swell the number of spectators watching the scene from three hundred yards away. They found it reminiscent of clearing a hill of rabbits, when such animals were plentiful, with the enemy scuttling about in the undergrowth.

However, the tanks by themselves could not turn the enemy out, and Meek and his company went into the attack. Even so, by five o'clock in the evening the hill had not been cleared, and Meek was among the wounded. It was astounding how the few survivors had stood up to this tremendous hammering. Since it would soon be dark and time for the tanks to get back to refuel and for maintenance, the attack was called off and the Dogras withdrew.

At about midnight Mace's company was fired on again, but no attack was put in. Silence followed, and patrols at first light found no sign of a living Japanese, only a litter of corpses. Strewn about were swords, bags of biscuits, rice and plenty of ammunition. From the amount that each man had been carrying it was obvious that this had been no probing attack: the enemy had meant to stay.

A tally of corpses showed that no less than ninety-eight Japanese had been killed—a very careful search could not make the century. Only one truculent wounded prisoner was taken, and he, strangely enough, could speak Urdu, having learnt it in Japan. Few documents were found, but one of them revealed that one hundred and twelve men of the Japanese 15 Division had taken part in the attack. Thus only thirteen had escaped slaughter, and the disposal of this large number of dead was a serious problem. Unless the corpses were got rid of quickly in such a high temperature, the Dogra position would become impossible. Consequently, the whole day was spent in carrying the dead down to the valley, digging a huge hole and burying them. This had been a good opening for 5 Division, but more bitter and even fiercer fighting was to follow in a few days' time.

Prior to 9 Brigade being moved from the Kohima road to join 123 Brigade, the Japanese had established themselves in the mountains near Molvom, overlooking the Imphal plain from the north-east. They had descended on the big stores dump at Kanglatongbi, which had to be evacuated under difficult conditions, since most of the inhabitants were either untrained or unarmed. It had needed 9 Brigade's assistance before they left to evacuate both men and much of the material.

After reaching Kanglatongbi the enemy had pushed patrols out into the mountains to the north-west of Imphal, a move full of dangers, since the water supply for Imphal came from a pumping station in these mountains. This was in the care of a Manipuri '*chowkidar*', or watchman, who had been on the job for many years. History does not record why only one man with a *lathi* or big stick was left to guard this by himself!

One night the chowkida was absent from his post for a while — and it was lucky for him that he was, since a Japanese raiding party broke in, blew up some valves controlling the filtration plant and then departed, believing that it had wrecked the pumping station.

When, some time later, the chowkidar returned to find the valves damaged, he was in a great state of alarm, not at the thought of the Japanese being near by, but at what his master might say.

'The Sahib is going to be very angry about this,' he may have said to himself, no doubt feeling that his job would be in jeopardy for having been a lazy chowkidar; so he switched on the reserve filtration plant, which had not been damaged, and the Imphal water supply continued to flow freely and cleanly until the end of the siege.

When, on April 5th, Brigadier Salomons with his 9 Brigade had changed their locations, he was given a very large area of responsibility, which included the mountainous country east of Imphal and also Nungshigum. Part of his brigade still being occupied with the evacuation of Kanglatongbi, he was very short of men, so short that he was able to allot only a couple of platoons, sixty men or so of the 3rd Battalion, The 9th Jat Regiment, to hold the enormous Nungshigum feature. Even two battalions would hardly have been enough.

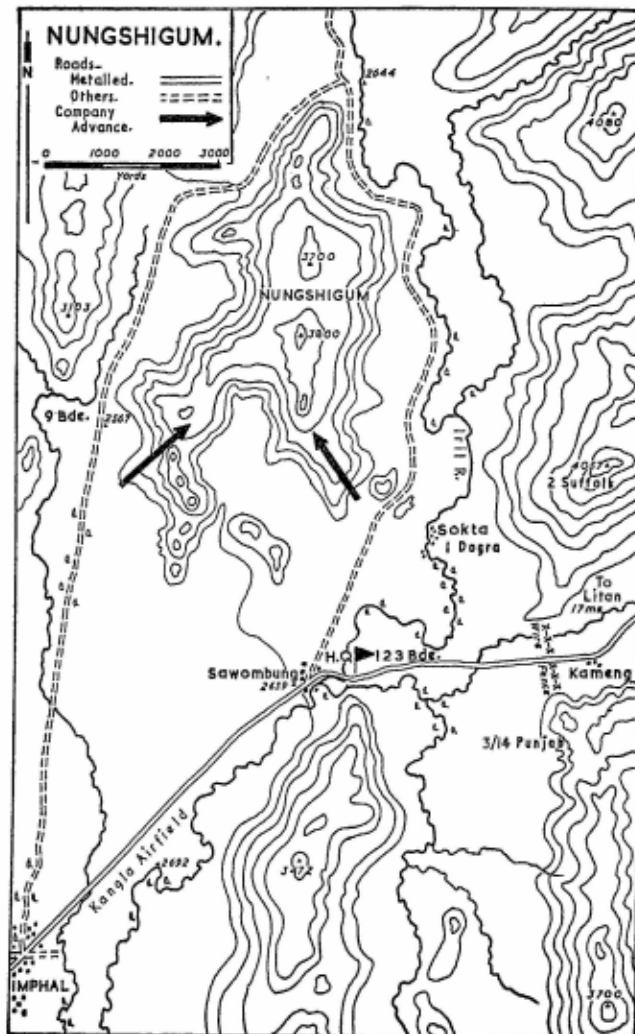
Nungshigum was about six miles from 4th Corps Headquarters and four miles from the Kangla airfield. Between it and them there were no defences other than the local '*boxes*', manned largely by

NUNGSHIGUM.

Roads—
Metalled. 
Others. 
Company Advance. 

0 1000 2000 3000

Yards



administrative troops. Thus if the Japanese chose to push through from this direction they would have practically a clear run right up to the defences of the 'Keep' itself, which contained corps headquarters, the main airfield and all reserves of supplies, petrol and ammunition. Whether they ever realised this is not known.

Nungshigum rose abruptly from the plain to over a thousand feet; the top of the ridge, consisting of a number of separate hills connected by small cols, was about seven thousand yards long, and varied in width at the summit from a few yards to over five hundred yards. At the end nearest to Imphal two prongs, as it were, pushed out into the plain. The steep slopes were covered in long grass and shrubs a few feet high, while on the top grew a number of trees but no really thick jungle. From the plain to the ridge was more than an hour's climb with battle equipment. Altogether it was a very formidable place either to defend or to attack.

On April 6th two Jat platoons had toiled up the hill in broiling sunshine, with little time before darkness fell to dig or wire their positions on the southern end. This was unfortunate, because at three o'clock the following morning two companies, the leading troops of 51 Japanese Regiment of 15 Division, attacked them under cover of a high wind and one of the season's first rain storms.

By six thirty the Jats had lost twenty-four men and were surrounded on all sides, so that the commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Bernard Gerty, gave them orders to get away as best they could. Havildar Munshi Ram, in command when his platoon commander was killed, had his hand shattered by a grenade at the same time as he was badly wounded in the foot, while gallantly encouraging his men. He was left on the summit for dead when the rest withdrew, only to survive an air-strike by our Hurribombers when it was light. When found by the Japanese, he was hurled down the hillside, but although suffering terribly from pain and loss of blood, he managed at last to stagger into Gerty's headquarters. A few days later this gallant havildar died of his wounds and was posthumously awarded the Indian Order of Merit.

It was clear that in no circumstances could Nungshigum be left in enemy hands for any length of time, as, given the opportunity to build up the whole of 51 Regiment on this all-important hill, a real and very serious threat might develop.

On the same day another Jat company went up and recaptured the position with remarkably little difficulty, presumably due to

the casualties the enemy had suffered in the attack early that morning. April 8th and 9th saw more efforts by the Japanese to re-establish themselves, a whole battalion being used on one occasion. A diary captured during this battle proved the enemy's intention to drive the Jats off the hill at all costs and avenge the deaths of four of their officers killed in the earlier attacks.

By the evening of the 10th the Japanese had succeeded in bringing up a few 75-millimetre guns, and with the help of these they overran the forward defences by seven the next morning, casualties and lack of ammunition forcing the Jats off the hilltop once more. Again Gerty tried to establish the position, this time using two companies, but without success, one company commander and a number of men being killed. By the evening of April 11th the Jats could do no more, and the situation was critical. The 'Keep' was in danger, and so was 123 Brigade, with the enemy now behind it.

On the morning of April 12th Brigadiers Evans and Scoones were summoned to 5 Division Headquarters to plan a full-scale attack on the 13th. Also called to advise on the support that the R.A.F. could give was Wing-Commander Archer, a charming, helpful, fair-haired young Australian, whose job it was to interpret the Army's requirements to 221 Group Headquarters, and whose knowledge on all air matters was of the greatest value and assistance. In the course of discussion it transpired that three squadrons — about twenty-four aircraft — could be made available to help in the attack.

Despite the series of attacks made by fighters and bombers on the Japanese positions on Nungshigum, there was no doubt that the enemy would have made good use of the time available to improve his defences. Therefore the infantry chosen to make the assault would need all the support that the aircraft, the guns and the tanks could give them.

Lakri Woods' battalion, 1 Dogra, was ordered to do the attack, which was to be launched as early as possible on the 13th. To help him he was to have two squadrons of Vengeance dive-bombers, one Hurribomber squadron, all the artillery of 5 Division plus a medium regiment, and B squadron of the Carabiniers. If it proved possible to drive the tanks up to the top the chances of the infantry being able to oust the Japanese would be greatly increased. But could the tanks climb these steep slopes? Never before had they tackled so difficult a job. 'Cully' Scoones was quite certain they

could, as also was Ralph Younger, the Carabiniers' commander, but to the uninitiated it looked impossible.

April 12th was a very busy day for Woods, for not only did he have to reconnoitre and make his plan for the attack, but arrangements had to be made for the relief of his battalion in its present position south of the road by 3/14 Punjab, a battalion of 9 Brigade. At seven o'clock that evening he gave his orders for the assault to take place the following morning.

The essence of his plan was that the Vengeances and Hurribombers were to bomb and strafe the Japanese positions as the infantry climbed the hill. This was to be followed by a bombardment by some eighty-eight guns. Then the Hurribombers were to machine-gun the enemy and intersperse this machine-gunning by occasional 'dummy' runs so that the Japanese, never knowing when the aircraft would fire, would keep their heads below ground whenever they saw the aircraft approaching.

One troop (three tanks) accompanied each of the two assaulting Dogra companies. Looking north, B company, under Captain Hugh Alden, was to move up the eastern prong of the Nungshigum feature and A company, led by Major L. A. 'Jonah' Jones, the western prong. Both were to start up their respective slopes at half past ten on April 13th, while Woods with battalion headquarters would remain at the bottom of the hill near the village of Sokta, in wireless touch with his companies and with 123 Brigade Headquarters, established on the road near Sawombung. From brigade headquarters, three thousand yards from the foot of the hill, it was possible to have a good view of both prongs and the southernmost bump on the top of Nungshigum.

At four o'clock on the morning of April 13th, the handover to 3/14 Punjab having been completed, the men of the Dogra Regiment left their positions in darkness to march the three and a half miles across open, dried-up paddy fields to their forming-up place at the foot of Nungshigum. Here the tanks and the gunner forward observation officers were to join them.

The Japanese on the heights above had been remarkably quiet, despite the fact that for thirty-six hours they had overlooked the road to Imphal, 123 Brigade Headquarters, the guns of 28 Field Regiment and the tanks, from a distance of little over a thousand yards. This inactivity was surprising, but was possibly due to the rough handling they had received in the course of capturing the hill.

It was still dark when the Dogras arrived, so because there would be much to do as soon as it got light, the opportunity was taken to give the men a hot drink then and there.

After the orders for the attack had been given out the night before there had not been time for Jones and Alden to see the ground and in their turn issue orders. Therefore, as soon as it was light enough to see, Woods took them to a vantage point, repeated his orders and pointed out the relevant features, thus enabling the two company commanders concerned to make their own detailed plans.

Just before ten thirty the roar of approaching aircraft could be heard, and out of the sky hurtled the Vengeance dive-bombers on to the unsuspecting Japanese. When the last had pulled out of its dive and had flown off towards Imphal, in came eight Hurri-bombers to drop bombs and strafe the enemy positions with their machine-guns. The noise was terrific; clouds of earth, shattered branches of trees and mangled bodies were flung into the air on the summit. Twenty minutes later the guns of 5 Division artillery opened fire on the harassed enemy.

At brigade headquarters Evans looked at his watch. It was ten thirty. The sun was beating down fiercely as the two companies, each with its troop of tanks, began to toil up the hill.

'When I first saw the hill that morning,' said Alden, 'my impression was that it was very high. It was really quite open, covered with sparse bushes about two or three feet high, and a few straggly trees. You could see the men moving about quite easily. It wasn't steep to begin with, but became so as we climbed higher.

'We advanced with one platoon leading accompanied by one tank, the infantry moving well to the flanks to avoid any fire that was aimed at the tank and any ricochets that might bounce off it. The troop commander's tank moved with my company headquarters, but as we were not tied up with their wireless, if we wanted to talk to them inside the tank we had either to shout or use the tank telephone attached to the back.

'It was awfully hot, and we sweated pints. Until more water was sent up after the battle we would have to rely on our water bottles only.'

General Briggs now joined Evans and Scoones at brigade tactical headquarters. Younger was also there and in touch by wireless with his tanks grinding up the hill, so that he was able to gain first-hand information of what was happening.

Woods had ordered each company to go at its own pace but as quickly as it could; the first to reach the summit would be given further orders. Several bets were laid between brigade and battalion headquarters as to which company, 'Oxford' or 'Cambridge', would win!

Once the advance started the infantry were hidden from view of both headquarters, but the tanks were plainly visible. The spectators watched anxiously as they, with engines roaring, slipped and skidded sideways or backwards, travelling at only one mile an hour up the steep slopes. Since the angle at which they had to climb made it impossible for drivers to see where they were going, they had to be directed by the tank commanders with their heads out of the turret. This was to lead to tragic consequences later in the battle when the top of the hill was reached.

Nearer and nearer they got to the crest. Meanwhile Hurricanes continued to pour machine-gun bullets into the Japanese, and the gunners plastered the hilltops with shells. To the west 9 Brigade was creating a diversion to attract the enemy's attention, and other tanks were firing on both flanks from the valley.

At last, shortly before eleven thirty, Jones' B company reached the summit, followed very shortly by Alden and A company. All six tanks were there too. So far there had been little interference from the enemy, but now things were to be very different.

A short pause followed, during which the tank and infantry commanders took stock of the situation. It was found that any further advance by the tanks would have to be made along a knife-edge ridge — and that one tank only could move forward at a time.

At this juncture the aircraft and the gunners had to stop pounding the forward enemy positions, and, true to their nature, such Japanese soldiers as had escaped the initial bombing and shelling came to life and resisted fiercely.

As the tanks inched their way forward, so heavy fighting raged on all sides — at one time Japanese troops were within ten yards of the tanks, which, in turn, were only twelve to fifteen yards in front of the attacking Dogras. Because of the angle, the tank gunners were unable to depress their guns sufficiently to take on the nearby enemy; and individual tank commanders, besides directing their drivers, were trying to deal with these by throwing grenades and firing pistols. To do so they had to expose their heads and shoulders to enemy fire.

With earphones on, Ralph Younger at brigade headquarters was listening to the conversations and reports of his tanks on the hill and passing on important bits of information to Scoones and Evans as they stood beside his wireless set.

First one tank would come up: 'Commander killed.' Then another: 'Commander wounded.'

'Good Lord!' said Younger, 'Tony Sandford's been wounded.'

Major Sandford, the squadron commander, was among the first of the casualties. Younger ordered Lieutenant C. T. V. Fitzherbert to take command, but fifteen minutes later came the news from his tank, 'Commander killed.'

One by one these fearless officers and non-commissioned officers fell back inside their tanks either dead or mortally wounded. In all, five out of the six tank commanders died in the space of a few minutes, leaving only Squadron Sergeant-Major Craddock to take command of the two troops.

It was while reports of the desperate fighting were coming back on the wireless to Younger that those watching from brigade tactical headquarters witnessed an astonishing incident.

Looking through their binoculars, they saw one of the tanks, which was balancing on a knife-edge, halt in its tracks, rear up in front and then slowly topple over and disappear down the steep side on the west of the mountain. There could be little doubt that the tank would be a complete write-off, with its crew dead or badly injured inside. But when the battle was over, there it stood, right side up, on a small piece of flat ground. It had fallen over a hundred feet and not one of the crew, though badly shaken, had been hurt. Beyond breaking a track, the tank itself was undamaged.

A few days later, when the track had been repaired and it could move under its own power, the tank had to be recovered. In any circumstances this would have been a tricky operation, but now to make things worse it proved impossible to turn it. The only way to get it down the steep slope to the valley was to drive it backwards. Trooper Fox, a fitter, volunteered to do this, and after an anxious hour, guided by signals from the front and not having the slightest idea where he was going, he arrived at the bottom. In the citation which gained him a Commander-in-Chief's commendation appeared the words 'It was an outstanding example of skill and guts'.

Not only the tanks had suffered. When he reached the place where the two spurs met at the top of the hill Hugh Alden halted B company, and went forward to look for Jonah. Nobody in the rear platoon of A company could tell him where he had gone, so Alden walked on to the first bump, which was swarming with tanks and Dogras. There he learnt that Jonah was even farther forward, and he eventually found him lying badly wounded and practically unconscious in a small ditch among the leading troops. He was ashen grey and bleeding profusely.

Alden realised that he would now have to take command and organise the next move, so having made arrangements to get Jonah back, he had a quick look at what was happening.

It seemed to him that farther along the hill was another knob from which a number of Japanese were firing at a hill which the leading tanks and Dogras shared with other Japanese. These last were on the reverse slope, and therefore out of sight. The hill was attracting all the fire and was an absolute death-trap.

Ordering his second-in-command, Subadar Tíru Ram, to take two platoons round the right flank while he organised covering fire with the tanks, Alden contacted the nearest tank he could see. Having tried and failed to make himself understood on the tank telephone, Alden had to climb on to the tank and tell its commander what he wanted him to do. It was suicidal for both of them to talk in full view of the enemy, particularly as Alden had to point out the exact position of the enemy bunkers. However, he got across what he wanted, and the tank opened fire, Alden waiting on the tank to make sure that there was no mistaking the target. All the same, as the second shot was fired, he was hit in the chest and fell heavily to the ground. Assisted by a nearby soldier, he somehow stumbled back to the wireless set in touch with battalion headquarters and was just able to tell Woods what had happened before he was carried down the hill with a stiff dose of morphia inside him.

By now all the tank and infantry officers had been either killed or wounded, leaving Sergeant-Major Craddock, a big fine-looking man, and Subadar Ranbir Singh of B company, the senior Viceroy's Commissioned Officer on the hill, to take charge of the tanks and both Dogra companies respectively.

Craddock could speak no Urdu, and it was indeed fortunate that Ranbir Singh had a good knowledge of English, otherwise there is

no knowing what would have resulted. It would have been a good hour before another British officer could arrive to take command.

These two gallant men went into conference to decide on what to do next in the desperate situation. The stumbling block was three Japanese bunkers strongly reinforced with trunks of trees and earth, impervious to anything but a heavy shell or aerial bomb.

The plan they evolved was for the tanks to move up to within fifteen yards of the bunkers, while Ranbir Singh organised an assault with the infantry. Forward roared the tanks and in dashed the Dogras, but they could get to within five yards only before they were forced to come back.

Again Craddock and Ranbir Singh got together, and this time it was decided to send another tank up on the top of the hill on which the bunkers had been made, while Craddock in his tank moved round the flank. The first tank had only ten yards to go, but the climb was almost precipitous.

This manoeuvre proved too much for the Japanese. Charging forward with bayonet and grenade, the Dogras killed all the occupants of the bunkers, and at last they and the tanks were in possession of the enemy's final defences.

It was now two o'clock, but there was no rest for the victors. The position had to be consolidated against the inevitable counter-attack, which could be expected as soon as darkness fell. Wire and iron pickets, which had been brought up on the tanks, were quickly off-loaded; trenches were dug and the guns registered to bring down defensive fire should it be wanted. By three Captain George Delmé-Murray had come up to take command of the jubilant A and B companies, and the tanks had begun their long journey down the hill, carrying the wounded back to the field ambulance at Sawombung.

By evening the whole battalion had moved up, and when the Japanese tried to retake the position about seven they met with a very hot reception, the gunners bringing their shells down on to the wire itself. The enemy could make no headway and were driven off.

Next morning, April 14th, patrols moving north along the ridge found that the Japanese had disappeared from the entire length of Nungshigum. Over one hundred bodies were buried in the position alone, a count revealing that two hundred and fifty Japanese and more had died on the hill since the fighting had begun on

April 7th. In addition, the enemy had lost two 75-millimetre guns and five machine-guns in the final battle.

Throughout the four months of the siege this was the nearest that the Japanese ever got to Imphal itself, and it was a matter of profound relief to all, from the Corps Commander downwards, that this grave threat had been removed, anyhow for the time being.

To Lakri Woods, who had planned and organised the carrying out of the attack with such skill, went a Distinguished Service Order; Jones, Alden and Tiru Ram were awarded the Military Cross; Ranbir Singh the Indian Order of Merit and Craddock the Distinguished Conduct Medal, while Sergeant Hamar and Trooper Smith, both of the Carabiniers, received the Military Medal.

Jones eventually recovered from his serious wounds, but it is sad to relate that both Woods and Craddock died within a few years of the end of the war; and Hugh Alden has died since these words were first written.

Everybody — R.A.F., tanks, artillery and infantry — had played their part magnificently in winning this all-important battle, and to mark the occasion a small ceremony was held at the Dogra headquarters. At this gathering Subadar-Major Kanshi Ram presented, on behalf of all ranks, a Japanese sword, captured at Nunshigum, to Sergeant-Major Craddock in appreciation of all the splendid help that he and the tanks had given.

After the war the Carabiniers adopted Nunshigum as their Regimental Day, which is celebrated year by year. Conspicuous among the functions on this special day is a regimental parade. B squadron takes its place on the parade ground — but with no officers. In proud and fitting recollection of the deeds on Nunshigum, it is commanded by the Squadron Sergeant-Major.

* * *

1 Brigade, commanded by Brigadier R. C. M. King, which had been withdrawn from the Kabaw Valley to act as Scoones' only reserve on the Imphal plain, was now ordered to harass the Japanese along the road to Ukhrul, and in particular to attack the headquarters of 15 Division already reported to be in the village of Kasom, a few miles north-east of Litan. A wide flanking movement along the Thoubal River and then eastwards through the hills

might even lead to the capture of Yamauchi, the divisional commander.

Mid-April saw Robert King's brigade on the march. Monkeys chattered in the jungle as the troops, laden with four days' light-scale rations and ammunition but without blankets, clambered over rocks in the stream beds. After the first two days the men had to travel by night, the columns stumbling along in darkness, the mules sometimes putting their feet between bamboo slats on the bridges. Most of the way they moved on little better than goat-tracks cut into the hillsides. King often wondered what he would do tactically as brigade commander if a Japanese machine-gun happened to be sited to cover the track and opened fire. Early on April 15th the R.A.F. bombed Kasom, whereupon the Seaforth Highlanders attacked along a spur north-west of the village and drove off the few remaining Japanese. Almost at once 1/16 Punjab, led by Lieutenant-Colonel G. A. Newall, after a most difficult two hours because the Naga guide lost his way, burst into a village and set all the dogs, chickens, ducks and pigs in a turmoil. Unable to find a path out of this village, the Punjabis climbed a sheer hill-face and did well to find the ridge unoccupied by Japanese.

Meanwhile a company of Patialas had blocked the road north of Kasom. Soon the surprised enemy reacted strongly by two fierce attacks against MacFarlane's Seaforth Highlanders in and above the village. The Seaforths, supported by 16 Mountain Battery and Newall's mortars, held off three more attacks after dark, despite a jungle fire which, started by enemy mortar bombs, blazed up the hillside. While smoke added to the fog of night warfare, enemy jitter raids swelled the uproar. A wind blew the flames directly towards brigade headquarters and the Punjabis. Here again Brigadier King could not help wondering what he would do if the fire forced him to evacuate the carefully sited defensive position, but the need did not arise.

Next day the positions were strengthened, because the first Japanese assault had been launched before the troops had had time to dig proper trenches. Patrols went out northwards to Lamu, and a mule convoy brought up supplies after an arduous twenty-mile march. The enemy still attacked in vain, and a company of 1/16 Punjab, attacking in its turn to put out of action a troublesome mortar, fell upon some Japanese soldiers making tea

and killed a dozen straight off. The mortar, though undamaged, was troublesome no more.

The brigade being many miles from 23 Division Headquarters and frequently out of wireless touch, General Roberts had operational instructions and other documents dropped to King from the air. As on one or two occasions he gave the brigadier a 'rocket' by this method, the liaison aircraft used for this purpose was always referred to by King's staff as 'the Rocket Plane'!

King had orders to open the road as far as Lamu, another five miles to the north, but before he could make progress it was essential to clear the Japanese out of Sokpao, a village overlooking Kasom. This task was allotted to 1 Patiala, magnificent-looking men, most of them over six feet tall, commanded by that stalwart bearded Sikh, Colonel Balwant Singh. He was a great character, who propelled himself along with the aid of a bulky stick and, even in the jungle, always managed to be well turned-out. Though separated from the rest of the battalion, A company held on to a hill west of the village, and when the enemy tried to dig in near by, harassed and sniped him without respite.

At half past two on April 19th D company dashed forward in attack to the heartening sound of their battlecry '*Sat Sri Akal*', and within ten minutes had overwhelmed and captured the position, only to find themselves attacked in the rear by more Japanese, who were just held off by desperate hand-to-hand fighting. Shortly afterwards the enemy attacked B company, and was checked. Still he had not done, for a few minutes later the Japanese soldiers tried to get between the company and Balwant Singh's battalion headquarters.

Here was the Colonel's moment. Battalion commanders do not often charge at the head of their men, but this the powerful Sikh did, and halted the Japanese. At five o'clock the R.A.F. flew over in response to a call for aid and attacked Sokpao most accurately. Although the Japanese made still one more assault, they were already beginning to withdraw. Next morning, April 20th, the R.A.F. again bombed for half an hour, after which the Patialas moved forward, took the village and linked up with the isolated A company.

Meanwhile Collingridge's 37 Brigade, back from its fine work along the Tiddim road, had advanced from the strong point at Kameng, engaged in tough fighting on a ridge astride the road

beyond Yaingangpokpi on April 17th and then cleared the road to Kasom, thus enabling a convoy and General Roberts to drive through to 1 Brigade, who were now to continue their pursuit and harassing of General Yamauchi's headquarters, reported to be six miles to the north-west at Shongphel.

While 1 and 37 Brigades were pursuing the enemy across hillside and valley, Esse's 49 Brigade, based on Kameng, held open the road back to Imphal. The 4/5 Mahratta Light Infantry were two thousand feet above the plain on a ridge named 'Sausage', which was linked by a narrow ridge to the hills farther north. Forty yards along this ridge were the Japanese of Number 3 Battalion, 151 Regiment. Whereas all drinking-water and food had to come up laboriously by mule, the Mahrattas went downhill to wash and, without enemy interference, to shoot pig and barking deer in the jungle.

It was on Sausage that the Indian Field Broadcasting Unit tried, by propaganda, to induce the Japanese there to surrender. Most enemy prisoners, once they had been interrogated, were flown to India for further questioning. But there was one exception. Corporal X had been captured half dead near Tengnoupal, and had been brought to life by hospital treatment. On leaving hospital he had volunteered to broadcast to the Japanese troops round Imphal, and so it came about that he found himself on Sausage, together with two CISEDIC officers and Major Preston, who had charge of the broadcasting equipment.

One of the officers has related what transpired. 'After quite a climb we reached the platoon position. Corporal X was in a suit of jungle green and wore a British steel helmet. Major Preston crawled on his belly with the loudspeaker as near to the Japanese bunkers as he dared, taking advantage of any dead ground he could find. The enemy did not fire, so he was evidently not seen. He crawled back, and then the programme began. First some sentimental Jap dance music was played. "They often come out at this point and sit on their hunkers to listen," said Preston. Waltzes roared over the hilltop, but no sign of the enemy.

'Then Corporal X did his piece — a splendid performance. It included phrases such as these: "Men of the — Butai, your position is hopeless. You are half starving. But do you know what I had for midday meal today?" Then followed a description of the bully-beef soya-link fruit-salad luncheon we had eaten at battalion

headquarters. "And how are you doing for cigarettes? Still smoking grass? I am smoking glorious V cigarettes.¹ Can you get a whiff of them where you are?" And so on. He spoke with as much sincerity, indeed passion, as a headmaster haranguing a confirmation class. There was no stir from the enemy, so we eventually dismantled the equipment and descended the hillside.'

On May 8th, 49 Brigade attacked the Mahrattas along the ridge to drive the enemy from the rest of Sausage, while 5th Battalion, The 6th Rajputana Rifles seized Point 4066, named 'Pinnacle', a bare, sharp-pointed peak which the enemy had been in the habit of holding by night.

Then operations had to be curtailed because 23 Division was required more urgently to take over from 20 Division the Shenam-Shuganu front. King's I Brigade again became Corps reserve, and while 49 Brigade protected the Palel airfield and the road up to Shenam, 37 Brigade took over the fortifications which they had built and formerly occupied.

¹ 'Glorious' was hardly the word British troops would have selected for describing these cigarettes!



HUNGSHIQU from the South.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE ORDEAL AT SHENAM

'NIPPON HILL' — 'Sita' — 'Crete East and West' — 'Scraggy' — 'Gibraltar and Malta'. These were the names given to some of the features which went to make up the Shenam Saddle position. They are hills unknown to the outside world, but they will remain always in the memories of those who fought there.





They were the scene of some of the most ferocious fighting of the whole war, and hundreds and hundreds of British, Indian, Gurkha and Japanese soldiers lost their lives on these hills which changed hands time and again as counter-attack followed attack. At the outset clothed with jungle, they became completely bare except for shattered tree stumps.

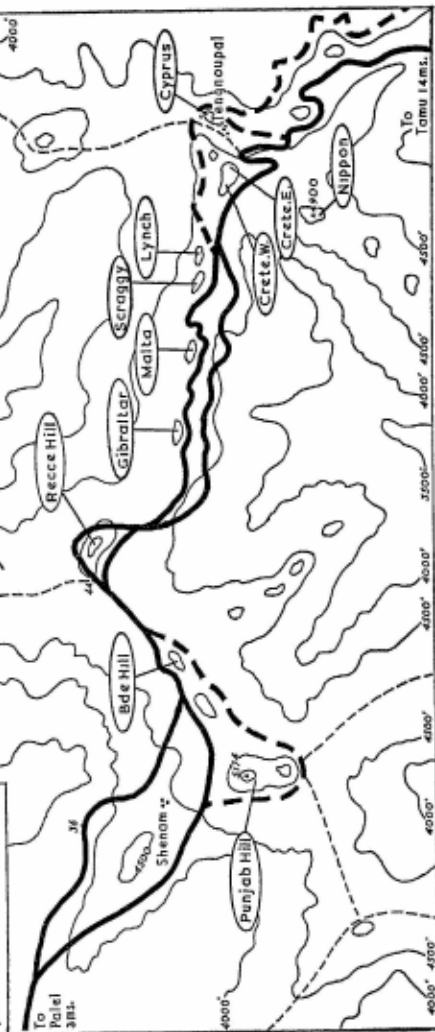
In the heat of summer it was a relief to climb to the Shenam Saddle, five thousand feet above sea-level, and to look back and down on the sweltering plain. But during the monsoon the Saddle was almost continuously shrouded in cloud and mist, while in winter it could be unbelievably cold.

Six miles up from Palel, the road curved at 'Recce Hill', from which there was a view along the gnarled finger stretching eastwards. It was rather like the blade of a saw, the isolated hills getting lower and lower until at the end was the last tooth — 'Scraggy'. On either side of the finger, which at the summit was in places a mere forty yards wide, precipitous slopes, densely covered with jungle, descended several hundred feet to the valley below. The road ran along the sides of these hills and about four hundred feet below their summits until it bifurcated beyond 'Scraggy', joining up into one road again near Tengenupal. Just north of this junction a jeep track, over six miles long, led to the Sita ridge, where several tracks from the Kabaw Valley met before debouching into the Imphal plain. This was an obvious line for an enemy to take when advancing westwards.

As the crow flies, the distance from Nippon Hill to the top of the Shenam Saddle was only three and a half miles. Once there, the

SHENAM

-  Motor Roads
-  Jeep Tracks
-  Mule Tracks
-  Jungle Paths



Japanese would have full command of the all-weather Palal airstrip and the adjacent dumps; they would also have an excellent jumping-off place for the invasion of the plain itself. Besides these advantages they would have behind them a good road by which to bring up supplies and ammunition.

With such a prize to gain, it was not surprising that General Yamamoto flung such a series of fanatical assaults at the stubborn defence over a period lasting four months, two and a half of them during the worst of the monsoon. By doing so, the Japanese were to suffer crippling casualties; and as the weeks went by, the stench of dead bodies, the reeking mud and the general desolation of war made it a grim and forbidding place.

It was on the morning of April 1st that Lieutenant-Colonel Jim Vickers, commanding 4/10 Gurkha Rifles in place of Godfrey Proctor, was approaching Tegnoupal to rejoin 100 Brigade Headquarters and 2 Border on the Shenam position. Vickers, a slim, wiry man of thirty-four, was a tough and gallant commanding officer who was to win the Distinguished Service Order twice and rise to the rank of brigadier before the war was over.

His battalion, carried in lorries, was on its way from Moreh and had passed through 80 Brigade holding the positions around Sibong. So far all had gone well, but when Vickers was about half a mile short of Tegnoupal he heard a considerable amount of firing on the road ahead. The column halted and the Gurkhas jumped out of their lorries, while he and his escort went forward to investigate.

He had not gone very far when he came upon one of the Carabinier tanks beside the road, with its commander watching through his glasses a hill which lay some five hundred yards to the south and on which there was a good deal of firing. This was 'Nippon Hill'.

'What's happening?' Vickers asked the tank officer.

'There's a bit of a schemozzle going on,' was his reply, and he added: 'Our chaps on that hill are having a packet of trouble.'

'The chaps' were, in fact, a company of 2 Border detached from the remainder of the battalion which was holding positions on the 'Crete' feature to the north.

'Can we get through all right?' was Vicker's next question.

'Oh! yes, they are so busy with one another up there that they won't take any notice of you.'

That was good enough. The Gurkhas scrambled into their lorries and the battalion went on its way unmolested to take up a position on 'Punjab Hill', the last ridge before descending into the Imphal plain. From here the Palel airstrip was plainly visible and so were parts of the road leading up to the Saddle, but looking eastwards there was nothing except a series of ridges and deep valleys covered with dense jungle.

It was a relief to the officers and men to be able to prepare their defences undisturbed after more than three weeks of continual fighting, and they hoped to make the most of a short period of comparative quiet. However, it was not to last. On the following afternoon Vickers was summoned to brigade headquarters. Here he was told that the Borders had been compelled to withdraw from 'Nippon Hill' and that 4/10 Gurkha Rifles were to capture it with the least delay — that very afternoon. Vickers also learned that he would have to make do with such little support as already existed — a few guns and his own mortars; no aircraft would be available to help in the attack.

Going forward to 'Crete West', he had a look through his binoculars at 'Nippon'. The Japanese were on the top in a kind of crater about thirty yards in diameter; on the lower slopes grew trees and scrub, but after that the hillside was steep and completely devoid of cover. Vickers decided that there was room for only one company to manoeuvre.

At two o'clock, the company started up the slope to the accompaniment of mortar bombs bursting in and around the crater. There was no sign of the enemy and no firing, and it looked as if the Japanese had not been expecting an attack.

Anxiously spectators watched the Gurkhas climbing up the hill until they were within about ten yards of the top, when they halted to prepare for the charge into the crater. Then, with bayonets fixed and shouting their battle cries, the men rushed forward, only to be met by a shower of grenades which tore gaps in their ranks and hurled the survivors back down the slope.

After some delay a second attempt was made, but the same thing happened. With casualties increasing, it was decided to call off the attack for the time being and to try again with a fresh company when darkness fell. This failed too, and morning found the Japanese still in possession of this important hill, and there they remained until on April 11th they were annihilated after a

particularly fine assault by the 1st Battalion, The Devonshire Regiment.

It was two days after this abortive effort that 80 Brigade withdrew up the road and took over the forward defences of Shenam from 100 Brigade, who, in turn, moved back to Palel in reserve. Little did officers and men realise that they were about to experience six solid weeks of savage fighting.

Sam Greaves, the brigade commander, was a huge, powerfully built man, with a round face and ruddy complexion. He had started his soldiering in the Frontier Force Rifles and had transferred later to the Royal Indian Army Service Corps, having won a Military Cross and bar during the First World War. Physically tireless, without fear, always forward when the battle was on, he would tackle any job. To his commanding officers he was understanding and cheerful, never appearing to be ruffled by an awkward situation. He was in every way the right commander for the battles ahead. By the close of the campaign he had won two Distinguished Service Orders and other decorations before being promoted to major-general.

To bar the way to the advancing Yamamoto, 9/12 Frontier Force Regiment had relieved 2 Border in the foremost posts round Scraggy and Crete, while 1 Devon held Patiala Ridge to the north-west. 3/1 Gurkha Rifles were in reserve around Gibraltar and a small detachment of 4/3 Madras held an isolated post on the Sita ridge. 32 Brigade had by this time gone to join 17 Division on the road from Tiddim.

Despite repeated attacks, the Japanese still held out on 'Nippon Hill' and because of the good view they had of the 9/12 Frontier Force Regiment all around them they were able to cause considerable inconvenience and casualties by accurate observed shelling.

Greaves decided that 'Nippon' must be re-taken, and this task he gave to Lieutenant-Colonel G. A. Harvest and 1 Devon. The date selected was April 11th, and unlike the previous assaults, it was to be supported by every available gun and by the Hurricane-bombers of the R.A.F. It was plain that it would be an even tougher proposition than ever before, because the enemy had had time to dig himself deep underground, turning the crater at the top into a rabbit warren of holes out of which automatic weapons poured a stream of bullets.



SHINAM—'Scratty' after it was recaptured



The bridge over the Lokchau river between Moreh and Tamu

At ten o'clock on the morning of April 11th the bombardment began while C and D companies formed up to climb the hill. Shells, mortar bombs and the bombs of the aircraft burst on the enemy defences. Spectators saw at least one bunker receive a direct hit and both occupants and debris soar into the air.

Shortly before ten thirty the assaulting troops went forward and as on previous occasions, the enemy held his fire until they had reached the top, when they were met with a storm of grenades and, from a ridge farther back, a hail of machine-gun bullets. It was difficult to understand how the enemy had survived the heavy bombardment.

With the artillery blasting the machine-gun positions, D company went on clearing the rabbit warren, which, despite the fact that much of it had been blown to pieces, still contained large numbers of Japanese, who would pop out of holes, fling their grenades and disappear again.

C and A companies had worked their way round the rear and were busily engaged in killing the enemy defenders on the reverse slope, who, with their usual stoicism, were fighting to the death.

At last Nippon Hill was captured, but with heavy loss. Two officers and seventeen men had been killed and six officers and sixty-two men wounded, including all three company commanders. During the fighting in Burma it was generally the officers and non-commissioned officers who suffered the most casualties in proportion to their numbers, since the Japanese were adept at shooting down anybody who was obviously a commander of some description. Although to all intents and purposes dressed and armed as their men, their gesticulations, movements and shouting of orders, and in the case of British officers with Indian and Gurkha troops, their lighter skins gave them away.

By evening the stretcher-bearers had completed their gruesome task of bringing the dead and wounded down the hill, including several Borders who had been killed ten days previously when the enemy had originally taken 'Nippon'. A company, under Captain Wallser, was left to garrison the position now wired in and stocked with fresh ammunition, while the rest of the Devons went back to Patiala Ridge.

Still the enemy had not had enough. Preceded by an artillery and machine-gun bombardment, the Japanese, shrieking and yelling, put in three determined attacks on the already tired A

company. Of these, the first two were beaten off with grenades and automatic fire when the enemy had got right up to the wire; but the third broke through the perimeter and was smashed only by the magnificent and accurate fire of the gunners, whose shells burst on the wire itself.

When dawn broke, their eyes bleary through exhaustion and lack of sleep, the defenders could count no less than sixty-eight dead Japanese on and just beyond the wire, while in the dim light figures could be seen dragging others away.

It had been a great effort on the part of these British soldiers, and they well deserved the congratulations that poured in from all sides. The enemy had paid heavily and to no purpose.

During that day A company went back to join its battalion, and 'Nippon Hill' became the responsibility of a company from 9/12 Frontier Force Regiment which was kept very much on the *qui vive* not only from outside the position but, unbelievably from the inside also. The reason for this was that some Japanese entombed under a mass of dead, wounded and debris were still alive. Now and again odd men would dig themselves out, throw a grenade while making a bolt for it and before they were shot dead. Some, although wounded, had been buried in this indescribable stench and filth for four and five days without food and water, and yet were able and ready to carry on the fight—an outstanding example of the fanatical bravery of the Japanese in general and of 33 Division in particular.

This was not the last to be heard of 'Nippon Hill'. Such importance did the enemy attach to the evil-smelling, shattered hill-top that within a week, after much shelling and attack after attack with and without the aid of tanks, they finally drove off the Frontier Force company and gained possession once more. Gracey decided that no further attempt would be made to recapture the hill, and it remained in Japanese hands until the end of July.

While this hand-to-hand fighting was in progress the enemy probed all along the front of 20 Division to find a way through to the plain, taking a particular interest in the Sita ridge, six or seven miles north of Nippon Hill.

When in March Geoffrey Mizen's battalion had originally withdrawn from the Kabaw Valley through Sita, a position known as 'Sita post' had been prepared and occupied by a company of 4/3 Madras. It was not an enviable place to defend, being isolated and

overlooked on three sides by jungle-clad hills. Consisting of small trenches or pits without overhead cover, it covered an area of about fifty yards in diameter; protected close in by wire, the surrounding jungle being thickly sown with anti-personnel mines. Although these mines were always demanded, they were a mixed blessing, for unless their locations were meticulously recorded and they were treated with the greatest respect, they often caused unpleasant casualties to friend and foe alike.

On the morning of April 14th, A company 3/1 Gurkha Rifles marched out from Recce Hill in the morning to relieve the Madrassis and arrived just before dusk, having covered eighteen miles of winding track, when the men put in four hours' work on the defences before retiring to rest. The wind had sprung up, and the rustle of leaves in the trees drowned all the other noises of the jungle. Except for the sentries, the tired Gurkhas slept until about half past three the following morning, when they were rudely awakened by a shattering bombardment. Shells from Japanese 75-millimetre guns crashed into the nearby trees and burst on impact in the branches, sending down a shower of red-hot metal on to the trenches below. As these lacked overhead cover, a number of casualties was the result.

After this shelling had been going on for one hour and a half, the enemy mortars joined in, to be followed by no less than six medium machine-guns, which opened fire from various points of the compass, adding to the noise but doing little damage.

There had been no sign of the Japanese infantry until the sudden noise of anti-personnel mines exploding all round the position indicated that they were on the way. They soon made their appearance, yelling, shouting and throwing hand grenades, while their officers could be seen brandishing swords, which gleamed in the dim light thrown by the exploding grenades.

A company was ready for them, and mowed down the first wave and the next and the next as the Japanese tried desperately to force an entry. None got through the wire.

There followed a lull, during which ammunition in the forward posts was replenished, and the enemy sent forward some members of the Indian National Army to call on the Gurkhas to surrender. The replies they received are unprintable!

To judge from the chatter that could be heard coming from the undergrowth, it was clear that the Japanese were making a new

plan, and a few minutes later the platoon which had borne the brunt of the fighting reported that the enemy was trying to blow a way through the perimeter wire with 'Bangalore torpedoes'.¹

The platoon commander, Havildar Minbahadhur Rana by name, seizing a couple of haversacks of grenades and accompanied by a medical orderly, Rifleman Narbahadhur Thapa, jumped out of his trench and rushed towards the enemy. Standing fully exposed, he hurled grenades in quick succession at the enemy trying to position the Bangalore torpedo. By the light of the explosions he could see more Japanese forming up in the jungle ready to dash through the gap when it was made, so he shouted orders to his light-automatic gunners, and a murderous stream of bullets was poured into the waiting enemy.

Minbahadhur Rana threw his final grenade and then, as he turned to go back, he was shot dead by a sniper. Narbahadhur killed the sniper before gallantly carrying his dead havildar back to the trench through a hail of fire. For this he was awarded an Indian Distinguished Service Medal, but died of wounds a few weeks later. When the battle was over and a survey was made more than one hundred enemy lay dead in front of Minbahadhur's platoon position. These included thirteen officers, of whom one was a major, possibly a battalion commander.

During another lull the only reinforcements — five of company headquarters and some stretcher-bearers — were sent up to help repel the next attack, which came in just as day was breaking. It was beaten back and by seven o'clock the Japanese, realising that they had failed, withdrew into the jungle, having killed ten and wounded seventeen of the Gurkhas.

As often happened on such occasions, wireless communications had failed and three hours elapsed before the persevering Madrassi signallers, working with two unexploded shells at their elbows, managed to get through a call for help.

By night-fall, after some brushes with the enemy, the rest of the battalion arrived, much to the relief of the cheerful but exhausted garrison. As they approached the position, the anti-personnel mines which had been so effective against the enemy now took their toll of the relieving companies. But the crisis was over.

¹ A Bangalore torpedo was a hollow iron pipe filled with explosive. It was pushed through the wire and then detonated. The explosion blew a passage in the obstacle.

Beyond a few patrol clashes, this was the end of the Sita battle for the time being. The enemy had lost very heavily; besides the bodies in front of Minbahadur's platoon, a further eighty could be seen in the jungle among the anti-personnel mines. As it was most unsafe to walk in among the mines to retrieve the bodies, they had to be left to decompose — to the great discomfort of succeeding garrisons for some time to come. Documents captured later revealed that Japanese casualties totalled some five hundred, of which three hundred had been killed. In comparison, the Gurkhas had come off lightly with sixteen killed and thirty wounded. It had been a resounding victory; but Yamamoto was not deterred from continuing to launch many more desperate attacks in his attempt to capture Shenam. And for the next month 'Crete' and 'Scraggy' were to be the focus of attention and the scene of bitter fighting.

Although the enemy concentrated his main effort on the Shenam bastion itself, Yamamoto did send the 'Gandhi' or 2 Infantry Regiment of the 1st Indian National Army Division to capture Palel from the south, the only time that the I.N.A. was used in an independent role. The results, from the Japanese point of view, were extremely disappointing, as a whole battalion was utterly routed during an ambush laid by twenty-five men of 4/10 Gurkha Rifles about six miles south of Palel. Among the few prisoners taken was an Indian officer who gave the information that the rest were retiring as quickly as they could in the direction from which they had come. Evidence of this was the great amount of equipment and clothing which littered the track and the dumps of arms and ammunition that lay about in scattered disorder.

At Shenam the fortunes of battle swayed first one way and then the other. Hills were captured and recaptured. The numbers of killed and wounded on both sides increased with alarming speed as Yamamoto hurled his battalions at the determined defence of the British and Gurkha soldiers. Hilltops which a few weeks before had been covered with vegetation were now bare from the shelling and bombing; all around lay the destruction of war.

A week after their successful capture of Nippon Hill the Devons were again in the forefront, having taken over the positions on 'Crete', 'Cyprus' and 'Scraggy' from 9/12 Frontier Force Regiment. Several hand-to-hand engagements ensued, during

which the Japanese gained 'Cyprus' and 'Crete East', but only after heavy losses.

It was during one of these actions that a wounded Japanese officer was seen lying just outside the wire. Sergeant Leech and Corporal Venn went out to bring in this valuable prize, but as Leech tried to raise him up, the Japanese seized the sergeant's hand between his teeth. Despite repeated blows on the head he refused to let go, and only by despatching him with his own sword was Leech able to release his hand. However, the sortie was not in vain, since documents taken from this officer and from two other dead men near by proved of great value.

On April 23rd came the turn of 3/1 Gurkha Rifles to relieve the tired Devons. Having captured 'Cyprus' and 'Crete East', the next hill on the Japanese list was 'Crete West', on which they turned all their artillery. After two days of intensive shelling the infantry surged forward and captured part of the hill and four of the bunker positions.

In this desperate situation, Jemadar Dharmasing Thapa was ordered to counter-attack with his platoon. Charging forward, the Gurkhas succeeded in regaining two of the bunkers before being temporarily halted by the enemy fire. Ordering his men to draw their kukris, Dharmasing Thapa led them forward again to capture the two final positions. As the Gurkhas appeared on the crest, with bloodstained kukris, the Japanese turned and fled. One, carrying an automatic gun, was not quick enough, and a Gurkha caught him up; a slash with his kukri and the exultant Gurkha, bearing the gun, returned to his comrades. After seeing this incident, many other Japanese soldiers dropped what they were carrying so as not to impede their headlong flight.

A week in the forward posts was quite long enough for any troops. The strain imposed by lack of sleep, continual shelling and constant attacks was very heavy. So it was on May 1st that 3/1 Gurkha Rifles handed over to the Devons once more and went back to a reserve position. During that week the enemy had made no further gains, although at times they had all but succeeded in capturing 'Crete West'.

Immediately following their arrival, the Devons had a comparatively quiet time, until May 7th when the Japanese made another all-out effort to capture 'Crete West'. They were driven back, but the following morning they did force their way on to

'Lynch Pimple', held by about thirty men, thereby isolating the company which garrisoned 'Crete West'. Only six survivors escaped from the 'Pimple', and although the R.A.F. plastered it with their bombs and A company put in a counter-attack lasting over two hours, the enemy held on.

For D Company on 'Crete' the situation was very serious. With casualties mounting, with ammunition running short, the Devons beat off a succession of attacks, so that when at dawn on May 9th the battalion was relieved by the Gurkhas, it still held out. In vain did 3/1 Gurkha Rifles try to retake 'Lynch Pimple' to help out their British comrades. The last assault, although a failure, temporarily distracted Japanese attention from 'Crete West' and, taking advantage of this, the men of D company slipped out, carrying their wounded with them. They rejoined the battalion, which had suffered no less than two hundred casualties during the past few days fighting. 'Scraggy' was now 80 Brigade's most easterly position.

The next two days proved to be among the most critical in the struggle for the Shenam Saddle.

On the morning of May 10th the Gurkhas were distributed between 'Scraggy' and 'Reserve Hill', and the commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel C. M. H. Wingfield, had his command post right forward with B company on 'Scraggy'. Maurice Wingfield was a great inspiration to his Gurkhas, his tall, wiry figure giving them confidence as he walked among them in the most grave moments of the battle. '*Beau chevalier, sans peur et sans reproche*' is an apt summing-up of him by one of his senior brother officers.

Throughout that day and indeed until midnight all was quiet; both sides had had enough for the time being and were licking their wounds. When darkness fell, all was quiet. Even on 'Lynch Pimple', only two hundred and fifty yards away, the sentries could neither hear nor detect any movement on the part of the enemy.

Then at midnight down came the shells on 'Scraggy', followed thirty minutes later by the first Japanese attack. Wave after wave of men surged forward, only to be beaten back until at last, after climbing over the piles of dead that hung on the wire, the enemy overwhelmed the forward Gurkha trenches, reaching a point no more than twenty yards from the command post.

Remaining outwardly calm and cheerful, Wingfield was here, there and everywhere encouraging his men. Now he would join a

threatened post, manning a rifle and hurling grenades. Now he would be giving out orders, only to be interrupted while he and his British officers rushed out to reinforce a diminished platoon. Meanwhile, other officers, including the doctor, were organising carrying parties to bring up ammunition.

Shortly before four thirty the situation was so desperate that Wingfield decided that there remained only one thing more he could do, and that was to call for artillery fire on to his own positions. Two minutes later down it came, miraculously doing little damage to the Gurkhas in their slit trenches, although Wingfield and three other officers were slightly wounded.

For the moment this bold move averted the crisis. Probably the most anxious of all were the gunners, who felt greatly relieved to receive a message of reassurance and thanks from the Gurkhas.

Shortly before daylight, reinforcements arrived in the shape of a company of the Borders, full of confidence and shouting greetings to the men of 3/1 Gurkha. They came in the nick of time and took over the forward positions. By eight thirty the whole of the British battalion had arrived, and Wingfield and his men were able to pull out, sadly reduced in strength but with the satisfaction of learning later that the Japanese had lost in killed alone eight hundred men, including a colonel and a major.

Nearly six weeks had passed since Yamamoto's infantry had first appeared on 'Nippon Hill'. Since then there had been no respite for the men of 20 Division. Heavy rainstorms were now heralding the monsoon, which was due to start within the next few days. Conditions were bad enough as it was, but once torrential rains and heavy mists became the order of the day, they would be indescribably worse.

Scoones, who had already decided that Gracey's division badly needed a change of air, ordered 23 Division to begin taking over at Shenam on May 13th. So it was with a feeling of relief, tempered with satisfaction at having foiled every effort of the enemy to break through to Palel, that the British, Indian and Gurkha soldiers handed over their scarred and battle-torn heights and moved over to the Ukhrul road to take on another division, the 15th Japanese. Some enjoyed a few days of quiet from the noise of bursting shells and the rattle of machine-guns; others went straight into action again, with little opportunity to reorganise after all the heavy fighting in which they had taken part.



SHENAM — the Tanyu road passing below 'Malta' and 'Scraggy'



The Tiddim road — Monsoon conditions near Milestone 60.



SHENAM — 'Nippon' Hill



CHAPTER XIX

BISHENPUR AND THE SILCHAR TRACK

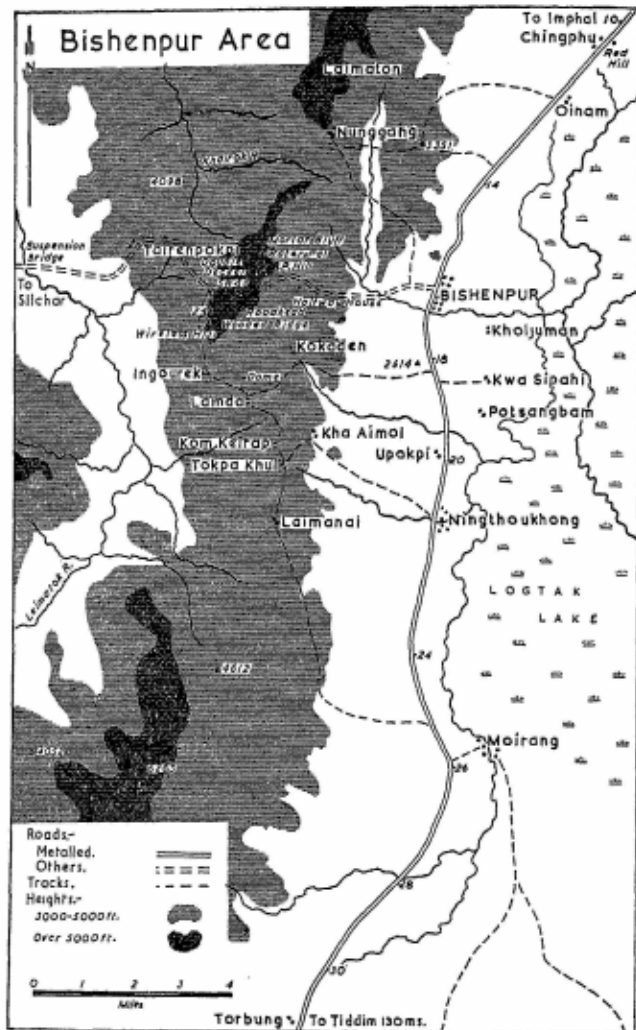
'Sir, this stretch of track is not strictly brigadierable.'

Lieutenant-Colonel Wilfred Oldham

AFTER the withdrawal of 20 Division from the Kabaw Valley, Mackenzie's 32 Brigade was placed under General Cowan's orders to relieve 49 Brigade at Milestone 32 on the Tiddim road, both the brigades of 17 Division being fully occupied north of Imphal. When, on April 12th, Mackenzie drove south over the flat plain, past villages set in dense bamboo clumps, past Tuliha airstrip, through Bishenpur (the town of Vishnu, one of the principal Hindu deities), and between marshy ground, on the one hand, and foothills, on the other, he found 49 Brigade very isolated and under intermittent shelling. The positions, tactically disadvantageous, were not those from which much could be done to impede the obvious Japanese moves northwards along the range of hills to the west of the road. So, after consultation with Cowan and Scoones, it was agreed that Mackenzie's battalions should occupy Bishenpur astride the road and 49 Brigade should go into reserve.

Repulsed on the Tiddim road, the Japanese were in fact heading for the Bishenpur-Silchar track,¹ hoping to break into the plain from the west, so that when a company of 3/8 Gurkha Rifles went up into the hills to occupy the hamlet of Laimanai and then push southwards it soon reported its inability to progress in the face of strong Japanese opposition. This confirmed Mackenzie's belief that the enemy was, for the time being, bent on a hilltop advance and not one via main road and paddy fields. On the night of April 15th/16th three Japanese soldiers eluded the platoon guarding the three-hundred-foot wire suspension bridge over the deep Leimatok gorge on the Silchar track by Milestone 31, and placed explosive charges. One Japanese jumped to his death in the gorge,

¹ Between July and September 1942 Lieutenant-Colonel G. P. Chapman and about a hundred and fifty officers and men of 82 Anti-Tank Regiment had, with the aid of Nagas, made the bridge path into something like a road.



the other two were blown up with the bridge; but their suicidal operation had completely severed the track.

Mackenzie's headquarters were on a steep, wooded hill, and near the top grew a remarkable tree, centuries old, of which the trunk stretched along the ground for some thirty feet before rising into the air. Care was taken not to interfere with trees or remove undergrowth except for clearing fields of fire, and these precautions were amply repaid when Japanese shelling became a regular event. In expectation of this shelling, all but the bare minimum of 32 Brigade's motor and animal transport was sent back to Imphal, whence it was summoned only for special operations.

An outpost position a mile to the south, named Point 2614 on the map, was held by one company of 9/14 Punjab and two anti-tank guns. From this scrub-covered bastion one could watch over the villages and hamlets on the flat land between lake and hills, and overlook Japanese movements along and near the road. Mackenzie had all his supporting artillery brought within the perimeter wire of the main brigade base, so as to avoid demands for outside protection of the guns. These — initially eight 25-pounders from 9 Field Regiment, four 3.7-inch howitzers of 23 Indian Mountain Regiment, six 6-pounders from 203 Anti-Tank Battery and three Bofors guns of 165 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery — were commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Roger Lupton, last mentioned at Charing Cross. The gunners inevitably had little elbow room in what was called 'Gunner Box', and were too few in numbers to cope simultaneously with the many tasks on dispersed target areas. Not until the end of April were any artillery reinforcements received, when an advantageous reorganisation of the lay-out became possible.

A great deal of the most intense and costly fighting during the next two months took place along the dozen miles of the Silchar track between Bishenpur in the plain and the suspension bridge formerly spanning the Leimatok. This jeep track of earth and red laterite wound between and around hill features, of which some were covered with scrub or jungle, some with soft soil or boulders, while others again had a bare surface. The track, rising some two thousand five hundred feet in four miles, crossed the main ridge nearly five thousand feet up between Point 5846, a dominating hilltop covered by dense bamboo jungle, on the north side, and, to the south, Wireless Hill named after two old wireless

masts found there. The belt of jungle stretching north-east from Point 5846 was so dense that a company of men took two days of very strenuous work to cut a path four hundred yards long and three feet wide.

At noon on April 16th 3/8 Gurkha Rifles, commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Victor Whitehead, attacked and captured Wireless Hill. This was a distinct gain along the ridge running south from the Silchar track, but since no barbed wire was available for proper consolidation of the newly won position, a fierce Japanese counter-attack during the night retook the summit and southern slopes, leaving the troops exposed, when day broke, to enfilade fire from two directions. Whitehead was obliged to withdraw his men, and when another company had attacked in vain, Brigadier Mackenzie ordered a halt until some tanks could climb up to give close support. By the evening of April 18th one troop of Lees had, with the aid of 92 Indian Field Company, reached the battalion's base on Wooded Ridge just to the north.

Colonel Whitehead, a tall, athletic man with keen grey-blue eyes and thinning sandy hair, had a commanding personality which implied authority and determination. His men loved him, and it is sad to record that he was killed nearly a year later, soon after the crossing of the Irrawaddy.

At half past seven the enemy attacked the Gurkhas. When, after fierce hand-to-hand fighting, Whitehead sent in a counter-attack for which the tanks switched on their headlights and fired their Browning automatics to good effect, the Japanese were driven back; one officer who jumped into a slit trench was thrown out bodily by a British private and then shot by Whitehead, as he tried to run away. But next day the tanks tried repeatedly to reach the summit of Wireless Hill, only to be baulked within a mere twenty feet. If the infantry were to have a reasonable chance of holding the hill after recapture it was essential for the armour to get over on to the southern slopes, and when this proved impossible the Gurkha assault was cancelled.

A stalemate ensued, with Gurkhas and Japanese facing each other two hundred yards apart on either side of a nullah which neither could cross on account of his opponent's fire. A month was to pass before Wireless Hill fell into our grasp again.

Down on the plain first contact was made when a patrol of 9/14 Punjab captured a Japanese private near Upokpi. This led to a

company, with Lee tanks in support, advancing down the Tiddim road on April 20th to search for the enemy, but not to go farther than Milestone 24. In fact, the column encountered the Japanese dug in astride the road four miles farther north in Ningthoukhong, which village, averaging a mile in depth and width, became vital to the enemy alike as an advanced base and as a covered area facilitating dispersal under cover from air attack.

During the next three months Ningthoukhong was the scene of many a battle, and, along with Shenam, it probably received more shelling than any other area in Burma or Assam. Like its neighbours, Ningthoukhong's thatched wooden houses stood between trees and wide earth bunds which, with thick bamboo binding the soil, formed perfect natural breastworks large enough for foxholes to be dug inside them. Narrow lanes led between clumps of banana and fences of bamboo to a well. Visibility within such villages was very restricted, and attack was more difficult than defence. The *tuel* (stream) which flowed down from the hills and under the road proved a severe obstacle to our tanks, for the places at which it could be crossed were few, and then only with aid from the sappers. Apart from two adjacent hamlets, the country round was open paddy verging upon marsh and bog and the Logtak Lake farther to the east. These paddy fields were intersected by bunds along which the pad of many bare feet had stamped out paths from one village or vantage point to another.

It was not known how strong the Japanese were in the village, though they were thought to have only an outpost; and at this early stage an impression was current that the British tanks had only to drive down the road or over the then dry paddy fields for the enemy to be thrown back in disorder. True it is that Japanese tanks were expected in the plain, but they were known to be inferior in armour and armament, and the only anti-tank gun so far encountered could not pierce the Lees. But the dusty rice fields, though parched, were poor country for tanks, being crossed by numerous dry nullahs and earth bunds, many of which were difficult to negotiate and caused a tank to present an easy target to accurate Japanese artillery fire. On the bunds, usually two feet or so in height, grew cacti and aloes, of which the flamboyant spikes formed a distinct obstacle to foot soldiers. East of the road the country was far too swampy except in rare places.

The first reconnaissance in force was made by two companies of

9/14 Punjab and eight tanks. The commander of this battalion was Lieutenant-Colonel John Booth, a most likable Irishman with a ready sense of humour. This dark-haired man with a black moustache was of medium height and build, giving the impression of solidity. Never ruffled, seemingly phlegmatic, he exuded confidence and ability; and his Punjabis would follow him anywhere.

At half past eight on April 22nd twelve Vengeance dive-bombers pounded the place, but they arrived earlier than expected, and the infantry, being still too far back to be able to attack in the wake of the bombs, sustained many casualties in the open paddy from medium machine-guns. The tanks were unable to knock out these guns, and one troop became bogged in marshy ground. In short, the whole operation failed. Next, the tanks put down an effective smoke screen, behind which Colonel Booth got away his men, arms and ammunition. Much more difficult was the evacuation of casualties, but here the battalion carriers, led by Major R. G. E. Apps, who in this action gained the first of two Military Crosses, turned themselves into ambulances and, dashing through the smoke, picked up wounded men. One tank had to be abandoned, one carrier was knocked out, the tank squadron lost three men, while the 9/14 Punjab had sixteen killed and sixty-seven wounded.

Results were small and losses great, but certain lessons had been painfully learnt for this type of village and paddy-field fighting, of which there was to be much in the weeks ahead. One major difficulty was co-operation between tanks and infantry; whereas it was to the latter's advantage to close on their objective under cover of darkness and the early morning mist, the tanks could move efficiently only in daylight, and could not therefore be up with the infantry even at dawn. This was awkward enough, but now a second problem faced the tank commanders. During the first battle of Ningthoukhong one tank had its turret blown off by what proved to be a 47-millimetre anti-tank gun: the first sign that the Japanese had on this front so formidable and penetrating a gun. Thus the armour had to be careful, and it became first priority for infantry and tanks to put out of action any anti-tank guns present rather than for tanks to shoot down the medium machine-gunners, who proved so daunting and deadly to infantry in the open.

For the second attack a full battalion was used, this time 1/4 Gurkha Rifles, commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Wilfred

Oldham, who belonged to 17 Division and had just reached the Bishenpur front.

Oldham was a quiet, pleasant man, tall, handsome and debonair. He had a well-trained and wide-ranging mind. Fear had no place in his composition, nor prudence where his own safety was concerned. Always conspicuous by reason of his great height, especially among Gurkhas, he would expose himself freely among the most forward troops, or sit about *on*, not in, cover, as though fire and missiles were no more than a shower of rain. With his fine eye for country and a brilliant gift for quick notebook sketches of positions, he was a great one for the personal, close-up reconnaissance, and he sometimes took unwarranted risks by moving about with an escort of only two or three men.

This first-class young commanding officer who exacted, and received, the highest standards, became a legend among his devoted Gurkhas. Gallant, gay and highly professional, Wilfred Oldham would undoubtedly have risen high in the Army had he not, after sustaining two wounds, been killed when out on patrol much ahead of his battalion. Of him might have been said, as Wellington wrote of one of his best officers: 'In him His Majesty has lost an officer of great merit and tried gallantry, who had already acquired the respect and regard of the whole profession, and of whom it might have been expected that, if he had lived, he would have rendered the most important services to his country.'

The plan now was to capture first the northern end of Ningthoukhong and then clear the whole village step by step. One troop of tanks — on this occasion Major Edward Pettit's squadron from 3 Carabiniers — roared over the paddy with the leading company of 1/4 Gurkha, only to be halted by a Japanese 47-millimetre anti-tank gun and a captured British 2-pounder. When the Gurkhas tried to get to close quarters with these they were pinned down by bullets from medium machine-guns cleverly sited to cover the anti-tank positions, and when a second troop of tanks tried to cross the *tuel* they failed, despite a most gallant reconnaissance by their commanders on foot and under fire. By now two Lees had been knocked out and two more damaged, and Pettit told Oldham that to continue the action in these conditions would be to lose his remaining tanks.

It was plain that infantry could not clear the village without continuous and close tank support. Yet Brigadier Mackenzie had to

reckon that so long as the Kohima road remained blocked, no more tanks were available, since they could not be flown in to Imphal, and the hard-pressed 254 Tank Brigade had to find tanks for other fronts than Bishenpur. So once again withdrawal was ordered; once again the Japanese made no attempt to follow, and merely shelled to no good effect. Altogether 32 Brigade's first engagements in the villages of the plain had been discouraging and expensive.

To build up their strength some miles north of the Silchar track in readiness for an attempt to advance against Imphal from the south-west and west, the Japanese needed to use what might aptly be termed the 'jungle corridor' between Kokaden and Nunggang, a hamlet four miles north of Bishenpur, but pressure on the main ridge and effective patrolling compelled them to use the longer and more westerly route through Tairenpokpi.

The Japanese had two simultaneous aims: to prevent the use of the Silchar track by their opponents and to secure their own corridor. It was for them essential to occupy hills within sniping distance of the track and then to use snipers and ambush groups to seize every opportunity to hold ground from which they could derive advantage, inflict loss and cause disruption. Similar tactics were required by the British to combat such designs. So in the early stages of the battle each side raced to capture key positions in country where one company only could be deployed at a time and seldom more than one or two tanks be used in support. Operations were further hampered by the difficulty of knowing just where individual platoons and sections had got to in the jungle and what was happening to them — wireless communication was made fickle by the close hill country and the high degree of 'atmospherics', a factor which was to limit the chances of co-ordinating action with a view to closing in upon the Japanese from several directions at once. Troops approaching from different angles had to be very careful not to shoot one another. As for the artillery support by 25-pounders and 3.7-inch howitzers collected near Bishenpur, in most cases the guns could be brought to bear on the forward slopes and even on the summits, but the 25-pounders could not hit the reverse slopes, where the enemy took refuge when our shells were falling. Only medium guns stood a reasonable chance of destroying the average Japanese bunker by a direct hit on its top, and to begin with no such guns were available. Thus it

was often left to the tank guns to blast at close range into ground-level bunkers.

For the most part the Japanese used their guns singly, and they were experts at siting and camouflage. For instance, they would site a gun just over the brow on the reverse slope and then dig a tunnel through the crest of the hill for the muzzle. Even when spotted by smoke or flash, the Japanese guns were extremely hard to silence because of the difficulty of hitting the crest of the hill. Shells either landed below the crest or whistled over the top.

At one stage of this fighting 25-pounder ammunition was so short that Forward Observation Officers had to obtain permission from their Commander Royal Artillery to fire in excess of six rounds a day.

It might well be asked why the enemy tried to block the Silchar track, since by doing so he tied up troops which could more effectively have been used nearer to Imphal, his ultimate target. Mackenzie has given his opinion that the enemy hoped to force his withdrawal from the ridge by his inability to supply the two battalions concerned — neither side as yet appreciated just what supply dropping from the air could achieve. Had such a withdrawal occurred, the positions about Bishenpur would have become untenable, and this was the sole place capable of prolonged defence on the southern approach to Imphal. Moreover, until they had captured Bishenpur, and thereby the main road, which alone could take the tanks, heavy guns and lorries laden with supplies, the Japanese would not be able to maintain an all-out effort against Imphal via the western hills.

On the Japanese side April 17th saw Colonel Murata, the chief of staff of 33 Division, telephoning to Colonel 'Saku', commanding 214 Regiment, to ask why he had not yet reached the Silchar track, when this failure was holding up 215 Regiment now poised to attack Bishenpur. 'Saku' explained that he was faced with very considerable Allied opposition, the strength of which he could not yet assess with accuracy, and that their positions stretched across his path 'like a steel wall'. This was at a time when Tokyo Radio was claiming that 'the enemy is trying to hold the last defensive line before Imphal and is now withering under our onslaught'. The broadcasts made the preposterous statements that the 14th Army had already lost thirty thousand killed and that

Mountbatten was throwing five hundred planes a day into the battle for the Imphal plain.

Murata, a short, fat man who was said to be fond of drink and women — the girls of the geisha establishment in Rangoon had bestowed upon him the endearing nickname of 'Ketcham' — was furious. Dynamic and full of self-confidence, he found 'Saku's' excuses intolerable. He therefore ordered 'Saku' to follow one of his battalions which had already reached the village of Nunggang, and to by-pass the Allied forces along the Silchar track.

To this 'Saku' replied that he thought it imperative to crush the enemy forces first, otherwise they would present a constant threat. He estimated that the main strength of 33 Division would be needed to destroy the British in their mountain stronghold, particularly as the division was in so depleted a state. He suggested that General Yanagida, commanding the division, had no conception of the strength of the Allied positions, nor of the speed with which the enemy could move up supplies and reinforcements. Whether or not this claim was true, it did seem as if the fanatical Murata and not the wiser and more cautious divisional commander was in control. Indeed, officers and men alike were well aware of a serious disagreement between the two men. Morale was particularly low in 214 Regiment, where the troops saw that the situation on the Imphal front was already turning against them in that the enemy airlift of reinforcements — 5 Indian Division — had forestalled the Japanese by a few decisive days. Numbers were inadequate and falling every day. Before the operation began, 214 Regiment had been at full strength, with three battalions totalling 4,300 men. Of these, 3,700 had set out for Imphal, but were by now reduced to one thousand. Only the six hundred men of Number 3 Battalion remained in the rear, without incurring losses.

The Commander of 33 Division had still more to contend with and to dispirit him when, on April 22nd, General Mutaguchi suddenly appeared at his Headquarters. With hands gripping the hilt of his sword and his drooping moustaches bristling, he glared at Yanagida and demanded to know what his troops were doing. The 33rd had been the last division to reach the Manipur plain, he said, and though its task was to cut the Silchar track, it had not even reached that track. Whereas 15 and 31 Divisions were engaged in bitter fighting, the 33rd was lagging behind. Did the General not realise his responsibility? An agitated and appre-

hensive Yanagida tried to plead lack of men, but was curtly informed that other formations had lost far more.

Then Mutaguchi turned contemptuously away and addressed the rest of his remarks to Colonel Murata, announcing that for the time being he was going to stay and take personal command of operations in this area. In fact, Mutaguchi had been so confident of the success of the thrusts which he had planned and forced through that he had already ordered that a geisha establishment of twenty girls be brought from Maymyo over the Chindwin to Kalewa, ready to move into Imphal the moment the town was captured.

Murata tried to reassure General Mutaguchi that all would yet be well if the Japanese pushed up the main road from the south and at the same time attacked from the hills near Bishenpur. Mutaguchi blamed 214 Regiment for the delay, so its commander was summoned and reproached by the Chief of Staff for his failure to capture the enemy's hill positions. Did he lack the will to do the job? The commander protested that he had insufficient men. If only his first battalion were recalled, then he could succeed. Murata interrupted to say that there was no time for this, and that the hill must be taken with the present forces, which in fact numbered a mere eighty men in one company and twenty in another. The divisional artillery would give covering fire.

Yanagida was not present at this fateful conference, which was attended by senior staff officers of 15th Army and 33 Division. Instead he sat brooding in his tent. Everything was working out just as he had foreseen. The division, in his opinion, had been much too weakened by the earlier fighting round Tongzang on the Tiddim road to be ready for an advance on Imphal against stiff opposition. The attempt ought to be called off, and he determined to see General Mutaguchi and persuade him to postpone the attack. He did try, but with no loyal staff officers to support him he failed, and his recommendations were rejected with scorn. Not only was Yanagida overruled, but Mutaguchi sent a secret signal to Colonel Murata instructing him to disregard Yanagida's orders if necessary, as he was to be replaced immediately after the Battle of Imphal.

Thus it was Mutaguchi and Murata who made plans for the next stage in the Japanese onslaught, while Yanagida, humiliated and not consulted, was in anguish at the prospect of his troops being

misguidedly launched into attacks when they were in his view unfit to take even Bishenpur, still less Imphal.

* * *

The continued lack of Japanese initiative in the plain and the fighting round Wireless Hill focused attention on Point 5846. This hill had been held by four platoons of the 7th Battalion, the 10th Baluch Regiment, but on April 19th Taunton's Northhamptons were sent up to reinforce. Ted Taunton was a sinewy, middle-sized, balding officer who had formerly been lightweight boxing champion of the Army and for whom difficulties existed to be overcome. Thorough in preparation, not afraid to speak his mind, a tiger for work, he did splendidly in the fighting ahead, and was later rewarded with command of a brigade in 20 Division besides the Distinguished Service Order and bar.

He held a conference at half past one in the morning, and when it ended sleepily at three o'clock several officers were saying in despairing tones that they would never have their companies ready in time. But a free round of liquor, spliced with reminiscences of other moves at short notice, did much to invigorate their spirits. Taunton went ahead with his escort and was not impressed with what he saw — dense, very dense bamboo jungle; or heard — the Baluchis said cheerfully that the Japanese had already been twice on Point 5846, but had moved away for the moment.

No sooner had his battalion arrived than Taunton set the men to dig in and erect at least a cattle fence round the perimeter. He also sent out representatives from each company to learn their way about the nearby jungle, and it was well they did, for so thick was the jungle that in one area British and Japanese troops found themselves cutting grass within ten yards of each other without being aware of this until fields of fire were gradually cleared to reveal an enemy immediately in front.

It should be stated here that the Japanese too got lost in the bamboo jungle or the rye-grass, which in places rose to fourteen feet. One Northamptonshire platoon, on its way to picquet and hold open the mule route for supplies and water, bumped into about thirty Japanese soldiers, apparently lost. The warrant officer in command was shot, whereupon the remainder ran for their lives, and this time had cause to bless the long grass, into which they vanished all too quickly for pursuit or accurate shoot-

ing. On another day one of Taunton's companies set off to try to capture an enemy gun which had become a nuisance and danger. So lost did the men become in the bamboo that not till a salvo from mortars had been put down near the gun could they take a compass bearing on the bursts and so make contact.

Next day, April 20th, the Northhamptons went on digging, and they brought up as much reserve water and food as they could. By evening they were reasonably well dug in and wired, just in time to withstand attacks throughout the night, the next night and for several days thereafter. From all directions came grenades and rifle bullets. Once only did the Japanese get through the wire, and then they were either shot or chased off with grenades. When, on the second night, they prepared to rush the same part of the barbed wire defence, their attack was broken up by grenades even while it was forming. The defenders were helped by a bright moon to anticipate the enemy, to carry back casualties and to move ammunition from one hard-pressed point to another.

The Japanese, thwarted in their efforts to gain the hill, took up positions in thick jungle below Point 5846 and defied all attempts to evict them — not least because Taunton, with orders to hold out to the last man and having had over a hundred casualties, was compelled to use carefully his depleted companies. They dug fox-holes and bunkers in the ridge running parallel to, and some four hundred yards above, the Silchar track. Having also worked his way closer to the track from the south side, digging in as he went, the enemy brought up guns and, at point-blank range, cut the road between the Northhamptons and Bishenpur and began to shell or machine-gun everything moving on or near the track. Roadhead, the summit of the pass, was secure because it was protected on the south by our troops holding Wireless Hill and, on the north side, by the battalion on Point 5846. At this stage the procedure for supply was that every third or fourth day a supply column — jeeps for 3/8 Gurkha, mules for 1 Northampton — would be sent up from Bishenpur after the garrison there had opened and picqueted the track up to Milestone 22 and the Northhamptons had done the same for the jungle track down from Point 5846 to the water point. Once the convoy had delivered the goods and returned, the picquets withdrew to their respective bases.

In the last week of April the enemy were found to have thinned out from around Point 5846 and to be sniping at the vital water

point, which was guarded by first one and then two platoons of 1/4 Gurkha Rifles. Early on April 25th patrols encountered some forty Japanese firmly established by Milestone 22 on the track, near what was termed Halfway House. Although, on this and the following day, a daily convoy was able to get through to Roadhead and back again to Bishenpur despite sniping, by the 27th sections of the track were so commanded by fire that until the enemy could be evicted, no convoy could pass. Although the Northhamptons were still able from their own resources to picquet the route to their water point and obtain water, they and the Gurkhas were soon desperately short of supplies and ammunition, and they had casualties to evacuate to hospital.

And so, whereas Oldham's 1/4 Gurkha tried to drive the Japanese off the track, the Northhamptons sent a company down from Point 5846 to clear the enemy from around a commanding knob named Water Picquet by the water point, which was by now under direct observation of Japanese guns near Kokaden. The company reached the enemy positions, only to have its final attack halted by intense artillery fire and a prompt counter-attack. During the ensuing withdrawal a troop of tanks from 3 Carabiniers supported the British soldiers while they were collecting their wounded and reorganising, but one tank became stuck and the second fell into a nullah. At once the crew climbed out, dismounted the Browning gun, wrapped belts of ammunition round their necks and attacked on foot with the infantry as they cleared several Japanese posts.

Two American Field Service drivers, Calvin B. Dunwoody and R. Field, attached to the advanced dressing station drove along to collect a dozen casualties, but the track being covered by a Japanese bunker, the medical officers were reluctant to let the two Americans go beyond the water point. However, the arrival of a Northampton asking to borrow one of the Field Service ambulances prompted Dunwoody and Field to volunteer to make the run. While one man drove the ambulance, the other fired a rifle at the bunker in the hope of spoiling the enemy's aim. Dunwoody is said to have twitted his companion with the menacing question: 'What if a half-shaft breaks now?' — a disquietingly common occurrence with these particular vehicles. Exhilarated in the face of danger, he also sang 'Coming in on a wing and a prayer' as he fired. Field's ambulance was shot up on the first run and put out of

action; during the next journey the infantry helped by attacking the dominant bunker in order to distract attention. All the wounded men were recovered, and Dunwoody was awarded the British Empire Medal for his gallant behaviour.¹

The story is also told of a liaison officer sent from brigade headquarters to report on how one of the attacks was going. As he walked up the track he saw the very light 'success signal' go up, and this meant that he would not have to go any farther.

About to turn and wend his way back, he saw a figure, obviously wounded, limping towards him. He stopped, and as the figure approached he saw that the man was a sergeant of the Northhamptons.

'Come on, I'll give you a hand down,' he said to the sergeant. And together they started off towards the advanced dressing station. Wounded in the buttock, the sergeant had lost a lot of blood, and soon they had to stop and rest.

As they sat there smoking a cigarette, they saw another man coming down the hill with a large white bandage on his arm. On and on he trudged until, when he was opposite them, they saw that he too was a Northampton.

'Been wounded, chum?' said the sergeant.

The private soldier stopped, looked stonily at the sergeant for a few seconds and then said acidly: 'Of course I have. What do you take me for? A bloody umpire?' (During training exercises umpires wore white arm-bands to distinguish them from the troops taking part in the exercise.)

Meantime 1/4 Gurkha, having failed at their first attempt to dislodge the enemy from Halfway House, moved up the track on April 28th with Lieutenant J. A. R. Beaumont's troop of tanks to force the Japanese from their positions near a nameless hamlet at Milestone 21. It was then decided to get the tanks off the track on to a spur already held by the Gurkhas. At one o'clock this had been achieved after tremendous efforts by the engineers of 92 Indian Field Company, but a sudden cloud-burst veiled the hills in mist, and alike the poor visibility and the state of the ground rendered impracticable the use of tanks.

The shrewd Oldham, guessing that the Japanese might be sheltering from the rain in their dugouts, sent in two platoons who quickly captured half the hamlet. They even succeeded in wiring themselves in within fifty yards of the enemy, and that night

¹ *History of the American Field Service*, p. 504.

repulsed a fierce counter-attack which cost the Japanese sixteen dead and one prisoner. Throughout the same night the engineers, though harassed by shelling and mortars, worked to make the approaches fit for tanks, to such good effect that when, at half past six next morning, Oldham's Gurkhas advanced to attack, the tanks, despite the loss of a track, did splendid work in support, blew in and crushed bunkers, shot up enemy tree-snipers and cleared the hamlet. An extremely steep gully barred further progress.

One tank, driven by Corporal Brennan, got down the dip and then could move neither forwards nor backwards. Not till later did the corporal succeed in regaining the ridge by skilful manoeuvring. Afterwards, when soldiers tried to climb this far slope, they had to do so on hands and knees. Another tank, Sergeant Howell's, which helped the Gurkhas deal with remaining Japanese resistance, had to go backwards along a ridge, because it could not turn, and was then winched down to the track. Howell destroyed one bunker, and was then stopped by a ditch dug by the enemy as an anti-tank obstacle across the road. The escorting Gurkhas promptly filled in the ditch with logs.

Next day, April 30th, the Gurkhas and tanks again attacked together, this time capturing B. P. Hill, named after Major Brodrick Pittard, whose company did so well during these operations. At last contact was made with the platoons which for the past two days and nights had defied every Japanese effort to capture Water Picquet. So good had the tank support of his Gurkhas been during three days' fighting that Oldham presented to A Squadron one of two captured officers' swords as a tribute and memento.

On one of the three days Brigadier 'Cully' Scoones, commanding 254 Tank Brigade, had gone forward to watch his tanks in action. Cautiously he wriggled on his stomach right to the front line during the battle. He came upon some Gurkhas, who didn't see the brigadier lying prone. One of them suddenly spotted a dove perched in a nearby tree. Very gingerly he put his hand back, felt in his haversack, produced a catapult and took a shot at this bird. The little Gurkha missed it, and turning round he saw to his horror the 'brigadier sahib', red tabs and all. With a sheepish grin he replaced his catapult in the haversack, reloaded his rifle and got on with the battle.

On the same day Scoones walked up part of the Silchar track with Colonel Oldham to reconnoitre a route for the tanks. Sud-

denly Oldham said: 'I don't think we'd better go any farther up here.' Scoones thought otherwise and replied: 'No, it looks all right. We'll go a bit farther.' Oldham responded in very doubtful tones: 'Well, sir, this stretch of track is really not brigadierable.'

* * *

The Silchar track being now open as far as Roadhead, the much delayed convoy passed along with four days' supplies. The relief of the water point was no less important, though the cloud-burst which had thwarted the tanks had enabled the troops to collect some rain-water. The returning convoy took back towards Imphal fifty wounded men who had been waiting in the aid post at Roadhead. On no day thereafter did the convoy fail to get through, though not without casualties to vehicles and men caused by gunfire and, still more, by mines laid at night by Japanese patrols.

The enemy had by no means finished his efforts to block the track, and for many a day the Northhamptons and 1/4 Gurkha Rifles were engaged in a ding-dong struggle for hill features near the track. Day after day came attack, counter-attack, repulse of attack. One Gurkha garrison after another had to defend Water Picquet from night assaults, every one of which ended in failure and heavy loss — a total of one hundred and fifty killed is a cautious estimate of the enemy's losses in attacks on the picquet alone.

One of the notable personalities of this prolonged contest was Sergeant Kelly of the Northhamptons. He came from near Peterborough, and as a sniper he was a truly natural shot, with a countryman's eye for country. He was permitted a roving commission, being accountable to Colonel Taunton only for his actions; and he would attach himself to any patrol or picquet or minor operation which offered a chance of sniping.

He would sit patiently awaiting a worthwhile target. One day he had been watching a Japanese position for several hours on end through a telescope when he suddenly picked up his rifle and fired. A new arrival in the company rashly said to Kelly: 'Did you hit him, Sergeant?'

'What the bloody hell do you think I've been looking at the so-and-so's all this time for? Do you think I'm going to have a bloody flag?'¹

¹ When marking on the shooting range and the firer misses the target, this fact is signalled by flag from the butts.

That he seldom missed is testified by the twenty-three notches on the rifle butt. On another occasion Kelly, when waiting behind a boulder with his precious rifle resting on the top, ready for a Japanese machine-gun post, had the weapon blown to pieces by a discharger grenade. Undeterred, he went on sniping with another rifle until some three weeks later he was wounded in the leg. The Distinguished Conduct Medal was a fitting reward for this fearless man, who, combining high spirits and bravado with great common sense, was a born leader, exacting discipline and obedience from men while reserving individuality to himself. He later served the Northamptons as Regimental Sergeant-Major.

One of the most unpleasant jobs during this period was fetching water. Taunton's battalion had its water point over a thousand feet below Hill 5846, and every day collection meant fighting to keep open the way down and up. Every journey demanded real courage — in cold blood, not in the heat of battle, and with no chance of hitting back at the enemy. The casualties to men and mules were heavy, but thanks to gallantry and determination they never failed to deliver a load. More than half the mules were killed, but despite this their loads were retrieved under fire and manhandled to their destination.

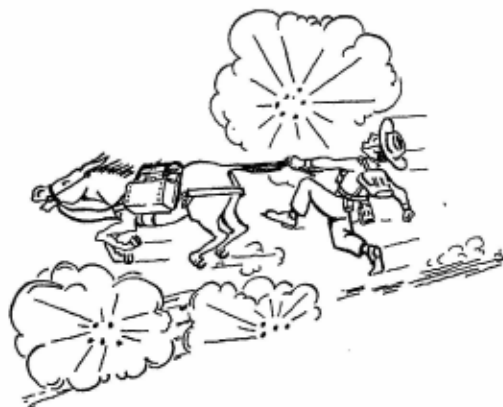
Often the Japanese, in sardonic mood, used to let the mules and their drivers get down unscathed to the water point, and would then snipe at them on the return journey. It was a hateful, demoralising, hazardous task for mule-drivers and escorts alike, but one way was found to ease the work. The soldiers would load the water pakhals on to the mules, give them a sharp cut across the rump, hang on to their tails and be galloped home.

The troops involved in fetching water used to ask: 'Is Kelly out?' And if Sergeant Kelly was sniping on the track, then morale rose very noticeably, such was the troops' faith in him and his shooting.

One of the many who displayed courage at this period was the Northamptons' cook-sergeant named Saunders, a Londoner who had joined the battalion just before the war, and had already been conspicuous as a platoon sergeant in previous battles. It was he, too, who had slaughtered the cattle in the Moreh 'box' back in March. He could often be seen on the Silchar track rounding up cattle under fire so that his battalion should taste fresh meat instead of bully beef; and he accompanied every supply column from Bishenpur to Point 5846.

Like Kelly, he earned a Distinguished Conduct Medal. Ironically enough, Saunders had just been congratulated by Colonel Taunton on this award and had walked back to the cook-house to celebrate with a cup of tea when he was hit suddenly in the chest and arms by Japanese machine-gun bullets. His wounds notwithstanding, Saunders returned from hospital within three months and served the battalion for many another month of campaigning and cooking.

All this time the infantry had fought with cheerful courage in the face of strain and lack of sleep. Oldham's 1/4 Gurkha sustained some two hundred casualties, and no less than eleven British officers were killed or wounded within the space of three weeks. In the fighting, most of it hand-to-hand with bayonet and grenade, the crews of the Lee tanks took great risks and were ready to attempt the seemingly impossible in order to support still better the unprotected men on the hillsides as they slowly pushed the enemy away from a track vital to our positions round Bishenpur.



CHAPTER XX

TANK WARFARE ROUND BISHENPUR

THOUGH busy fighting on the Silchar track, 32 Brigade had not neglected the valley. Patrols from Booth's 9/14 Punjab had been watching Japanese moves from Ningthoukhong, and early in May reported steady infiltration into the intervening hamlet of Potsangbam, inevitably christened 'Pots and Pans' by the British troops. A strong reconnaissance on May 7th having found that the enemy had dug himself in with automatic weapons supported by artillery, it was decided to attack next day. No other troops were available than a company of 9/14 Punjab, and only by anxious juggling could Brigadier Mackenzie free two more of Booth's companies for the assault.

But first a strong patrol based on Khoijuman spotted a Japanese party entering the southern part of that hamlet with artillery. The platoon commander, Jemadar Feroze Khan, returning from a reconnaissance in Potsangbam and being warned of what the enemy had done, crept forward stealthily and saw two of the guns parked in the street and their escort seated near by brewing tea. The platoon charged in with fixed bayonets and put to flight the astonished Japanese, all except one brave man, who leapt to his gun and opened fire at point-blank range. Some of the attackers lay on the ground, but not Lance-Naik Allah Yar Khan. He ran straight at the Japanese soldier and shot him dead. Both enemy guns were then captured,¹ and Feroze Khan, determined to hold this valuable booty, deployed his few men as best he could to withstand the inevitable counter-attack. Already outnumbered by four to one, he now saw a new group of some fifty Japanese entering the village from the direction of the lake. Very soon the enemy launched first one and then a second attack; both were repulsed, but Booth's men were left in a serious situation. A Pathan platoon, commanded by Jemadar Mohammed Zaman, heard the firing from its post in the

¹ This was the first occasion on which a Japanese gun was taken in North Burma. A complete 47-millimetre anti-tank gun with ammunition was of particular technical intelligence value.

nearby hamlet of Kwa Sipahi and hurried across to help. With such success did Mohammed Zaman counter-attack that he relieved the pressure and captured a third gun. Meanwhile a runner hurried back to Booth at battalion headquarters in Bishenpur. The Colonel, mustering every man he could, raised two weak companies, some mortars, three carriers and a troop of tanks from 3 Carabiniers.

Their departure was delayed, though much inspirited, by a Japanese air-raid in which two enemy bombers, hit by Bofors guns, burst into flames and crashed near by.

Such raids were most infrequent. A day or so earlier, when two Japanese aircraft were shot down, an excited party of 9/14 Punjab came in with two enemy prisoners — a rare occurrence, especially as they were uninjured. Mackenzie said to Booth: 'This is a jolly good show. You must have had some scrapping for these.'

'Oh, no, not at all,' replied Booth. 'This was very easy. We had a patrol out, and it happened to come round a bend, and there were these two Japs standing in the middle of the track looking up at the sky and clapping their hands at their own aircraft. My chaps just tapped them on the shoulder and said: "Hullo! Come along with us."'

Booth's companies met fierce opposition in Khojuman and, having relieved the two bold platoons which had done so well — both jemadars were decorated for gallant leadership, Feroze Khan with the Indian Order of Merit, Mohammed Zaman with the Military Cross — they waited for the tanks to come up over soft ground. By the time they did arrive, at nine o'clock, Major Ronald Apps had towed away the three captured guns by means of his carriers. As the ground inside the village was impossible for tanks, the only way to get their support was to have them surround the place and fire inwards while the infantry attacked. Such collaboration required the most careful reconnaissance on foot, and the inevitable delay of two hours for this was fully justified, in that the attack swept Khojuman clear of Japanese. Booth's men seized a fourth piece of artillery, this time a 70-millimetre mountain gun, and took prisoner three unwounded soldiers belonging to a Japanese anti-tank regiment — all at a cost of eleven men killed and thirteen wounded.

The attack on Potsangbam which followed this episode began well. Even before daybreak 9/14 Punjab had dashed over the dry

paddy fields and gained a satisfactory foothold in the village. The leading tank, from Major Edward Pettit's squadron, when half a mile west of Potsangbam overturned as it was being guided across a nullah. The whole crew escaped unscathed by climbing out through the driver's hatch, but six Indian sappers from 92 Field Company who were riding on the tank were trapped under the engine plate and killed. A Valentine scissors bridge was laid over the nullah and three tanks crossed, only to be halted by a second stream. By six o'clock this too had been bridged, and the troop crossed to the accompaniment of Japanese shelling.

Within an hour five tanks had gained the south-west corner of the village, but were prevented by a high bund from entering the open cultivated compound there. Unfortunately the infantry were by now heavily engaged in the north-west corner, whither Captain Pearce led his tanks to their support. On the way he suddenly saw three flashes, not ten yards distant, and through the smoke the outline of an anti-tank gun. He opened fire. The first shot neatly chopped down a tree on top of the gun, which was soon knocked out and its ammunition set ablaze.

The tanks now spotted 9/14 Punjab, who were lining a ditch and nullah, where they were pinned by Japanese medium machine-guns. No sooner had one of these been destroyed by tank shells than Colonel Booth asked the tanks to advance straight into the wood, the infantry to follow close behind. Lieutenant F. A. Shepherd, saying that he did not like the look of the ditch for tanks but would do his best, moved forward, only to find that his steering had gone and that one tank track had come off ten yards away. A second tank now stuck in the ditch, and when about to be towed back the tow rope snapped. Shepherd, though immobilised, kept firing at the machine-guns, but when the Japanese again began shelling over open sights from the hills near Kokaden the infantry withdrew a short distance, his tank was twice damaged by shells, and eventually he and his crew had to bale out and run for the ditch.

Meanwhile Captain Pearce had driven along the edge of the wood in search of an opening which would lead into the village.

'I took a deep breath and ordered the advance. During all this time we were being shot at by enemy artillery and infantry, and the only thing which kept quiet was the anti-tank gun. But the devils produced another, a 47-millimetre, and just as Corporal Litch-

field started to move into the wood, his tank was hit. The shot penetrated, and the tank was put out of action. We all moved to engage the gun, but I found to my surprise that my tank would not move. With all the row going on a Jap mine under the track had exploded unheard, and it was not until Sergeant Davis told me over the air that I knew that my track was broken. The other two tanks engaged the gun and silenced it. . . .

'It was then getting dark, and no more attacking was to be done. I surveyed my command. Corporal Litchfield's tank was burning furiously, mine had its track off, Sergeant Bull was O.K. Then came Sergeant Davis, whose starter motor had gone, Sergeant Pearce's and the F.O.O. [Forward Observation Officer] tanks neatly lined up side by side in a minefield, both with tracks off, Freddie Shepherd's abandoned in the middle with its track about ten yards away, and Corporal Bowen's inextricably stuck in the ditch. A complete Stuart was also present.'

Pearce, with orders to contact Colonel Booth, crawled out of the escape hatch at the bottom of his tank and, followed by the well-meant but needless requests from his crew to take care, dashed across two hundred yards of open space illuminated by two burning tanks and criss-crossed by enemy fire. Booth had been slightly wounded in the arm and later blown over by a mine. His battalion had sustained severe losses — some forty men killed and a hundred wounded — and he had left barely a hundred fit either for attack or for withstanding the enemy's expected response. On being shown the defence perimeter, Pearce moved into position the Stuart tank and his two surviving Lees. 'We mounted the Brownings from my tank beside the others and dug in, expecting an attack any minute. Much to our surprise the enemy, who must have had more of a knock than I then realised, did not attack, and we all managed to get a little sleep, being woken up every few minutes by firing from the wood, and turrets, 75 mm. ammunition, petrol, etc. flying all over the place from the burning tanks.'

Next morning 1 West Yorkshire replaced 9/14 Punjab, and General Cowan sent Burton's 63 Brigade to take over responsibility for the Battle of Potsangbam, and thus relieve Mackenzie of one of his three fighting fronts. Throughout May 9th the enemy remained fairly quiet, but next day his guns in the hills once more shelled with accuracy, and just when Captain Pearce was about to attempt recovery of his disabled tanks after dark the Japanese put

down a regular bombardment, two Lees being at once hit and set on fire. However, on the morning of May 11th the troops were heartened by a first-class air strike by the Tactical Air Force upon Potsangbam. Brigadier Burton was leaning against a bund when the bombers flew over, and he thought: 'Oh Lord! They're going to drop them straight on us.' In fact, the bombs exploded three hundred yards ahead. After the bombers had finished, Hurricanes roared overhead, firing their cannon to the accompanying cheers of the troops below.

Among the tanks the only runners now were one Lee with a hole in its petrol tank and a Stuart which had run out of petrol. In the afternoon heavy rain fell on the paddy fields and turned the route back towards Bishenpur into a mass of mud. 'The Stuart,' wrote Pearce, 'sank straight away and we crowned our efforts by bogging the Lee in trying to get it out. So once more we had to abandon tanks, and we started to march across country.'

The fact that the whole of 63 Brigade took another week of hard fighting to capture Potsangbam indicates the strength and tenacity of the Japanese, who even then hung on in the south-east corner for another fortnight.

* * *

As a counter-thrust to Japanese pressure, it was decided that two battalions of Cameron's 48 Brigade — 2/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles and 1/7 Gurkha Rifles — should move across country to cut the Tiddim road near Torbung and Milestone 32 and so disrupt the Japanese line of communication. Cameron's third battalion, 1 West Yorkshire, was left to hold the enemy in the village of Potsangbam. Once the block on the road had taken effect, Burton's 63 Brigade was to strike south-west into the foothills near Tokpa Kul and thence to destroy the Japanese on the ridge between Lamda and Kokaden. It was hoped that having done this, 63 Brigade would be able to push south and link up with 48 Brigade, thereby opening the road at least as far as Torbung. To distract the enemy's attention from the plain, Mackenzie's 32 Brigade was to demonstrate along the main ridge towards Lamda and at the same time to deceive the Japanese into the belief that an attack was imminent from the direction of Bishenpur and the Silchar track.

With 1/4 Gurkha Rifles and Northampton still fighting for picquet positions along the Silchar track, and 4/12 Frontier Force

Regiment engaged between Nunggang and Laimaton, the only troops at Mackenzie's disposal for a southward feint were 3/8 Gurkha. However, all these battalions put in limited attacks to keep the Japanese occupied. On May 20th 1/4 Gurkha overran one hill at the second attempt and killed many Japanese, while Major Clements' company of 3/8 Gurkha attacked in the wake of an artillery bombardment and secured Wireless Hill, which had defied all attempts at capture for the past month.

Three days earlier 1 West Yorkshire down in the valley had made an excellent start. This battalion, defending the southern edge of Potsangbam, spotted a Japanese supply column moving straight up the road towards the enemy garrison still holding out in the south-east bastion of the village. When the Japanese reached the perimeter defence the British troops held their fire and even opened the gate in the barbed wire. It is said that the Japanese non-commissioned officer in charge of the column gave the correct countersign and password! Be this as it may, the Japanese soldiers had no sooner entered the British positions and turned east than they were annihilated by fire. One prisoner was taken. So much for 32 Brigade's diversionary pressure.

Meanwhile, on May 5th, Cameron's men had set off from Wang-jing along a route where jungle scrub reduced the column's speed to five miles in eight hours and where swampy ground and head-high elephant grass made it impossible for the stocky Gurkhas to push forward at more than half a mile an hour. The column marched by way of Palel and the foothills along the southern fringe of the plain to Shuganu, crossed the Manipur River twice, and eventually, on May 16th, approached the road near Torbung at Milestone 32, where two nullahs crossed the road some three hundred yards apart. By the southern stream 1/7 Gurkha Rifles (Lieutenant-Colonel James Robertson) set up a road block.

Soon five Japanese tanks approached from the bed of the northern nullah. By means of an anti-tank rifle the Gurkhas pierced the turret of the leading tank and blew off the commander's head; later they destroyed a second tank.

That night a convoy of some fifty enemy vehicles with headlights on rumbled up the road towards Moirang and Bishenpur. The driver of the first truck stopped to ask a Gurkha sentry, whom he mistook in the darkness for a fellow-countryman, if the road was clear. He was given assurance, and eight Japanese trucks laden

with rifles, ammunition and stores were let through before the 'lid of the box' was slammed. The enemy, seriously upset by this successful road block in his rear, launched vain attack after vain attack, and next morning ninety-four bodies were counted on the ground.

Cameron's headquarters and 2/5 Gurkha had remained on high ground to the east of the road, and from this elevation they could look north across the plain to the villages and the road as far as Moirang. At night they used to count the number of vehicle lights moving in both directions along this straight stretch of road, estimating hopefully that if every lorry and truck was filled with soldiers, then some two thousand Japanese must be on the move.

On the night of May 20th an enemy force, heavily laden and obviously intending to stay, put in an attack, not against the hill occupied by brigade headquarters but against a saddle nearer to the 2/5th's position. The situation might have become dangerous, had not two night patrols which had come in to harbour until dawn been able to hold off the enemy. They counter-attacked, and so did Hedley's Gurkhas, and most of the Japanese were killed, leaving on the hillside bags of rice, picks and shovels, bedding, and ammunition. The survivors were pursued down the hill.

A few of our most serious casualties were flown out by light aircraft, which were, with difficulty, landed on a strip of flat ground in full view of Japanese observation posts. The enemy made more furious counter-attacks and in all lost over six hundred killed, besides a large number of vehicles and five tanks — the R.A.F. had effectively bombed these soon after they first appeared on the scene. The hulks were later blown up by sappers of 70 Indian Field Company, who accompanied 48 Brigade.

Further north, the supporting advance by 63 Brigade had met serious trouble. From his base at Kwa Sipahi Burton had to make a night march across to the foothills, so by day he sent a patrol discreetly to mark the route every fifty yards or so with bamboo slivers stuck into the ground to show about eight inches, with the shiny side uppermost in order to reflect the light of the moon and of a screened torch with the leading man of each company. Despite this effort, the march proved to be an extremely slow procedure, so much so that, when day broke, 63 Brigade had not reached the foothills below Kwa Aimal and the concealment they would have afforded from enemy look-outs. On the contrary, Burton's men

were strung out across the paddy, and very soon Japanese shells came whining over to burst all along the column. In one large nullah bed near brigade headquarters two shells landed among the mountain artillery mules and killed eighteen, but one man only was killed and another wounded.

Then two disquieting things happened at once. First, a sudden report came in from the left flank that Japanese tanks were approaching from Ningthoukhong. To these 63 Brigade, in the open and without anti-tank guns, would present a vulnerable target. Secondly, the leading battalion commander reported that his men, unable to advance, had failed to take their objective, the first hill above the steep wooded ravines rising from the paddy fields. Despite this reverse, the two leading companies were moved over the ravine in the face of artillery and two machine-guns, the crews of which were soon bayoneted, and within the hour the whole battalion was half-way up the hill. As soon as the Gurkhas had captured the summit, the rest of the brigade hurried into the lee of a ravine, whereupon the shooting died away.

What, meanwhile, of the tanks? This turned out to be a false alarm from men on the left flank who, perhaps understandably after the long and cold night march, were a trifle on edge and, on hearing the sound of a tank, jumped to the worst conclusion. In fact, the noise was made by a recovery vehicle pulling in one of the Carabinier tanks.

Eventually 63 Brigade occupied the hamlets of Tokpa Kul, Kwa Aimal and Kom Keirap along the Kokaden ridge. In this area the enemy had thinned out his troops because of 48 Brigade's threat to his rear, but he had not reacted as hoped by a general withdrawal southwards. Indeed, Burton's men, exposed to everything the Japanese could bring against them, had to fight hard to hold their newly won positions; and far from being able to make progress, they were forced back at several points after desperate fighting in which the enemy used artillery at a range of only four hundred yards. The ridge was almost a knife-edge, and the reverse slope afforded complete cover to the Japanese, who had only to climb a few feet to the ridge, fire mortars and machine-guns, and at once drop out of sight before the Gurkhas could retaliate.

The problems of maintenance were acute, in that 63 Brigade lacked barbed wire and adequate reserves of food and ammunition, and was to lose nearly all its supply mules in the impending Japan-

ese assault on Bishenpur. As the road from Imphal was still blocked to supply convoys, Brigadier Mackenzie took one of the three or four days' reserve of food held by his own battalions and sent them forward to Burton, as well as a strand of barbed wire which had been removed from the entire Bishenpur perimeter. To coil this into suitable lengths and then to get it up under fire to 63 Brigade was a severe task.

As there now seemed no likelihood of 63 Brigade's being able to link up with the Torbung road block, and as he had no artillery support, being out of range of the Bishenpur guns, Brigadier Cameron was ordered to withdraw on May 24th. This withdrawal proved very difficult, for besides being hard pressed by the Japanese and their tanks, 48 Brigade had to fight its way north from village to village through enemy-held positions, and suffered heavily in the process. It had, moreover, to carry all its wounded, some of them on ponies.

It was while Cameron was standing, on May 27th, with his binoculars slung round his neck, that a sniper's bullet reduced the binoculars to a monocular, lifted him off his feet and threw him three yards into a ditch. He was severely bruised and shocked, but mercifully not wounded. Osborne Hedley, summoned from the back of the column to take over command of the brigade, found that Cameron's orderly had settled his Sahib under a bund and erected a waterproof sheet to keep off the sun.

'Look here, old boy,' said Cameron, 'will you carry on? We'll have to spend the night here.'

With a 'Yes, you just leave it to me; don't bother', Hedley went off to organise perimeter defences, but on his return he found that a somewhat restored Cameron had taken command again.

The brigade survived the night, though not without loss, and next morning, May 28th, made its way between the Logtak Lake and Ningthoukhong, and later to safety in and near Potsangbam. Cameron was evacuated to hospital, and command of 48 Brigade devolved upon Hedley.

* * *

It is now time to turn back and examine the Japanese plans. On May 14th 'Saku's' 214 Regiment had received orders to hand over its positions and to advance through hilly country north of the Silchar track to the area of Nunggang village, ready to attack Imphal

with two battalions. The plan was to approach the town from the north-west, thereby cutting off the British line of retreat, while 215 Regiment and other units were to storm Bishenpur and then fight their way up the road to Imphal from the south. Colonel 'Saku' had no illusions about this plan. If 215 failed to take Bishenpur — and they had already failed again and again — his troops would be exposed and powerless. Surely, he reasoned, it would be wiser to use the whole strength of 33 Division to crush what were termed 'wasps' nests' — the hills held by the enemy — as an essential preliminary.

At five o'clock on the afternoon of May 16th 214 Regiment headquarters left its base at Ingourek, crossed the Silchar track safely and halted for the night at Tairenpokpi. Two days later the men reached Nunggang after a dreadful forced march, travelling only at night in difficult and unfamiliar country and through torrential rain, which had swollen the Khoirok River and flooded the narrow track. Water poured down the slopes. Landslides made the going still more treacherous, and soldiers were often swept off their feet and all but drowned. For much of the way the Japanese were up to their waists in water and had a struggle to stand upright. Lightning flashed and the rain went on teeming down. During one halt, when some of the troops searched for a comrade who had been swept down to the bottom of the valley, there was much grumbling on the following lines: 'What madness to order a forced march in weather like this', and 'This senseless war . . .' One junior officer, who observed that it was specially hard on the other ranks, had to be cautioned for making remarks detrimental to good discipline.

On the British side some officers felt that if the Japanese were permitted to stay in the hills between the tiny villages of Laimaton, Nunggang and Khoirok north of the Silchar track they would threaten Imphal by way of Buri Bazaar. They would also shackle any advance 17 Division might attempt southwards from the track along the Kokaden ridge and also astride the road towards Ningthoukhong. This largely correct assessment seemed to find support from captured instructions to the Japanese 214 Regiment, which included this comment: 'A night attack on the enemy's rear, closing in unexpectedly with cold steel, is an effective means of putting fear into the enemy. It is the only profitable means against an enemy lavishly equipped with artillery, and it is the method on which we pride ourselves.'

The country comprised parallel ridges with barren, knife-edge tops separated by jungle ravines often as deep as a thousand feet. British and Japanese troops occupied rival ridges, but to attack one's opponent was most difficult on account of the exposed slopes and because it was nowhere possible to deploy more than one company at a time. It is likely that had Cowan had troops available in the middle of April to push down the ridge between Laimaton and Nunggang, he might have prevented the Japanese from infiltrating and have advanced southwards to Khoirok and even far enough to link up with the troops holding Point 5846. But the enemy got in first, built up a strong base north of the track and repulsed the efforts of 4/12 Frontier Force Regiment, who had come from 17 Division's reserve on April 18th, to prevent Japanese northward pressure. Nevertheless, fighting patrols did much to harass the enemy's supply route. Skirmishes were frequent and hard fought, and each day saw fresh thrusts and counter-thrusts over this exhausting hill country.

However, these operations were overshadowed when the enemy's plans for 215 Regiment to storm Bishenpur were put into effect.

At about half past one early on May 20th Mackenzie's headquarters, Gunner Box and supporting troops were woken up by screaming and shouting on the eastern face of the defence perimeter. Everyone stood to in the darkness; firing, yelling and the activities of Japanese jitter parties continued until daybreak, when our patrols reported that a few enemy troops had established themselves in bunkers east of the road and covering the junction with the Silchar track.

Efforts by Booth's 9/14 Punjab and tanks of 3 Carabiniers to locate the Japanese and discover their strength cost many casualties, but it became clear that the 'few' Japanese numbered at least one hundred and fifty, well dug in with medium machine-guns in the north-west corner of Bishenpur village. To the further surprise of our patrols, and of Brigadier Mackenzie, some three hundred mules were found tethered in the area.

When Burton's 63 Brigade had gone through into the foothills in support of Cameron's long hook, it had been allotted a defended 'box' for its transport and administrative units, but the mules, instead of going into this protected area, had been tethered in the open. Though trenches had been dug for the mule-drivers,

no defence measures had been taken. Worst of all, 32 Brigade Headquarters had not been told that the mules were there, so had artillery fire been brought down in defence of the eastern face, all this animal transport would have been unwittingly annihilated.

When the Lee tanks did rumble out on the road — heavy rain made the going almost impossible *off* the road — they shot a large number of Japanese who had positioned themselves in ditches and shallow trenches, but when 9/14 Punjab tried to occupy these positions the sepoy came under heavy fire and could not do so. Some Japanese were seen running about in the mule lines, but since about a hundred animals were still standing there, despite all the shooting, it was difficult to deal with them. A second Punjabi company, led by Major Ronald Apps, now worked east from the road, but the supporting tanks were halted by deep nullahs, so progress was slow. It was decided to try to wire in the enemy, and by nightfall Apps' men, having established themselves securely just outside the main Japanese force in the mule lines, had pushed a wire fence close to the intruding enemy on that side.

Efforts were made to drive the mules away from No Man's Land, but enemy fire and numerous dead animals hampered this manoeuvre, and in view of the use the Japanese were making of the mules as a screen, it was decided the survivors must take their chance in the battle. That night the enemy attacked and jittered Apps' company, but was beaten off with the aid of mortars firing from the main Bishenpur box.

Brigadier Mackenzie was very hard put to it to provide any troops for dealing with this strong and serious Japanese incursion into Bishenpur, and he could do so only by thinning out other defences and calling on both gunners and engineers for 'infantry' to man perimeters or to act as a reserve. However, a company of 4/12 Frontier Force Regiment was brought from Khoirok in the hills to help Booth's Punjabis on May 22nd to clear out the enemy, but they were pinned down by most effective fire and the tanks could scarcely move once they left the main road. Indeed, one became so badly bogged that it had to be dragged in by two tractors. Nevertheless, the Carabiniers fired on the enemy holding out in the mule lines from two directions.

By nightfall three sides of the enemy's position had been closed and wired, while fighting patrols covered the sole exits to the north. By this time about sixty dead Japanese and two hundred dead

mules had been counted, and the stench was causing many of the troops to vomit most violently, so much so that a further attempt to rescue the surviving mules was overcome by the smell alone, and the volunteers were ordered to desist. By next day the stench had become so intolerable that fighting in or through the area was impossible, even though the men had been issued with field dressings soaked in eucalyptus and tied over their mouths and nostrils.

On May 23rd patrols found that the enemy had pulled out from his positions west of the road and had concentrated in a wood to the north-east, where, it was thought, about fifty Japanese remained. Two days later, after a nullah had been bridged for the tanks to cross, the area held by the enemy was shelled systematically by 3 Carabiniers and mortared by the infantry. Then the company of Frontier Force Regiment advanced into the wood, killing the few Japanese who remained and finding forty enemy dead.

By noon the last resistance was over, but there remained the very pressing problem of how best to deal with the corpses of one hundred and twenty Japanese and two hundred and eighty mules. They had to be buried quickly, for the stench was now invading the main Bishenpur base. A bulldozer dug a huge trench, then pushed all corpses and carcasses into it, finally piling earth on top. Later two tons of lime were spread over the site, and Bishenpur became habitable again.

The enemy had one last forlorn fling on May 25th. By night a group of about thirty men, some of them sick and wounded from 1 Battalion of 214 Regiment, attempted to destroy a Bofors anti-aircraft gun in Gunner Box. They failed, and lost thirteen killed and two prisoners. The survivors from this very brave raiding party took refuge in some old bunkers in a nullah, and were later shot by Lieutenant Steward's tank, which had played a leading role in the battle, and by grenades from the 4/12 Frontier Force Regiment.

In his diary Tom Dolan of the American Field Service wrote: 'Brought up tanks and Bofors to blast them. Like a cricket match. Spectators all around cheering, half of them in front of attacking infantry. When all over, they all just surged in for souvenirs.'

* * *

In order to be in closer touch when 48 and 63 Brigades set off on their respective missions to the south, Cowan had moved his

headquarters to the small village of Chingphu under the lee of a prominent and isolated hill beside the road linking Imphal with Bishenpur. At the same time as the Japanese launched their attacks against the latter village, they also sought to block the road at Chingphu, unaware of the presence of 17 Division Headquarters. They occupied the entire hill except for one conical feature on which a score of men from 7/10 Baluch, the defence battalion, defied every attack. Unaccountably, they did not occupy that part of the hill which immediately overlooked the headquarters. Instead, the enemy dug in along an offshoot ridge called 'Red Hill', with reserve troops in two nearby villages. Ten days were to elapse before the Japanese were cleared from this spot, and a miscellany of companies, tanks and guns were called in to assist, from 32 Brigade, from other divisions, from the 4th Corps reserve. This enemy incursion against a vital and vulnerable headquarters presented a serious situation, and every possible step had to be taken to deal with it promptly.

The first attempt to evict the Japanese was made by a composite force from Cowan's headquarters, but after several men had been killed and wounded, it was decided that nothing effective could be done until a battalion had been sent for. That selected was Mizen's 9/12 Frontier Force Regiment from 20 Division, but as two companies were some distance away and would not arrive in time, he collected two companies from 6/5 Mahratta Light Infantry under the command of Major G. K. F. Reid. It was thought that the larger part of the Japanese was in the outskirts of Chingphu, so a plan was made for the artillery to bombard that part of the village during an infantry assault. Unfortunately the gunners found it impossible to take on Red Hill as well, so Mizen's men were caught by enfilade fire as they dashed across the paddy fields.

Until nightfall, and next morning again, the two leading companies were engaged in hand-to-hand struggles and a ding-dong battle of grenades interpolated with bursts of machine-gun fire.

Mizen now decided to bring up his two reserve companies from the divisional headquarters side and to attempt to pin the enemy between two prongs. But his men were being picked off one by one in the open paddy, and he had to organise a relay of carriers to get the wounded away.

Night came, and the battalion could not make progress. Both village and hill were too much for the troops available. The 7/10

Baluch relieved Mizzen's men in the village, but it was then decided that a brigade would be required for the task, and 50 Parachute Brigade, now commanded by 'Lakri' Woods, last met on Nungshigum, was ordered to tackle the job. The composite body of infantry, tanks, sappers, artillery was named 'Woodforce' after its commander.

Late on May 27th Maurice Wingfield's 3/1 Gurkha Rifles came up to join Woodforce, and was ordered to attack Red Hill on the next afternoon. After a half-hour artillery bombardment, B company under Major J. Darby set off at half past three and the attack began well, only to slow down against stiffening opposition. Two troops of tanks from 3 Carabiniers gave supporting fire from the left flank, and one tank under the intrepid command of Lieutenant A. Weir managed to get up on to Red Hill so as to give direct aid to the soldiers on foot. The tank, which Weir guided on foot, kept slipping to the left and dangerously near the khudside, but after the sappers had made a definite track and banked it like a motor race-course, success was achieved and the tank reached the top in time for zero hour. Weir received orders from Wingfield to cross Red Hill five minutes after the Gurkhas and to fire on hillocks known temporarily as First and Second Pimple.

Lieutenant Weir takes up the story. 'Our barrage had begun. I raced back to the tank, mounted, and in about three minutes we were off on to Red Hill without mishap, where the Gurkhas were bobbing up and down throwing grenades while others worked their way round to the south flank. From the top of the hill I found that the guns could not be depressed on to either Pimple, so I had to advance over the hill and down the reverse slope. Three Japs ran out as I went over, but the Gurkhas were grand and killed them before they reached the tank. We were able to hold the tank on the slope with the engine, both sticks pulled tight back, and the operator tugging on the parking brake with both hands.

'Immediately we opened fire at about fifteen Nips who ran away over the top of First Pimple as we came over Red Hill. We then set about dealing with each foxhole and bunker in turn. These could be easily distinguished at the range of about 150 yards. The foxholes looked like what they are called, just a small black hole with a hint of disturbed earth round it.'

A verey light was fired, and the Gurkhas, who had been waiting to the side while the tank blazed off at the bunkers, went into the

attack and, after one short hold-up for a foxhole which had been overlooked to be dealt with, they captured First Pimple. Weir then switched his fire to Second Pimple and to the village, where he saw Japanese running away.

So far the Gurkhas had sustained few casualties, but trouble hit the tank. The driver was concussed, a round jammed in the barrel of the 75-millimetre gun and the breech-block also jammed. Weir tried to reverse to Red Hill, but this proved impossible on account of the soft, loose earth on the very steep slope. 'We then discovered to our horror,' he wrote, 'that immediately the steering sticks were let loose, the tank started slipping down the hill. There was only one thing for it. I ordered "Abandon tank". The guns and wireless were made useless, and I then took over from the driver, and the crew left via the escape hatch.

'I viewed tremulously the aspect in front of me. I could either let go of the sticks and try to jump out or else try and steer it to the bottom. The engine could not be started, as the moment the clutch was dipped, the tank again moved forward. I decided to steer the tank to the bottom. By this time I had quite forgotten my guardian angel, but he had not forgotten me, for I had not gone ten yards when the tank stopped on a not quite so steep place and against a small ridge on the ground. Thankfully I dropped through the escape hatch and, running faster than I thought I was capable of, I reached safety behind Red Hill where the rest of the crew were waiting for me.'

Casualties began to mount, Major Darby was killed, and B company were forced to the ground by Japanese fire. Seeing what had occurred, Wingfield dashed forward to galvanise the Gurkhas into action once more, and then, hurling grenades, he led the company in one dash after another until in a final charge they drove the enemy from the hill. But the success was blighted grievously when Wingfield, leading the charge, was shot in the head by a sniper.

Fierce hand-to-hand fighting now broke out for the mastery of First Pimple, two officers were killed and the two forward companies could make little progress because their ammunition had been almost exhausted. The carriers laden with reserve ammunition had become bogged in the wet paddy fields, and carrying parties on foot had hurriedly to be organised. They got the ammunition boxes to the top just in time for renewed Japanese attacks to be repulsed, but whatever arrived was quickly spent, and

by half past five it was clear that the Gurkhas could not consolidate their positions before nightfall, so Brigadier Woods ordered them back. The Battalion, with nineteen killed and fifty-five wounded, had been reduced to some four hundred men.

Great credit is due to the coolness of the British wireless operators, who kept brigade headquarters informed of the situation every few minutes, even after the British officers had been killed. One infantry officer wrote some years afterwards: 'To this day no one knows how they managed to transmit orders from battalion H.Q. to the Gurkha commanders. Without them the battalion would have stayed out all night without food, water or ammunition.' But one man who can say how this was done is Colonel Abbott, second-in-command of the brigade involved. 'The Gurkhas were very weak in numbers,' he records, 'and all the British officers and anyone else who could speak English had been killed. We had a British corporal of Signals named Monk forward with a wireless set to let us know how things were going. Suddenly he came up on the air. I was about eight hundred yards away. Monk told me the Japanese had surrounded the Gurkhas but that he thought personally that the enemy was very shaken. He wanted to tell the Gurkhas what to do, but he couldn't speak Gurkhali. So I told him what to say. He then shouted to them to attack, and the encircling Japanese were killed.'

Corporal Monk was recommended for the Distinguished Conduct Medal and to Lieutenant Weir went a Military Cross.

On May 30th 7/10 Baluch found that the enemy had moved off Red Hill and the two pimples; a hundred bodies were counted and seven unarmed, shell-shocked prisoners, one of whom admitted that his entire company had been wiped out. Next day about eighty Japanese with a few guns were driven out of a nearby village.

On the Japanese side the battle had gone badly. One company had been wiped out to the last man. Their light tanks were out-classed. No supplies were reaching 215 Regiment. Survivors who tottered out of one battle and reached headquarters were promptly sent back to fight again. Indeed, when ten wounded men under a medical lieutenant came in from Bishenpur a staff officer said they had no right to leave the battle while one single Japanese soldier was still alive to fight; and he sent them all back. More than seventy per cent of Colonel 'Saku's' sick and wounded were still with 214 Regiment, for if they could fire a rifle they had to stay. Even if

sent to a field dressing station, these men were seldom evacuated to field hospitals in the rear, but were turned out instead to rejoin their battalions.

Life for the Japanese soldiers in the front line was pitiful. Posted singly in slit trenches, up to the waist in water, without food, with no one to talk to, suffering from dysentery or malaria, under incessant rain and nervous tension, they stuck it grimly, living almost instinctively. Wasted by disease and hunger, their clothing in tatters, their bodies encrusted with dirt, they no longer hoped, knowing well that the next day might be their last. What infuriated them perhaps more than anything else was to see British, Indian and Gurkha troops walking about in comparative safety, smoking cigarettes: the Japanese very often dared not give away their positions by firing a shot, nor had they the ammunition to spare.

Colonel 'Saku', in his tented headquarters in Nunggang, could overlook the battle for Bishenpur, and he was the recipient of a stream of gloomy reports. One evening a message came that Yauchi, commanding what remained of a battalion fighting round the village, was still alive and had five men with him. All the others had been killed or dispersed. 'Saku' ordered the messenger to return, taking with him a few wounded men, as 214 Regiment was not giving up yet. When word was brought that forty soldiers under a captain were still holding out just north of Bishenpur, 'Saku' took momentary hope and sent a lieutenant and a handful of men to help. But next day Yauchi telephoned to say that he could no longer hold out at Bishenpur and had left. In fact, he had lost control of the few surviving troops at his disposal, and had already left several days before. 'Saku' now realised, and admitted, that his force was scattered and demoralised, and that all was lost, so he told 33 Division Headquarters that he had decided to pull out. Of the 380 men in Number 1 Battalion, seventeen were left. Thirty-seven remained out of 540 in Number 2 Battalion.

THE MONSOON APPROACHES

AT Litan, where 15 Division Headquarters were located, a hopeless outlook faced General Yamauchi in early May, only two months after his leading troops had passed victoriously through the village.

His division was scattered in small groups between Kanglatongbi, sixteen miles north of Imphal, and the Ukhrul road. Between them stretched many miles of mountainous jungle country with bullock-cart tracks and footpaths as the only means of communication, and it could only be a matter of days before the monsoon broke and made these tracks well-nigh impassable.

Initially, the capture of Kanglatongbi, Nungshigum and the heights around Mapao had brought Yamauchi very close to 4th Corps' nerve centre. Even now, although Nungshigum had been lost with heavy casualties, his troops on the Mapao ridge looked down on 'The Promised Land', the town of Imphal and the airfield. It was a galling sight for them to watch the stream of aircraft landing to bring in food and ammunition, commodities of which they themselves were in dire need. To make matters worse, their positions were being constantly harassed and chivied from the air and on the ground.

The road block at Kanglatongbi still held firm, but any advance from this direction was out of the question, while from Litan he could make no headway despite the arrival of his third regiment. The strong British positions in the hills above Yaingangpopki had proved too tough a nut to crack. In short, he was bogged down everywhere, and once the effects of the monsoon began to make themselves felt, his situation would be desperate.

Yamauchi's personal position, too, was far from comfortable, since not only had his headquarters been bombed on more than one occasion, but, as has already been shown, he had been twice forced to make a quick get-away into the jungle to avoid capture by raiding columns of Roberts' 23 Division.

About this time Scoones was also reviewing his plans in the

light of new conditions and the fresh information that was coming to hand. One thing stood out clearly: the original Japanese intentions had been thwarted. On all fronts their casualties had been very heavy and there had been no indications that any reinforcements had arrived to replace them. 15 Japanese Division, in particular, had suffered in this respect, and Scoones saw no reason to change his decision of April 4th to strike hard at this division first. He did feel, however, that he could now increase the tempo against 33 Division, thanks to the arrival by air of welcome reinforcements in the shape of 89 Brigade, part of 7 Division now fighting hard at Kohima. This brigade, commanded by Brigadier Alan Crowther, a very experienced jungle fighter, he placed under Briggs to bring 5 Division up to its proper strength of three brigades. In doing so he was able to release 63 brigade of 17 Division and give Cowan the whole of his division for a counter-attack at Bishenpur.

An important date in his calculations was May 21st, as by this time the monsoon was bound to have started. He could, therefore, count on only about three weeks of fine weather ahead, and he was determined to make the best use of this precious time. Once the rains came, the speed of operations would inevitably be slowed down, the incidence of malaria would rise and the difficulties of keeping his troops supplied in out-of-the-way places in the jungle would be increased.

One other very important factor which Scoones had to consider carefully was the physical condition of the soldiers. For some time this had given him cause for anxiety, because many weeks of the monotonous dry rations were beginning to tell on their digestions. Suffering as many of them were from chronic diarrhoea, food passed straight through them without providing any nourishment. In addition, they lived in deplorable conditions: just a hole in the ground for weeks on end, with the strain of continual contact, day and night, with a cunning and ruthless enemy. All this was having serious effects on their physical endurance, and care would have to be taken not to ask too much of them.

Perhaps the greatest effect that the monsoon would have on the operation would be to reduce the number of hours during which aircraft could fly. This could only mean that the stocks of food and ammunition coming in daily to the airfields would get less and less, and already delivery was behind schedule.

There were some 155,000 men to feed, of which 30,000 were British. There were also 11,000 animals. The daily requirements of men and mules amounted to just over 250 tons. Additional requirements would be petrol and oil, ammunition, clothing, weapons, canteen stores, mail, engineer stores, reinforcements and special equipment for the R.A.F. and the tanks. Altogether there was a demand for 471 tons or 157 aircraft loads per day — a colossal total.

A comparison between what was required during the months of May, June and July and what was likely to be flown in revealed a shortage of no less than 15,000 tons. From this estimate it was obvious that one of two things must happen: either the road must be opened — and Scoones considered then that June 15th was the latest date for this — or, at some time, the garrison would have to be reduced. As far as the second alternative was concerned, he felt sure that this would not be possible, unless the enemy were thoroughly defeated.

From these several considerations and particularly because of the necessity for taking advantage of the remaining days of fine weather to speed up the opening of land communications, Scoones decided on a plan involving three distinct and separate actions.

First, to intensify pressure on 15 Japanese Division with 5 and 23 Divisions. The distance that 23 Division could advance towards Ukhrul would depend on how far from Imphal the monsoon allowed the division to be fed and supplied with ammunition. It might well have to come back once the rains started. As for 5 Division's move up the road towards Kohima, much would depend on the progress made by 33 Corps at Kohima and how soon it could start an advance southwards in the direction of Imphal.

Second, to turn to the offensive on the Bishenpur front with 17 Division and wipe out the Japanese 33 Division. This was going to be a tough business against the best that the enemy could produce.

Third, to remain on the defensive at Shenam, where Yamamoto was daily weakening himself by costly attacks on 20 Division's defences.

In the event, these plans had to be adjusted for the relief of 20 Division at Shenam in the middle of May, when it changed places with 23 Division.



During the time that 23 Division had been moving up the road to Litan and playing havoc with Yamauchi's headquarters and his lines of communication, Briggs, with 5 Division, had been slowly driving the enemy up the Iril valley from Nungshigum and simultaneously trying to dislodge the Japanese who occupied Mapao and the ridge of mountains running northwards from that village.

It had been during this fighting that, on April 16th, Jemadar Abdul Hafiz of 3/9 Jat won the Victoria Cross — the first Muslim soldier to do so in the Second World War.

On a small unnamed hill a few thousand yards to the north-east of Nungshigum there was a standing patrol of a few men of Gerty's 3/9 Jat. This the Japanese attacked and, having driven off the patrol, were able to overlook the main company position, so that it was imperative for the hill to be retaken with the least delay. Supported by the guns of 4 Field Regiment and led by Jemadar Abdul Hafiz, a platoon was quickly on its way up the steep, bare slope.

The Japanese, while they were being shelled, kept silent. But when the Jats, with bayonets fixed and shouting their battle cries, tried to storm the top, they retaliated with a machine-gun and grenades, wounding the Jemadar in the leg.

Undaunted, Abdul Hafiz rushed forward as best he could and with supreme bravery seized the barrel of the machine-gun while a second Jat killed the gunner. That done, he saw a bren automatic which had been dropped by one of his wounded men, and picking it up without hesitation, he opened fire on the enemy to such effect that those whom he did not kill ran away as fast as they could. For this reason the hill became known as 'Runaway Hill', a name which it retained throughout the battle.

However, the fight was by no means over, since the Japanese were still shooting from another hill near by. A chance bullet mortally wounded the Jemadar, who, still grasping the bren gun and with blood pouring from his wound, shouted to his comrades: 'Reorganise! I will give you covering fire!'

These were the last words he spoke, and he died without being able to press the trigger again.

* * *

From Mapao, when the weather was clear, one had a wonderful view not only of Imphal and the airfield but also of Kanglatongbi

and many miles of the road towards Kohima. In dry weather it was a long haul up to this crow's nest even by the jeep track that the Engineers had built to the summit, but once the rains came and water streamed down the mountainside, it was almost impossible to get a foothold on the slippery slopes. No wonder the British and Indian troops found the storming of these heights a formidable proposition.

However, it was not only climatic conditions and the exhausting performance of climbing the steep slopes that frustrated the efforts of 9 Brigade. It was also the outstanding bravery, tenacity and discipline of the Japanese who held the series of heights that made up the Mapao ridge. Out on a limb, under frequent bombing from the air, subject to one vicious assault after another, short of food and ammunition, with no succour for the wounded, they hung on grimly in the pouring rain. Beyond capturing Mapao itself, 9 Brigade could make little headway, and suffered heavy casualties in its attempts to dislodge the enemy.

Since conditions were getting worse and worse as the storms became heavier and more frequent, Briggs, in consultation with Scoones, decided to make his main effort up the Kohima road.

* * *

As soon as Crowther's 89 Brigade had landed on the airfields it was immediately sent to Sengmai, ten miles north of Imphal, where it was in touch with the Japanese south of Kanglatongbi. In the old supply dump, scene of heavy fighting in April, the enemy had constructed three road blocks and at the same time had fortified the hills on the east of the Kohima road, from which they now overlooked the dump itself and any movement on the main road. Between these hills and the road ran the Imphal tuel, in dry weather a sluggish stream, but in the monsoon a dangerous raging torrent. Crossing places were few, and since these did not always coincide with operational requirements, resort had to be made to some form of improvisation, often ingenious and nearly always hazardous.

At one place, when a whole battalion with tanks was fighting in the hills on the eastern side of the river, all its supplies and ammunition had to be got across the obstacle and its casualties evacuated. The Indian Engineers, given the task of devising some means of doing this, eventually threw a wire hawser over the stream and

attached it to a tall strong tree on the other side. On this wire ran a pulley wheel, on the underside of which was suspended a large wooden box. In this box, pulled backwards and forwards across the thirty yards of swirling water, travelled live and dead material in the shape of officers and men, food, mortar bombs and tank ammunition.

The river rose in spate or fell according to the amount of rainfall each day. At low water the journey was quick and without incident. But it was a very different matter when the river came up, since under the weight of the loaded box the wire sagged almost to water level, and the arrival of a dripping brigadier, having been partly submerged on the way, always provided a welcome source of amusement to the onlookers.

The clearing of the road blocks was Briggs' main objective, but before this could start the Japanese had to be driven off the heights above Sengmai and the hills to the north of them. Briggs entrusted the clearing of the heights to Alan Crowther, while he moved Evans' 123 Brigade over from the Iril valley to advance up the road and clear the road blocks. The target date for this to begin was May 15th.

Crowther assembled his battalion commanders on May 11th and explained his plan, which was a straightforward attack by 2nd Battalion, The King's Own Scottish Borderers and 4th Battalion, The 8th Gurkha Rifles; but it also included a daring exploit by a company of 1st Battalion, The 11th Sikh Regiment, the third battalion of the brigade.

Briefly, this company was to pass through the enemy forward positions in darkness and establish itself on a ridge immediately behind the main Japanese defences, astride the track up which all their supplies were brought. Once established, the Sikhs were to divert Japanese attention from the main assault, stop an enemy withdrawal and try to make contact with 4/8 Gurkha Rifles. Situated as it would be between the enemy forward and reserve defences and with a very precarious supply line behind it, the company had before it a very difficult undertaking.

Throughout the nights of May 12th and 13th, patrols probed their way through the towering elephant grass to find a passage, but in vain, because the Japanese held the only crossing of the Imphal tuel. Not only was the grass so thick as to make conditions akin to darkness; it also wrapped itself round the men's feet, tripping them up as they forced their way through it.

By the morning of May 14th the situation looked hopeless, but during the day patrols did find a small gap in the enemy defences through which the Sikh company might pass and get up on to the ridge.

As darkness fell A company set off under the command of a young officer, Major R. A. Adams, who was later to hear, a few days before he died in hospital from scrub typhus, that he had been awarded the Military Cross. Each man was heavily loaded with two days' cooked food, ammunition, grenades and an entrenching tool; all the bren automatics and small mortars with their ammunition had to be humped as well. By day the march would have been hard enough even without carrying a thing, but in pitch darkness and pouring rain, hampered by the elephant grass, heavily laden and with an alert enemy only three hundred yards away, it was asking a great deal of these magnificent soldiers.

At one period they took no less than five hours to cover a thousand yards, but by half past five on the morning of May 15th, after ten hours of great physical endurance, Adams and his men reached their objective. Only troops of the highest class could have done so. Within half an hour he was talking on the wireless to his commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel P. G. Bamford. Geoffrey Bamford was a great inspiration to his Sikhs, whom he knew so well and who would follow him anywhere. He was short and slim, but what he lacked in inches was more than made up for by his strong determination, his personal gallantry and his cool calculating planning.

Shortly after daylight the main attack went in, but it failed to secure the peaks, nor were the Sikhs able to make contact with the rest of 89 Brigade.

Despite the tiring night march, Adams' company had dug hard and was ready to meet the first counter-attack, which came in late that afternoon. It was successfully beaten back, but ammunition stocks had become so depleted that a party had to be sent from battalion headquarters with more ammunition, food and water. It succeeded in getting through the enemy positions, but failed to reach the company.

It was due to A company's success that Briggs decided to send the rest of the Sikhs to join it under cover of an attack up the road by 123 Brigade. So, on the morning of May 16th, Bamford led the battalion to join Adams, whom he reached without opposition

during the same afternoon. The regimental mules also got through with food and ammunition, and on their return journey they brought with them all the wounded to the ambulances waiting on the main road to take them to hospital in Imphal.

For two more days the Japanese made fanatical efforts to open up their lines of communication, but the Sikhs stood firm. By May 20th the enemy had given up the struggle and had evacuated all his forward positions, so that Crowther was able to concentrate on clearing the hills on the eastern side of the road.

It was one of those strange occurrences that happen in war, that two days after the battle parties of Sikhs were able, although in full view of the Japanese and just out of rifle range, to wash and bathe in the Imphal tuel. The enemy never interfered. The Sikhs too, from their positions behind the Japanese, could see them going out in the early morning for purposes of nature, but mortar bombs being then at a premium, they were unable to take advantage of the target!

With the Suffolks, Dogras and 3/2 Punjab of 123 Brigade forcing the first two road blocks on the opening day of the advance up the road, it looked as if 5 Division was going to make rapid progress. But disillusionment followed. The whole countryside lent itself to delaying tactics, and the Japanese, skilfully dug in astride the road and on the hills overlooking it, were determined to make the best use of this advantage. Each hill had to be taken separately. Guns had to be brought up to fire point blank to destroy the heavily timbered and earth bunkers. To make matters worse, the weather was atrocious. The rain teemed down almost incessantly, so that although a few tanks were laboriously winched up the hills, attacks had to be called off because neither men nor mules could stand on the slippery slopes.

With head-on attacks and hooks into the jungle to get behind the Japanese positions, the division pushed slowly northwards, killing large numbers of the enemy and incurring many casualties in the process. After nearly a month's hard fighting, the forward troops of 9 Brigade, which had relieved 89 Brigade and was now leading the advance, were only a little over sixteen miles north of Imphal.

It had been a real slogging match.

Meanwhile, about the same time as 5 Division was trying to clear the road to Kohima, Gracey's 20 Division had arrived on the Ukhrul road, after being relieved at Shenam by 23 Division. It still consisted of only two brigades, as the third, Mackenzie's 32 Brigade, was fighting under Cowan around Bishenpur.

Gracey's instructions from Scoones had been to hold the saddle at Yaingangpopki, with one brigade, so as to prevent any advance by Yamauchi from the direction of Litan. At the same time he was to send his second brigade north up the Iril valley on a long encircling movement, which was to come back on to the Ukhrul road somewhere near Litan, to which place it was hoped that before long the brigade at Yaingangpopki would be able to advance.

Because the monsoon had started just as the relief was in progress, all low-lying ground and cross-country tracks were rapidly becoming impassable for any form of motor vehicle or tanks. These would be able to move only on the road out of Imphal, and mules and air supply would be necessary for troops fighting at any distance off the road.

However, provided the appalling conditions could be overcome, this encircling move was likely to pay rich dividends and to bring confusion to both 15 and 31 Japanese Divisions, as it would cut right across not only their supply lines but also their lines of retreat to the Chindwin; and General Sato's 31 Division was already showing signs that he intended to pull out from Kohima. Furthermore, the Japanese on the Mapao ridge and those still in position by Kanglatongbi would be completely cut off. This fact, together with the battering that they were receiving from 5 Division, was bound to tell, and the opening of the all-important road would be hastened.

On the night of June 7th Sam Greaves' 80 Brigade started off on its long trek. The rain was pouring down, the paddy fields were deep in water and the only living things that seemed to enjoy life in these wretched conditions were the frogs, which kept up an incessant chorus, and the leeches waiting in ambush for a succulent meal. Dragging their mules up and down the mountain tracks, through knee-deep mud, forcing their way through swollen streams, one moment dripping with sweat and the next bitterly cold on the cloudy heights, the men of the Devons, 9/12 Frontier Force Regiment and 3/1 Gurkha Rifles plodded on. Patrol clashes were frequent, and now and again a strong enemy rearguard position had to be liquidated.

Through the monsoon clouds shrouding the hilltops came the courageous pilots with food and ammunition, which floated down by parachute, to the surprise and pleasure of many who had never before seen their rations appear in this way.

It was the wounded who had the worst time, as there was no means of getting them back to hospital. For instance, even with the help of an elephant, it took sixteen hours for a wounded man to be carried back the three miles to the dressing station, and at one time the stretcher-bearers had to make a raft to float him across a wide, fast-running water gap. It speaks volumes for the toughness of these men that the wounded soldier lived to tell the tale.

Meanwhile, on the saddle near Yaingangpopki 100 Brigade was at the receiving end of the last desperate effort on the part of General Yamauchi to break through to Imphal. For days the battle swayed backwards and forwards. Once the Japanese made a deep hole in the defences, to the extent that they were able to dig in and stay for two days within two hundred yards of brigade headquarters, the dug-down hospital being in the direct line of fire. When Gracey went up to see the doctors after the enemy had been wiped out he found them as usual cheerful and quite unperturbed by the events of the preceding forty-eight hours. While bullets from both sides had been cracking over their heads, they had gone on calmly and quietly tending the wounded and carrying out operations.

Not until the first week in July was 100 Brigade able to push on towards Litan and join hands with 80 Brigade.

CHAPTER XXII

SCRAGGY AND GIBRALTAR

'He put his head out of the dug-out and said: "Here come the little bastards now," just as if he'd said: "Here comes the 14 bus."

Neil Gilliam

BETWEEN May 13th and 16th Roberts' 23 Division took over the Shenam positions from a weary 20 Division. While 49 Brigade protected the road from Imphal up to Shenam and also the Pael airstrip, and 1 Brigade set off on a flanking march to clear the hills north of Shenam and so relieve pressure, Vivian Collingridge's 37 Brigade, the original builders of the Shenam defences, moved into the forward posts on Gibraltar, Malta and Shenam. Besides his own three Gurkha battalions, Collingridge now had under his command 1 Seaforth and 5/6 Rajputana Rifles, all supported by 158 Field Regiment, part of 28 Mountain Regiment, a battery of light anti-aircraft guns, most of the Jat machine-gun battalion and a troop of tanks.

One battalion held Scraggy and Malta, another defended Gibraltar, the largest and most precipitous of these hills, and a third what was perhaps the key to the whole bastion and, at 5,259 feet, the highest feature of the Shenam position, 'Recce Hill'. About twice a week these forward battalions would be relieved from their trenches and dugouts, where, because of shelling by day and jitter raids at night, the men could get no sleep.

From hills to the east the Japanese medium guns continued to fire unremittingly — on one day two hundred and fifty rounds crashed on Malta, on another day Gibraltar received a hundred shells in the space of one hour. They had 37 Brigade's trenches and dugouts pin-pointed, and at night the shelling more often than not would sever vital telephone cables — slender single or twisted wires which lay along the ground, vulnerable to violence. At first light the battalion signallers were on the move, making good the damage with pliers and black insulating tape.

The trenches, until the sappers of 68 and 71 Indian Field Companies had revetted and strengthened their slipping shale sides, provided poor protection and casualties were heavy. In the course of four days, for instance, 3/3 Gurkha Rifles had fourteen men killed and twenty-four wounded by shelling, grenade-discharger fire and nuisance raids. For hours on end soldiers had to wait in their trenches, since it was most inadvisable to move above ground unless it was essential.

Major T. G. Picard of 3/3 Gurkha wrote this description of the system of strongpoints which ran thirty feet below the peak of Scraggy: 'Half the posts were occupied by the Japs and half by the Borders, and no-man's-land was from six to ten yards. This made it impossible to dig and our foremost men were barely two feet underground until mortar boxes, filled with earth, were brought up to provide the essential cover. Wiring was impracticable. Sanitation was non-existent; dead Japs in varying stages of decomposition lay around while men plugged their nostrils with cloth and cotton wool. Our position came under heavy artillery fire from Nippon Ridge in addition to grenade, rifle and mortars from Scraggy itself. Each side raided the other's trenches night after night, but grenades were scarce and artillery defensive fire was at times limited to one round per gun per day.'

When 3/10 Gurkha Rifles went up there they found their forward bunker was only eight yards from the nearest Japanese bunker. The ground round the bunkers was strewn with dead — British and Gurkhas of 20 Division and Japanese. So bad was the stench that Colonel Cosens commandeered cigarettes from all his companies so that the men of the forward platoon could smoke *ad lib*. The bren-gunner had his gun sighted on the loophole of the nearest enemy bunker, and beside him another Gurkha waited with a grenade, its pin already withdrawn. Reliefs were every twenty minutes, and this went on for the three days the battalion was there.

Scraggy was the British soldier's idea of what the First World War battlefields of the Somme had been like: broken tree stumps, the ground scarred by trenches or pock-marked by shells, vegetation well nigh obliterated from the ridge crests. None of these hills had a natural source of water, so by day and even by night water had to be carried up in four-gallon pakhals; in places where the mules could not take them, two of these containers slung on a length of bamboo were humped between two men.

The road by Scraggy was in full view of Nippon Hill, yet one could drive up there in a jeep, a whole battalion could be relieved in daylight and on some days scarcely a shell would the enemy fire. Was it lack of initiative, or were the Japanese husbanding ammunition for their major assaults?

The relieving and relieved battalions moved along the winding road in single file, ten paces, and sometimes fifty, between each man, thus offering no worthwhile target to enemy gunners. Marindin recalls how on one occasion his 3/5 Gurkha had relieved 3/10th on Scraggy, and Roy Cosens' men were moving back down the road, on which an occasional Japanese shell was landing. 'The long line trudged on. There was a derelict concrete-mixer standing on the side of the road, and as each man passed he gave the handle a twirl. I watched for some time. When an elderly Gurkha officer, the second-in-command of his company, approached, he seemed to hesitate for a moment, but was unable to resist giving the handle a spin.'

The first of the enemy's attempts to evict 37 Brigade began on the evening of May 20th with two attacks, assisted by an intense artillery bombardment, on Gibraltar held by the Rajputana Rifles. This hill, if in Japanese hands, would have made the situation on Malta and Scraggy certainly grave if not impossible.

Fighting was fierce, but by half past one next morning the Japanese had given best to the Rajputana Rifles. Nevertheless, they still went on attacking with the utmost persistence Cosens' 3/10 Gurkha Rifles now back on Scraggy, but thanks to the tenacity of the men in the trenches and to the accurate and admirably prompt defensive fire brought down on the enemy by 158 Field Regiment and the mountain guns, the positions were held. When, soon after daybreak, three waves of Japanese soldiers came running and yelling over the hilltop, the bren-guns shot them down, whereupon the eager Gurkhas jumped from their trenches to charge with the bayonet. The enemy left behind ninety-three dead.

* * *

One of the heroes of the next month's fighting was a civilian, a member of the American Field Service, Neil Gilliam by name, born and educated in England, though both his parents were American. In the summer of 1941 he had been feeling restless, upset about the war in which his country was not involved, and

vaguely out of things when many of the boys were joining the Canadian Air Force. He, too, wanted to get into the war, but at seventeen he was too young to be enlisted into the American Army, and in any case it then seemed quite inconceivable that America would ever be drawn into the war.

Having one day met two men wearing American Field Service uniform in a Princeton bar, Gilliam joined the Service and travelled to the Middle East, there serving with the Free French at Bir Hacheim and elsewhere until 1943, when he failed to be accepted for the R.A.F. in Cairo on account of high blood pressure. Later he was sent with a new Field Service unit to India and then to Manipur.

Gilliam and others were soon to realise that the Chevrolet ambulances, good as they were, could not get far enough forward; and drivers, who felt highly conspicuous with a large red cross painted on the side of their vehicles, could only agree when the Commander Royal Artillery remarked: 'You're just giving the Japs gunnery practice.' Gilliam, who in the Western Desert two years before had experimented with fitting up bren carriers to bring in wounded men under fire, set about doing the same with jeeps. Aided by Sergeant-Major Bradley, a Durham man, and a Light Aid Detachment of the Indian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers, he fitted racks on which stretchers could be laid; and soon these jeeps, each bearing two stretchers, went into action. While one man held casualties firm, the driver hurried over the Shenam Saddle at thirty miles an hour and sometimes more. Only one time in five would the Japanese bother to fire at such a comparatively elusive target.

In this Shenam fighting the Field Service unit became broken up, with individual Americans attached for duty to a particular infantry battalion. To begin with the Americans seldom saw the wounded until regimental stretcher-bearers brought them down from the hills for loading on to jeeps, whereupon these took the casualties back over the Saddle and transferred them to the big Chevrolet ambulances bound for Palel. But gradually the Americans worked out an unofficial system for evacuating the wounded soldiers. As so often the medical officer of a battalion lost his stretcher-bearers when a battle was at its worst stage and the bearers had to take up a gun and shoot, the Field Service volunteers took it upon themselves to form the vital link between the

regimental doctor and the medical services behind. If one battalion was going to put in an attack the Americans might take their jeeps away temporarily from the other two battalions in the forward brigade and also persuade the colonel of the next medical unit back to lend as many men as possible, in case of need. When the battle was being fought a jeep driver would take his collected bearers to the medical officer concerned and search for wounded on the hill-side or summit. Most members of the American Field Service had studied elementary Urdu, and they soon picked up a smattering of Gurmukhi.

This system had to be most flexible, and it was not worked out unopposed. But when it became clear, after the Rajputana Rifles had attacked thrice before gaining the hill to which they gave their name, that the Chevrolets could not be driven down the track to fetch the many casualties, the Americans were allowed to take their fitted jeeps. They pointed out that stretcher-bearers on foot would have a very long carry if jeeps were banned from the task.

On May 23rd, three nights after their first and vain attack on Gibraltar, the Japanese again attacked the Rajputana Rifles. In exceptional darkness they climbed the northern slopes and reached the summit, which was linked to the rest of the feature by a narrow, razor-backed ridge where at most two men could walk abreast. On the other side the precipice fell four hundred feet and more. Many of the twenty-one defenders of this seemingly impregnable pinnacle were killed by the enemy's bombardment, and the dazed survivors were unable to hold off the Japanese assault.

When, however, the enemy sought to advance along the ridge, our guns pounded the summit and the triumphant soldiers thereon. Shell bursts, tracer streaks, and the other sounds and lights of warfare rent the night. A company, holding the eastern half of Gibraltar, were ordered to counter-attack, but they were already fighting for their lives; and as part of their wireless aerial had been shot away, they were barely in communication with headquarters or the other company.

Gilliam had been on the road near Malta soon after five o'clock when he became aware of heavy shelling and made enquiries, at first in vain, as to what was happening. Then he drove his jeep ambulance to the foot of Gibraltar and began to walk up. On reaching the rear company headquarters he learnt that the forward platoons had been severely hit.

'Can I take the stretcher-bearers up there?' he asked.

'We haven't any stretcher-bearers. I don't know where the M.O. [Medical Officer] is. I think he's been killed.'

So Gilliam hurried down again to fetch another American named Grey and also several bearers from the Field Ambulance. They tried to go up over the crest by the regular path to the forward companies, but were prevented by shelling, and had to be guided round the side through the undergrowth.

Gilliam had almost reached the forward headquarters when the company commander was killed by a shell. First he attended the wounded in the open, then those in bunkers and trenches, but as there were more than Gilliam could deal with, Grey took down as many as he had stretchers for, with instructions to telephone James McGill, a judge from Maryland who commanded the American Field Service in Palel, to send up every jeep and man he could spare.

There being no medical officer on the spot, Gilliam asked permission to stay, and soon he established a first-aid post in a dug-out which had formerly served as the kitchen of a mortar battery. Here he set to with field dressings, morphia and whatever medical equipment he had available to patch up the wounded until they could be carried down to hospital.

At nine o'clock that evening, two Japanese companies suddenly attacked in driving rain, after clawing their way up the exceedingly steep slope and wriggling on their bellies amid scrub and rocks. More and more wounded Rajrifs were brought into the dug-out, and soon the erstwhile kitchen was too small to protect them all. When, shortly after midnight, the Indians were compelled to withdraw, Gilliam went with them, the only white man there, carrying the wireless set and marshalling his stretcher-bearers and their patients.

Half-way down the slope the troops halted, and though showered with grenades, they held their ground and refused to be dislodged. Gilliam found another deep dug-out for a dressing station, but even so, some of the wounded were killed before they could be taken inside.

Down below, waiting for walking wounded who came slithering down to the road, were two jeeps with their drivers Frank Mayfield of St. Louis and Hilding 'Dewey' Svensson, the short-sighted Swede from New Jersey, who was killed nine months later

on the road into Mandalay. These jeeps, which normally carried four or five sitting patients, were loaded with up to fourteen men, who sprawled on the hood and bonnet as they were driven back to the nearest field ambulance.

When day broke on May 24th bleary tired eyes saw a Japanese flag fluttering high upon Gibraltar. Marindin's mortars on Malta fired at the flag, but the Rajputana Rifles, who were still holding part of the hill, reckoned this a greater danger than the Japanese, so the firing was stopped. The enemy had tugged a heavy machine-gun to the summit, and the only way to drive them off was to attack along the narrow ridge. At nine o'clock the artillery shelled their positions. One shell hit a bunker, and when some enemy soldiers ran out and scrambled down the northern slopes they were picked off by 3/5 Gurkhas, temporarily cut off on Malta by the loss of Gibraltar, and sent hurtling to the bottom.

The bombardment lifted after five minutes, whereupon C company of the Rajputana Rifles attacked, two by two, and led by the lieutenant and his company havildar-major. The officer, thrice wounded, killed four Japanese. The havildar-major, though severely gashed in the chest, bayoneted one enemy after another, and even tossed one over his shoulder and over the edge like a truss of straw.

Two Japanese posts were cleared, but the enemy proved stronger than expected, and when their guns opened fire the Indians had to retreat along the ridge, only five of them unwounded. Then A company of 3/10 Gurkha came up at eleven o'clock, rushed along the ridge, past the trenches and bunkers recaptured by 5/6 Rajputana Rifles, and, though showered with grenades and shells, they charged over the crest. Hand-to-hand fighting, first with the bayonet, then with kukris, was too much for the enemy, who fled.

Marindin on Malta had a splendid view from the enemy's side of 3/10 Gurkha's counter-attack, which moved steadily from the road up the sheer sides of Gibraltar. As the attackers neared the peak, Japanese soldiers darted forward from their reverse side of the hill and threw grenades by the score. Marindin wanted to shout a warning to the unsuspecting Gurkhas on the other side of the crest, but the leading platoon, under Jemadar Bhakatbahadur Rai, who won the Military Cross in this action, charged forward with kukris and grenades and eventually chased the enemy off the top.

'Almost immediately,' writes Marindin, 'the first Japs appeared on the bare hillside, racing down it to the safety of the jungle below. They had to run down a four hundred foot gauntlet before they reached the scrub. At first they came in twos and threes, and then in larger groups. How the numbers we saw had crowded into the trenches they had captured is hard to say.

'The splendid counter-attack of which we had a ringside view had been so enthralling that we were quite taken by surprise; but everyone who could lay hands on a weapon belted into the Jap. Truth to tell, the target at about eight hundred yards was so fleeting that little damage was done to the enemy, but what irritated me was that my batman had his sights set at three hundred. It was the first time we had seen the Japs in full retreat. I am inclined to think the Jap panicked; it was so unlike him not to hold a position to the last. Their withdrawal started with a trickle and then became a spate.'

The Japanese left on Gibraltar one hundred and forty-five dead and large quantities of equipment, including a medical aid post. Losses incurred by 37 Brigade on the hill had been eleven killed and one hundred and seven wounded. When Cosens' 3/10 Gurkha took over the summit they had a horrible job to dispose of Japanese bodies in the rocky ground, and a great deal of lime had to be sent for.

Not until Gibraltar had been thus recaptured did Neil Gilliam finally come down off the hill, his blue eyes bloodshot in a pale face drawn with fatigue, his fair head hatless and helmetless as usual. With him came more walking wounded and stretcher-bearers staggering under their loads. They went on, but he continued to evacuate wounded men until there were no more.

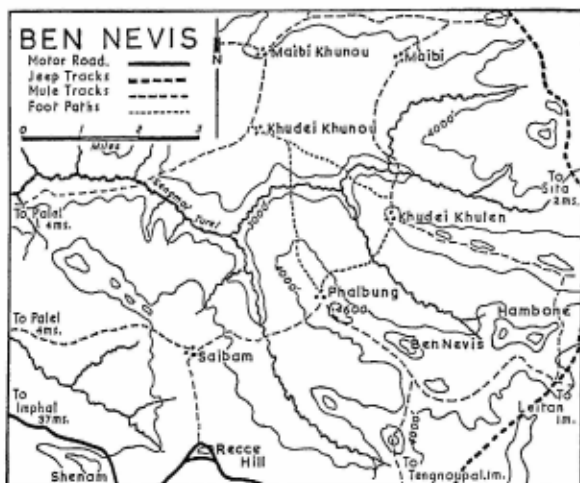
A few days later the grateful Gurkhas presented Gilliam with a captured Japanese officer's sword — heavy three-foot blade, gold tassel, bronze hilt encrusted with seed pearls, scabbard decorated with small bronze flowers in bas relief; and the Rajputana Rifles made the American an honorary member of their officers' mess — the greatest gift then in their possession.

One of his companions, Burgess Whiteside, wrote at the time: 'An M.O. said that any battle casualty who still lived half an hour after being hit, and could be operated on within two hours, was almost sure to survive. In other words, a good many lives may be saved if the wounded can be evacuated during the engagement or

immediately following it, and treated almost as they fall. It is the practice Gilliam has been following. . . . The good that has been done is enormous. Gilliam alone has carried over two hundred and fifty patients and has undoubtedly saved scores of lives. A good number he has carried off the pimples himself, by stretcher or on his back. The other drivers have carried proportionately as many as the time they have been driving. The Gurkha officers can't do enough to show their thanks.'

* * *

After the two assaults upon Gibraltar, there followed a fortnight of comparative inactivity on these hills; one reason for this lull was that the Japanese had taken a hard knock and were obliged to recoup their losses. But a second and even more effective reason was the action of Robert King's 1 Brigade, which on May 8th had set off from Wangjing, two battalions strong, to clear the ridge which runs north of and parallel to the Palel-Shenam road and to remove the threat of any Japanese advance on Palel by way of Phalbung.



On May 11th the Patialas in the lead encountered the Japanese on a spur a little north of Khudei Khunou. Next day Colonel James Newall's 1/16 Punjab stormed the enemy's position and captured it. Two days later patrols were close to Phalbung, and by the 17th the Punjabis had established one company on a hill east of the village. Ahead, on the twin peaks of 'Ben Nevis', rising to four thousand five hundred feet, the Japanese were firmly dug in, and nothing but a major assault had any chance of ousting them from so formidable a stronghold.

To begin with patrols explored the position. Then plans were laid for two companies to attack each peak. On May 24th — the day of Gibraltar's recapture — early mist veiled the battalions as they moved up to their start lines. As soon as the weather cleared, Hurricanes flew over to strafe the hills, but alas! one pilot mistook the target and shot up the wrong hill five hundred yards to the south-west, under cover of which 1/16 Punjab were forming up for the attack. Colonel Newall was seriously wounded. The pilot could not be blamed, for the hills all looked very much alike, and though coloured smoke shells had been fired at the correct target to start the air attack, the smoke had drifted away by the time the second wave of Hurricanes flew over.

Brigadier King had his gunner beside him and told him to get in touch with his Field Regiment at once and order them to fire more coloured smoke on to Ben Nevis. He could not establish communication immediately, and for some agonising moments King watched helplessly from half a mile away as the aircraft fired at his own troops.

The gunners had experienced the utmost difficulty in getting their 25-pounders near enough to support the infantry, and the route towards Ben Nevis being no better than a slightly improved mule track, the guns had had to be taken to pieces and loaded into jeeps. So far so good, but unlike the mules clipping along with loads of supplies, the jeeps stuck in the mud. The gunners tried to tow their laden jeeps, but soon gave up the attempt, so steep and muddy was the track. Next the sappers arrived with a tiny bulldozer and winched up the jeeps, only to run out of petrol at a critical moment. One gun fell over the khudside. Despite these setbacks, four guns were eventually manhandled up the slope by fifty soldiers heaving on ropes, while the ammunition followed on mule-back, altogether a notable achievement.

The artillery bombardment stopped just before eleven o'clock, and within thirty-five minutes the right-hand peak of Ben Nevis had been captured. But on the left peak the leading platoons encountered much fiercer resistance, and were halted some two hundred yards from the top. They tried to attack round a flank, but found the jungle too dense. So Major J. P. Lawford, who had assumed command when Newall was wounded, stopped any further attacks for the time being, since to persist would lead to fruitless casualties. Instead, he sent a company of Patialas, which had been given him as reserve, along the connecting ridge from the right-hand peak.

All this inevitably took time in such country, so it was three o'clock before the Patialas had reached the left peak and turned down the spur towards the Japanese bunkers and the thwarted Punjabis, who, for the past four hours, had been exposed to fire every time anyone moved on the hillside. Now the Patialas themselves came under fire from carefully concealed enemy posts, and when they in their turn tried to push out to one or other flank, they too became entangled in the undergrowth. As for artillery support, the troops were by now so close to the enemy that for the guns to shoot would only have been dangerous.

Onlookers might well have felt that nothing more would, or could, be achieved that day. Yet at half past four A company charged up the hill in a final effort. Many a Punjabi was hit, but the remainder clambered on, reached the barbed wire, broke through it and then dashed for the bunkers, so gallantly that by six o'clock the whole of Ben Nevis was in our grasp. Inevitably the day's fighting had been costly, but the achievement was outstanding.

For once the Japanese did not react as strongly or indeed as promptly as was to be expected. True it is that their guns began to register targets, but the awaited counter-attack did not come for four days. Having lost Ben Nevis and Gibraltar on the same day, the enemy doubtless needed some respite and lacked the force to attack in two directions at once. He waited until June 9th before trying again to assault Scraggy on the Shenam front, but before this he chose May 28th for a first attempt to regain Ben Nevis. For three hours his guns pounded the Punjabis, during which ordeal several trenches received direct hits and many a fine sepoy was killed or wounded. The defences were momentarily disorganised,

but the Japanese failed to take advantage of the confusion, and by the time they did attack two hours later, the Punjabis were ready for them, beating off not only this onslaught but three more on successive nights. By June 1st most of these attacks had weakened to jitter raids, and the enemy had clearly failed to recapture this great bastion which threatened the right flank of his positions facing Shenam.

* * *

37 Brigade was now commanded by John Marindin, Collingridge having left on June 5th to become Commandant of the Staff College at Quetta after commanding the brigade with distinction for four years. With Marindin was the Commander Royal Artillery of 23 Division, Brigadier R. W. Andrews. The command post in which they lived and slept was a hole roofed with corrugated iron, with two feet of water covering the floor. Life in the mist was dank and unpleasant, so much so that Andrews often knew the leather of his cap to go mildewy in half an hour. The officers messed in a dug-out covered only by a tarpaulin; curtains would be drawn across the doorway at night so that hurricane lamps and other means of illumination could be used without the enemy spotting the gleam.

The monsoon had by now begun in all its uncomfortable severity. Major T. G. Picard has recorded that: 'Living conditions grew steadily worse, and one lived in perpetual mist with intermittent heavy downpours. Work on the defences was never finished, as revetting material was practically non-existent and the heavy rain caused trenches to collapse. Dugouts and shelters, particularly in the forward positions, were not much better than the trenches, which were ankle deep in mud and slush. Visibility was often less than fifty yards, making air support impossible and reducing artillery support to fire on fixed lines and recorded targets.'

The enemy's third and final attempt to overwhelm our positions on Scraggy was made on June 9th. Late in the evening the Japanese artillery bombardment knocked out 3/3 Gurkha's foremost machine-gun posts, one by one. Through the gap rushed the enemy soldiers, laden with sandbags full of grenades. Neil Gilliam has recorded his experiences that night.

Earlier in the evening, from Malta, he had heard the sporadic shelling on Scraggy suddenly intensify, had listened to it for a

while, and then had said: 'I'd better go up and see what's happening there.'

It was teeming with rain as he clambered up to the command post and asked the colonel: 'What about casualties, sir?'

'Well, there's A company. The shelling's been mostly on them. Maybe they've had some.'

'I'll wander up and see if they have.'

Up he walked, and soon arranged to evacuate the few wounded Gurkhas. Then the company commander invited Gilliam into his little bunker for a cup of tea.

'All of a sudden there was the most awful row. Shelling came down very very heavily for about two minutes, then hand grenades, then sounds of running. All this time the officer sat there drinking his tea. I didn't like it one bit and thought: "It's about time for me to go." But I couldn't while he was still sitting there. Gurkhas kept running in and out of the bunker. He gave them orders, and everything seemed to be organised.

'Suddenly, when grenades started flying around, the company commander said, in the most conversational voice: "The little bastards are attacking us. I think they've overrun the first position."

'I said: "What's going to happen now?"

'Well, it's hard to say." We were still sitting there quietly. "I expect they'll be over the top of the hill here in a minute."

'He put his head out of the dug-out and said: "Here come the little bastards now", just as if he'd said: "Here comes the 14 bus."

'The damned Japs ran across the roof of our bunker, and this guy sat there as calm and collected as anybody I've ever seen in my life. I'll never forget his typical British reaction: "Here come the little bastards now."

'He said: "Damn! This is a nuisance. Do you want a rifle, old boy? Or does that contravene the Geneva Convention?"'

The Gurkha defences were in arrow-head formation, and although one flank had to give ground, the other men held firm. The Japanese failed to overrun the whole feature, but retained Scraggy peak. 3/3 Gurkha counter-attacked thrice with the one platoon available, and each time failed for lack of weight. Outstanding in this fighting were Lieutenant J. M. Carew, who was twice wounded, and Subadar Dalparsad Gurung, both of whom won the Military Cross.

While 3/3 Gurkha held the Japanese at bay, 3/5 prepared to counter-attack to regain the lost positions on Scraggy. An attempt by one company early on June 10th failed to come to grips, so a full-scale attack was laid on, with tanks to shoot at bunkers, a heavy artillery bombardment and, at three o'clock, a strafe by the R.A.F. But when Major Martin's company and another from 3/3 Gurkha moved to their start line the Japanese gunners had the exact range, and their accurate shooting caused serious loss. Martin and two other officers were killed, and some forty Gurkhas lay dead or wounded.

Despite so demoralising a start, the attack was pressed home. Resolutely the enemy held on. Progress was slow. Soon the attack had spent its force, and when Japanese reinforcements came up with grenades the assault had to be called off.

Once again Neil Gilliam distinguished himself. He helped men to adjust their field dressings and assisted casualties along difficult sections of trench. When the attack was over he brought back seven more wounded Gurkhas from no man's land within ten yards of the enemy.

Captain S. K. Rao of the Indian Army Medical Corps reported that Gilliam was 'tireless in his efforts — at times climbing the hill with a stretcher on his shoulder, and at times creeping inside bunkers looking for wounded and digging them out. He did this for nearly three hours, till he was sure the field was clear of casualties. All this he did in spite of the warning that he was running a great risk himself and should wait until the severity of the shelling was less.'¹

It was also said that with his ready smile, his pats on the back, his 'Camel' and 'Lucky Strike' cigarettes, and the greeting of 'Thik hai [everything's all right], Johnny', Gilliam had a cheering, settling effect on the Gurkhas under heavy fire.

Such was Neil Gilliam's splendid, cheerful courage and inspiring conduct on these two occasions in particular that he was recommended most strongly for the Victoria Cross, but as an American he was not eligible either for this or the George Cross. Instead he was decorated with the George Medal, an award he so richly deserved.

When Colonel Cosens got orders for his battalion to recapture the summit of Scraggy he went up for a 'look see' and found the

¹ Quoted in *History of the American Field Service*, p. 515.

Gurkhas' new position far stronger than the one lost, since they had thirty yards of 'killing ground' and the forward troops were now defiladed from Japanese artillery fire. He therefore advised against seeking to drive the enemy off the top, and both Roberts and 4th Corps Headquarters agreed. Accordingly, 3/10 Gurkha took over and consolidated the new defence line. Casualties on the hill had been twenty-three killed and one hundred and thirteen wounded — a grievous loss; but the Japanese had fared even worse, and though they held the top for another six weeks, they made no more full-scale attacks on 37 Brigade's positions at Shenam.

CHAPTER XXIII

BISHENPUR IN JUNE

'The position as I see it at present could not possibly be worse and therefore inevitably must get better.'

Colonel Eustace

'JUST as I said,' observed Colonel 'Saku' bitterly. 'As soon as it's all over at Bishenpur and too late, along they come to help.' On May 30th the Japanese 33 Division informed 214 Regiment that its Number 3 Battalion was at last to move up and rejoin. Major Fusada, who had been relieved of the command of this third battalion for his tardiness in joining up with the Regiment, had nevertheless elected to accompany his men. But on the way he was met by Lieutenant Naga with orders from 'Saku' that he was *not* to do so, being sentenced instead to thirty days with a mule unit, perhaps the severest punishment that could be inflicted on a battalion commander — equivalent to stripping him of his rank, and shameful in the extreme. However, Fusada flouted this order and went to see 'Saku', only to be turned away harshly, with accusations of cowardice ringing in his ears. His battalion was a sorry sight, since it was largely composed of sick and wounded men who had been discharged from hospital although totally unfit thus to be sent back to the fighting line. But worse lay ahead, for during an artillery bombardment on June 3rd Number 3 Battalion lost over a hundred out of two hundred and seventy men.

On the previous day the new divisional commander, Lieutenant-General Tanaka, had issued a Special Order to his 33 Division.

'Now is the time to capture Imphal. Our death-defying infantry group expects certain victory when it penetrates the main fortress of the enemy. The coming battle is a turning point. It will decide the success or failure of the Greater East Asia war. You men have got to be fully in the picture as to what the present position is; regarding death as something lighter than a feather you must tackle the job of definitely capturing Imphal.

'That's why it must be expected that the Division will be

almost annihilated. I have confidence in your courage and devotion, and believe that you will do your duty. But should any delinquencies occur you have got to understand that I shall take the necessary action.

'In the front line rewards and punishments must be given on the spot, without delay. A man, for instance, who puts up a good show should have his name sent in at once. On the other hand a man guilty of any misconduct should be punished at once in accordance with the Military Code.

'Further, in order to keep the honour of his unit bright a Commander may have to use his sword as a weapon of punishment; exceedingly shameful though it is to have to shed the blood of one's own soldiers on the battlefield.

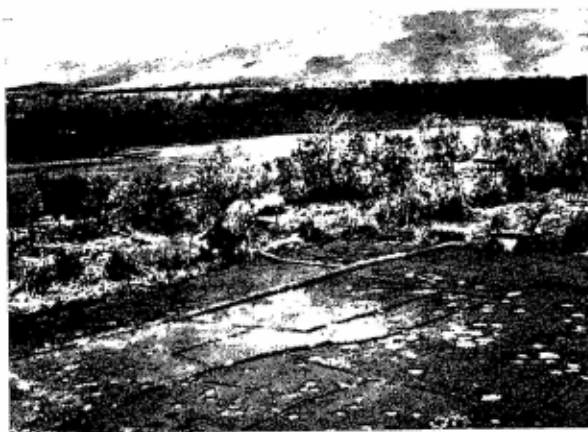
'Fresh troops with unused rifles have now arrived and the time is at hand — the arrow is ready to leave the bow. The infantry group is in high spirits, afire with valour and dominated by one thought and one thought only: the duty laid upon them to annihilate the enemy.

*'On this one battle rests the fate of the Empire. All officers and men, fight courageously!!'*¹

The first effort to implement this more pessimistic than stirring order took place at Ningthoukhong. The village was divided by a sunken stream having a muddy bed and, near the site of the ruined road bridge, very steep banks. The Japanese half straddled the road, and, containing as it did many trees and hedges, afforded such good cover that Colonel Cooper's West Yorkshires could not pin-point their opponents' outposts. By disadvantageous contrast, the northern half, occupied by the West Yorkshires, had scant cover: one tree, several scraggy hedges and a bank or semi-sunken track or two. In consequence, the British soldiers could easily be sniped, and screens had to be put up near battalion headquarters to prevent enemy observation of all their comings and goings.

Such protection was very incomplete, since the Japanese held the hills for some distance behind our positions, and their sniping from the right rear with light artillery and sometimes more persistent shelling added much to the labour of building defences and bunkers, these having to be proofed from both fore and aft.

¹ This document had been recovered by 2/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles from the body of a Japanese officer killed on Mortar Bluff.



A battered village on the Imphal Plain. Shell-pocked paddy fields in the foreground



The two tanks knocked out by Rifleman Ganju Lama, V.C., M.M.

For some three hundred yards behind 17 Division's leading battalion the ground was open, low-lying, marshy and deeply pitted with holes from shellfire and aerial bombardment. The swamp and a deep ditch beside the road meant that, unlike the lighter Japanese tanks, the heavy British ones could not operate off the road. Within a few days this ditch was to be so infested with Japanese corpses, floating and inflated rather like Mr. Michelin, that for troops on that flank the air smelt of anything but attar of roses.

Ningthoukhong had long since seen its Manipuri inhabitants flee, and in the northern half no houses remained standing. But in the middle of the forward positions someone had stood upright a painted terracotta *bas relief* of the Hindu deities, Krishna and Sita, which must have come from a local shelter or shrine. 'Krishna,' recalls Colonel Eustace, 'was fluting in traditional position, with one knee and leg raised in graceful dancing motion. The plaque, gaily painted, with yellow, blue and white predominating, was undamaged. And without suggesting that it was a work of art, there was something very peaceful and pastoral about it. I never passed near without an agreeable sensation; and wondered whether its intact presence held for Hindus anything of the mystic significance that a crucifix in a ruined village in France might have for some people.'

To dig bunkers or foxholes was to see them fill with water, so to obtain cover the troops had to build up prominent, igloo-like edifices. Many a Japanese shell left in the soft mud a large hole which soon became a pool and a trap for the unwary. Shells or mortar bombs which burst near any of the large clumps of bamboo or thick bamboo hedges caused additional casualties in that bamboo splinters flew around and made nasty wounds which turned septic very quickly. With water pouring from the heavens and creeping up from the lake, the troops suffered badly from footrot, and great chunks of skin and flesh came away when they took their socks off. A cure was found by wrapping their feet in newspaper before pulling on socks.

In the early hours of June 7th the Japanese attacked the south-west corner of Ningthoukhong, supporting their infantry with machine-gun fire, both medium and light. By creeping up under cover of a nullah the enemy was able to throw grenades with such deadly effect that the weak West Yorkshire platoon of twenty men defending this part of the perimeter was compelled to yield ground.

Making repeated and most determined efforts to dislodge their stubborn opponents, the Japanese concentrated all the fire they could on this one dwindling platoon for a period of two hours. But in vain. That they failed to extend their penetration in this sector was in large part due to the cool, dogged leadership of Sergeant Victor Turner, who, when he saw that the enemy were trying to outflank the position he had built up with such care and courage, decided to take the initiative and drive them off. Not that he could muster a party with which to counter-attack. On the contrary, the few soldiers left were the bare minimum required to man the position. There was nothing for it but to counter-attack alone, and this Turner did, armed with every grenade he could carry. Boldly, single-handed, he attacked with devastating effect. When he had thrown the last of his grenades he went back for more. Five journeys he made to replenish his armoury, five times he went forward again through intense small-arms and grenade fire. On the sixth occasion this supremely gallant man, an honour alike to his battalion and to his rank, was killed while throwing a grenade into a group of the enemy. In that crucial night Turner displayed leadership, a will to win and valour — all of the highest order. Upon him was bestowed, posthumously, the Victoria Cross. The company commander, Captain J. S. Scruton, was awarded the D.S.O.

Having come within an ace of success, the enemy faltered in his violent attacks, which petered out before dawn, and he left on the battlefield a hundred dead and one wounded prisoner. The West Yorkshires had lost two officers and twelve other ranks killed and thirty-six men wounded, so the battalion, already under-strength and with no reserves left, was withdrawn from the line. In its place came two companies of 2/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles, now led by Lieutenant-Colonel Philip Townsend, a steady, experienced and warmly respected commander who had served with his battalion right through the retreat from Burma. This handsome man's slight impediment sometimes made him seem stern, but he was in fact an exceptionally kind person. Within a day or two in Ningthoukhong he was wounded, but declined to go back for hospital treatment until his wound had stiffened and he could scarcely move. His successor for three weeks was Lieutenant-Colonel 'John' Eustace, who had given up his post as senior staff officer of 20 Division and had recently been acting as second-in-command of 48 Brigade.

Widely read, having an excellent brain, Eustace had passed first out of Sandhurst and later done exceptionally well at the Staff College. Pleasant, conscientious, he was inclined to be unduly modest, sometimes even disparaging, about his capabilities, yet it must be said, as it can surely be said of few if any other battalion commanders, that during the two June battles when he led 2/5 Gurkha and attached troops, three of his men won the Victoria Cross.

His reports, either in writing or spoken over the wireless, were in character. One example of the latter may serve: 'The position as I see it at present could not possibly be worse. I say again, could not possibly be worse. And therefore inevitably must get better.' To anyone who knew Eustace that was distinctly reassuring.

The bridge area and part of the stream bank on our side were mined that first night. Gurkha snipers crept across, but found it almost impossible to pin-point enemy positions, since the well-installed Japanese hindered by sniping every attempt at close investigation.

For two nights, just before daybreak, a great noise of enemy tanks starting up and moving about was heard. Were they arriving in the village from farther back, or rehearsing for an attack, or 'educating' the Gurkhas to disregard such sounds? Nobody knew, but whatever the noise held in store, Eustace's attention was drawn to his lack of defence against tanks. Brigadier Hedley sent up a section of anti-tank guns, laboriously manhandled forward in darkness across the marshy area; more mines were laid along the stream; and several guns and a PIAT or two were placed in position.

In the early hours of the following morning, June 12th, Japanese tank engines were once again heard starting up. Soon these lemon-green tanks came in sight beyond the stream, and the Gurkha snipers had quickly to retreat. A brisk artillery bombardment then opened. Next the combined strength of two depleted Japanese regiments attacked with armoured support, and five tanks penetrated the Gurkha lines, while two others stood back under cover and fired at very short range. Eustace's men on the right held on by a narrow margin, though on the left his Gurkhas had no difficulty in repelling a simultaneous attack.

The two anti-tank guns did stout work until one was overrun and the other had to be dragged back in the very face of the

Japanese. The gunner officer, though wounded, took a PIAT and knocked out one tank, which, unable to move between two banks, had been acting as a strongpoint much too close to battalion headquarters for comfort. Two British tanks, summoned by pre-arranged light signal, rumbled down the road and, though handicapped by their inability to move over the wet paddy, engaged the enemy's armour.

Every telephone cable had been cut, and the wireless was out of action, so that for a time all communication had to be by runner. By now Gurkha casualties had been serious, and Eustace had no reserves with which to drive out the enemy, so Hedley sent up a company of 1/7 Gurkha Rifles from Potsangbam to help restore a menacing situation.

The 1/7 Gurkha company soon came under Japanese medium and tank machine-gun fire at point-blank range, and every line of approach was covered. Rifleman Ganju Lama, on his own initiative, crawled forward with a PIAT. Despite a broken left wrist and two other wounds, one in his right hand and one in his leg, he succeeded in firing his weapon within thirty yards of the enemy tanks and knocked out first one and then a second. He next moved forward and killed or wounded every member of the tank crews, who now attempted to escape. Thanks to his exemplary devotion to duty and brave initiative, his company was able to advance and recapture the lost positions. Only then did Ganju Lama allow himself to be taken back to the regimental aid post to have his wounds dressed.

When General Slim went to see Ganju Lama in hospital afterwards and asked him why he had gone forward in the open like that, the Gurkha replied: 'I had been trained not to fire the PIAT until I was certain of hitting. I knew I could hit at thirty yards, so I went to thirty yards.'

Upon this very brave rifleman, who had won a Military Medal less than a month before, was bestowed the Victoria Cross.

* * *

Exposed to almost incessant rain, the battalions of 32 Brigade up in the hills were never dry, whether crouched in foxholes, trudging on patrol or laying an ambush; and as a result they could not be kept out for more than two days at a time. When they did come back they were exhausted. Apart from providing hot food,

little could be done to dry and rest these soldiers before they had to be up and off again. Yet they exacted a severe toll of the still more uncomfortable Japanese, and hardly a day went by without a successful ambush or patrol clash.

Despite the failure of two attacks by 32 Brigade south down the Kokaden ridge to capture a formidable hill named 'Dome' — a failure largely due to monsoon conditions and the fickleness of the morning mist — it appeared by the middle of June that the enemy's power, if not his dogged will, to launch attacks was dwindling fast and that he was now on the defensive as though playing for time or awaiting some decision as to his future course of action. Yet the persevering and fruitful harassing of his line of communication through Ingourek and the consequent need to secure the shorter supply route between Kokaden and Khoirok now occasioned his most determined final effort to block the Silchar track.

At daybreak on June 21st the Japanese attacked Mortar Bluff and nearby Water Picquet. Part of the path leading off the track proper to the picquet was exposed to shelling from Japanese positions on the Kokaden ridge, and to avoid this exposed portion it was necessary to make a detour to the north through a narrow valley. In wet weather this had soon become a morass from the feet of men and animals using it, and to plod uphill through this mud was real hard work. The 7/10 Baluch garrison, which in the past two months had repulsed numerous attacks, was overrun in unusually thick mist and forced off Water Picquet. Taunton's Northamptons, by now only two companies strong, were ordered up to recapture it. After a long, arduous climb they attacked in the wake of our shelling, but were driven back from the wire by medium machine-guns. This was bad enough, but worse ensued, in that another Japanese night attack drove out the sepoy's holding a key picquet on B.P. Hill, the bump above Halfway House. Once more the Northamptons had to counter-attack; once more they reached the wire only to be forced back, though on this occasion the men did secure several nearby hilltops from which to prepare a second attempt. This succeeded, and the British company recaptured B.P. Hill with the loss of only one man killed. Conspicuous in this action was Lieutenant Franklin, who earned a Military Cross.

Even though it might be a desperate last fling, this sustained Japanese pressure was disquieting, since Mackenzie now disposed

of only one weak company as reserve with which to counter each new enemy thrust. This force was so obviously inadequate in the circumstances that Burton sent up two companies of 1/10 Gurkha, and on June 25th Hedley's 48 Brigade Headquarters and 2/5 Gurkha, rapidly changing to pack transport, were summoned to aid the dogged, defiant but much burdened 32 Brigade. The serious overall situation had been aggravated by the grim fact that for five days past no convoy had been able to drive through to Road-head. Rations had become extremely tight, and not until the R.A.F. risked much in foul weather and hazardous cloud to drop supplies by parachute did matters improve.

The task of Eustace's 2/5 Gurkha riflemen was to relieve the exhausted Baluchis, who had fought so well, and to recapture Water Picquet.

At half past six on June 25th forty-one Gurkhas under Subadar Netrabahadur Thapa were sent off up the steep hillside with signallers and with soldiers and mules carrying food and ammunition, to take over the isolated post of Mortar Bluff, a small round pimple rising out of open grassland and barely large enough to contain a platoon. The relief took place without incident save for a sniping shot or two.

During the early part of the night a moon shone, but later heavy clouds blew across the sky, and a torrential monsoon downpour soon began and then continued all night. Absolute blackness fell on the hills, and from the edge of a wood growing along the crest some fifty yards from Mortar Bluff Netrabahadur's position was bombarded at almost point-blank range by Japanese mortars, grenades and guns — as a prelude to the first of a series of violent attacks made with at least a company.

Colonel Eustace spent the night beside the Baluch exchange, to which was connected the cable linking Netrabahadur's telephone. From time to time the Subadar reported the situation with clarity and calm, and he was helped with pre-arranged artillery fire. Eustace takes up the story.

"The attacks were renewed time and again. Netrabahadur began to report that he was hard pressed; casualties were heavy; the Japs were massing near his wire and had surrounded him; they were in part possession of his position and he was trying to eject them; grenades were getting short; the situation was bad; were there any orders? — only to hang on. There was now nothing we could do

to help him from below. A party of reinforcements, and a quantity of grenades, was sent off, but it must take time to get there in the dark and rain, and with Mortar Bluff surrounded by enemy it is improbable that they could ever have reached the garrison, or in the blackness avoid being mistaken for enemy.

'Sounds from above, of grenades and firing, reached us below from time to time, indicating the intimate and grim struggle going on above in the darkness and rain. I think I was in touch with Netrabahadur nearly up to the end. He was cool and bent on carrying out his orders to the last. It must have been 3.30 a.m. when communication ceased.'

The enemy made furious efforts to exploit their initial but costly gains. In vain did they attack. The Gurkhas yielded not an inch. At four o'clock eight reinforcements with grenades and ammunition arrived, but they at once attracted fire and all became casualties. Undismayed, the Subadar himself retrieved the ammunition and, followed by the men of his platoon headquarters, attacked with kukris and the few remaining grenades. Netrabahadur Thapa received a bullet wound in the mouth and soon afterwards was killed outright by a grenade. When his body was found next day, a kukri was in his hand, and beside him a dead Japanese with cleft skull. Major P. A. Gouldsbury, then adjutant, recalls: 'Although the Jap had been wearing a steel helmet, Netrabahadur had cut right through his helmet and skull, and the kukri had finished up almost half-way down the Jap's breastbone. I could not prise the kukri out with my hands or with a bayonet, and finally had to shoot it out with a tommy-gun.' So many bodies lay in Mortar Bluff that it was impossible to avoid trampling on them.

Thus Netrabahadur Thapa, an intelligent, sensitive man, well known in the battalion as a dancer, had organised his young riflemen and fought and defended for eight hours against heavy odds before he died. In recognition of his indomitable leadership he was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross.

The position was overrun. A few wounded survivors got away and posted themselves on a ridge near Mortar Bluff, thereby helping the assault next morning, June 26th.

The day began badly, for when Eustace's headquarters halted, as it was thought under cover, two Japanese shells landed in their midst, and Major J. M. McGill, who had just arrived as second-

in-command, his hand outstretched to take a biscuit offered by Eustace, was mortally wounded in the head. Three havildars were killed and several other men wounded. Nevertheless, the Gurkhas drove forward when the bombardment from our own guns lifted. The leading company passed over the scrubby crest, ran down a concave bowl through ankle-deep scrub and grass, and then clambered up towards the Bluff.

'It was the classic formation,' writes Colonel Eustace: 'sections separated, in waves, brens and tommy guns at the carry, ready for the final blitzing approach. We had a deers-circle view from the spur. The attackers came under very heavy aimed fire and men began to fall in numbers. Then came that hesitant moment when the watcher's heart stands still. But all was well. Encouraged by the company commander [Lieutenant J. P. Henderson] and their Gurkha officers, there was that determined rush forward which makes one feel instinctively that the attack is going to get home, barring accidents; and with cries of "*Ayo Gurkhali!*" they were in the position. We on the spur joined in the cries, and took some pot shots at Japs trying to escape into the cover of the wood.'

During this action the phlegmatic, unimaginative and extremely brave Agansing Rai so conducted himself as to win the Victoria Cross. A very fine basketball player, this naik was a steadfast and delightful companion. He had an unusual character in that, being a Rai, he quickly made himself at home and popular in a company which was almost entirely Magar-Gurung — rather like a man from Thurso serving in the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry. When the attack faltered on a false crest about eighty yards short of the objective, because of accurate enemy fire from Mortar Bluff and the nearby jungle, Agansing Rai led his section through withering fire and across open ground to an enemy post. While his bren-gunner killed one of the Japanese machine-gun crew, Agansing Rai killed the other three. Then the section moved forward again across bullet-swept ground, and routed the whole garrison of Mortar Bluff. They were now much troubled by a 37-millimetre gun pounding them from close range. Agansing Rai again took the initiative and led his men towards the dangerous gun position. Intense fire had reduced the section to three men before half the distance had been covered, but the survivors pressed on, the naik leading. When his tommy-gun jammed he seized a bren automatic, ran forward under fire and killed three more of

the enemy, while his companions dealt with the others, thereby silencing the gun.

They returned to Mortar Bluff, where the rest of their platoon were forming up to assault Water Picquet. Agansing Rai had still not done. As though all this were insufficient gallantry for one morning, he grabbed another tommy-gun in one hand and a grenade in the other, and, advancing upon an isolated Japanese bunker whence showers of grenades and a hail of machine-gun bullets had been causing heavy casualties, he killed its four occupants.

Another to distinguish himself this day was Subadar Dhirbahadur Gurung, a tough, rough and extremely good Gurkha officer, cheerful and good-humoured, especially when things were going badly. He had won the Indian Order of Merit at the Sittang River crossing in 1942, had been captured by the Japanese and soon afterwards escaped. Now, though wounded in the leg, he cheered on his company like a huntsman with a pack of hounds — a wonderful feat of control. Several Japanese guns were overrun, and large dumps of ammunition beside them. By late afternoon both Mortar Bluff and Water Picquet had been garrisoned, dug and rewired. As for the enemy, they had taken a very accurate pounding from our artillery in Gun Box, and had had enough. During the final phase of the company attack they broke and ran, but even so, every man carried a wounded comrade on his back, and many of them presented an easy target.

* * *

A week later, at the beginning of July, Colonel 'Saku' received orders from 33 Division to withdraw his 214 Regiment as far as Topka Kul. The Japanese were indeed in a parlous state. On July 2nd, for example, 2/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles captured a hill and there found enemy mess tins in which were being cooked ordinary grass and large black slugs — a disgusting mess.

'Saku' sent Lieutenant Naga ahead to prepare a site for Regimental Headquarters. About fifty 'walking' wounded from the field dressing station asked to accompany Naga. These were men without arms, men without legs, men with scarcely the strength to drag themselves along, men groaning on stretchers. Naga recognised on one stretcher a brother officer who had lost the use of one leg and whose dressings had been improvised from maize

leaves and banana-leaf pith. Only two medical orderlies could be spared to escort these wounded soldiers.

Naga took with him a reliable sergeant and, in his belt, two grenades. Progress was painfully slow; a hundred yards forward and then a long rest, after which many of the wounded could hardly rise to their feet again. From time to time they came upon squatting figures: Japanese soldiers dead on the path. Or a pitiful figure would crawl up to the column and beg to be taken along or else put out of his misery.

Perhaps the worst part of the journey was passing close under the British positions on Point 5846. Rain fell in torrents. The halts became longer and more frequent. Then the column came under heavy machine-gun fire. A violent storm blew up and the temperature dropped sharply. One junior officer begged a grenade off Naga and promptly killed himself.

After many hours of struggle the column approached Ingourek and came upon a heap of 'sleeping' men — all dead. The stench of death hung over everything there. At dawn they reached the village and Lieutenant Naga parted from the wounded, of whom only eight still remained with him. A few stragglers followed, but it was not known how many of these had fallen by the wayside. All in all, Naga felt thankful to be alive, having seen men collapse from the pain of their wounds, from the inroads of amoebic dysentery, and recalling how the worst ones had begged their comrades to kill them.

On arrival at Topka Kul, Colonel 'Saku' reported to the new divisional commander, Lieutenant-General Tanaka, a fierce-looking figure with piercing eyes and a long forked beard like some Biblical patriarch, who out of sheer bravado had placed his headquarters little more than a hundred yards from the British positions. 'Saku' explained frankly to Tanaka why he thought the Imphal campaign had failed — the Japanese had underestimated the strength of their opponents' defences round Bishenpur and Point 5846, and there had been insufficient reconnaissance before launching an attack. He also reported that the strength of 214 Regiment was down to four hundred and sixty men, only half of them fit to fight. He had started the campaign with more than four thousand.

Tanaka, who gave a first impression of toughness and brawn at the expense of brains but was in fact an experienced and resilient

commander fully aware of the dangerous situation, listened sympathetically to 'Saku's' opinion that his men were now in such poor shape that it would be far better to pull out until the worst of the rainy season was over and until improved supplies had built up alike the morale and the fighting power of his regiment. But Tanaka would allow only a temporary withdrawal to Topka Kul.

Then, like a bombshell, came new orders from Mutaguchi, announced at a divisional conference on July 6th. Clearly the Army Commander was making a last effort to salvage something from the Imphal-Kohima failure and to save face for himself, regardless of the cost in life and limb. To this end 214 Regiment was to advance via the Logtak Lake and attack Palel, with the remnants of 15 and 31 Divisions and a few stragglers who were still holding out over there.

Fatalistically, Colonel 'Saku' prepared himself and his Regiment for certain death. One of his junior officers came to protest passionately at the folly of sending soldiers on such a mission in their present state of debilitation. This was no way to fight a war, he declared. Could the Colonel do nothing to prevent the Palel fiasco? 'Saku' sympathised, but could not say so. He knew perfectly well that after starvation and suffering his men were being condemned to a useless death, but he had to upbraid the officer and order him to leave. The man left 'Saku's' tent and at once blew himself up with a grenade.

That night 214 Regiment, such as it was, set out for yet another battlefield. Those who were too badly wounded had to be left behind; and once more a pitiful column of sick and lame made its way to a new destination. 'Saku' was instructed by Tanaka to march southward, cross the Manipur River near Tongzang and then strike north for Palel. But he had already made up his mind to take a shorter route via the hills on the southern edge of the Manipur plain. To travel by Tanaka's route would mean a detour of one hundred and fifty miles, whereas his own route would be less than forty. Why make the already weakened troops march four times the distance necessary?

However, two days later fresh orders reached 'Saku'. Instead of marching to Palel, he was to move to Tiddim. Mutaguchi, having made his gesture, had reversed his orders, as perhaps he had intended doing all along; and he clearly admitted that all hope of success against Imphal was now at an end. 'Saku' suspected that

the shrewd and considerate Tanaka had foreseen this decision by Mutaguchi and had deliberately ordered the long detour in order to save needless slaughter. Had 'Saku' taken the shorter route, 214 Regiment's survivors would already have thrown themselves on Palel, and orders to retreat would have come too late.

By the time 5 Indian Division arrived and took over all defensive positions along the Silchar track on July 15th, 3/8 Gurkha had without opposition cleared Ingourek village and occupied Dome. When Mackenzie's 32 Brigade went back to Wangjing the men had been for over six months in continuous daily contact with the Japanese and were very tired and overdue for a rest.

PART FIVE
A RESOUNDING VICTORY



CHAPTER XXIV

THE ROAD IS OPENED

'British — Too many guns, tanks and troops. Japanese going, but back in six months.'

A notice scrawled on a wall in Mao

THE battle of Kohima was over — it had been a failure and General Sato's 31 Division, without orders, was in full retreat from that scene of carnage. General Yamauchi's 15 Division had been so severely handled that it was no longer in a fit state to make any impression on the defences east and north of Imphal. General Yamamoto's efforts at Shenam had reached a state of stalemate; in making these suicidal attacks his casualties had been crippling. General Tanaka's 33 Division (General Yanagida had been removed from command at the end of May) was making no progress at Bishenpur and had also suffered enormous losses.

The lines of communication up from the Chindwin had always been poor; now the monsoon was rapidly turning them into seas of mud. The forward troops were without food, without ammunition and without the possibility of being sent any more, which factor had inspired an angry exchange of signals between the three divisions and Army Headquarters. Both these commodities had been promised and none had materialised. Hence General Sato's disobedience of orders. There were ominous signs, too, that, with the possible exception of 33 Division, morale was cracking everywhere.

This was the situation facing General Mutaguchi during the early days of June. All his hopes of a quick victory had long since vanished. What was he to do?

For some time he had felt that Kohima was a lost cause. But with just that little bit extra, could he not succeed in taking Imphal? It was with this in mind that he had ordered Sato to send reinforcements down the Kohima road to join Yamauchi for a powerful assault on the town from the north. If only he could lay hands on the food, ammunition and vehicles stored in the 'Keep',

his troubles would be over for the time being. But Sato had ignored Mutaguchi's orders. 31 Division, its discipline said to be breaking down, was now streaming back along the jungle tracks towards Ukhrul.

Ever since the Japanese Army had entered Malaya and Burma it had enjoyed an unbroken sequence of victories. Now it looked like having to face the biggest defeat in its history. In Mutaguchi's view the commanders of the three divisions were responsible.

Yanagida had failed to show the dash and determination that was expected of him. He had allowed 17 Indian Division to escape from Tiddim when its line of retreat had been cut off. And then, at Bishenpur, he had failed to push on relentlessly to Imphal. Still, Yanagida had been removed, and perhaps under General Tanaka things might go better.

He no longer had any confidence in Yamauchi, who had surrendered the initiative to the British and allowed himself to be put on the defence everywhere. He would have to be removed too.

Lastly there was Sato, who had displayed gross insubordination and a flagrant disregard of orders, even to the extent of cutting off wireless communications with Mutaguchi's headquarters, and sending to Burma Area Headquarters a signal which had read: 'The tactical ability of the 15 Army Staff lies below that of cadets.'

He would have to go.¹

Mutaguchi decided that in one last all-out attack on Imphal lay his only hope. His troops had undergone the most severe trials, but all would be worth while if Imphal could be captured. He therefore sent instructions to 31 Division to join up with 15 Division for this final effort.

Extracts from an inspiring Order of the Day, which he issued about this time, made clear to the Army his attitude and the importance of the battle he hoped to stage.

After briefly summarising events over the past three months, of which he said: 'Still all this has not been fully up to the expectations of the Nation. This is a most regrettable matter', Mutaguchi went on:

'This forthcoming plan of operations will be the Army's last.

¹ All three divisional commanders were replaced. After General Yanagida's dismissal in May, Generals Yamauchi and Sato were relieved in June. This wholesale removal of senior officers was unprecedented and was a shock to the already falling morale. Yamauchi contracted malaria and later died in Maymyo.

You must fully realise that if a decisive victory is not obtained we shall not be able to strike back again. On this one battle rests the fate of the Empire! Officers and men must ever keep in mind the seriousness of this great task ahead and create a fighting will to win. Everyone must unswervingly serve the Throne and reach the ultimate goal so that the Son of Heaven and the Nation alike may be forever guarded.'

It was too late! 31 Division continued to retreat towards the Chindwin.

* * *

'Sally, that road block has got to be cleared by midday tomorrow and the tanks must be through by 2 p.m.'

These were Briggs' very definite orders to Salomons, when he went up to see him on the afternoon of June 21st at 9 Brigade Headquarters close to a ruined village by Milestone 114 on the road from Kohima.

The enemy position to which Briggs referred was two miles farther north, and as far as could be seen it was the last obstacle before the country became more open. Once cleared, the tanks would be able to move about more freely and there would be every likelihood that the advance would go more quickly.

This road block had proved a real tough nut to crack. For six days now Cree's West Yorkshires and Gerty's Jats, helped by the gunners and R.A.F., had tried to force a way through, but had made little or no headway, and many a brave officer and man had been either killed or wounded in the process.

In order to break the stubborn Japanese resistance, both Briggs and Salomons had tried other means besides a head-on clash. Salomons had sent 3/14 Punjab, in the early morning of June 20th, to try to reach Milestone 111 behind the road block. The news was that they were moving there slowly against opposition.

Meanwhile on June 19th Briggs had sent Evans' 123 Brigade on a wide left hook into the mountains west of the road, with the object of cutting it farther north at Kangpopki, Milestone 106.

A little time would elapse before the effects of this move were felt, as the going was terrible. The narrow track by which the brigade, with a mule company, had to climb up the mountainside was almost a waterway on account of the torrential rain. In the dark men and mules slipped and stumbled upwards. Most of the

officers and men had been in action almost unceasingly for nine months, since the previous September; for some time past the main meal of the day had been a tin of bully beef and some packets of biscuits between three men. They were tired and, beyond an occasional oath as a man tripped and fell, nobody spoke. The only noise to be heard above the splashing of heavy raindrops on the trees was the scraping of the nailed boots and the clip of hooves against the rocks and stones in the track.

Nevertheless, there was a hope that this might be the last big effort. The British 2 Division was hurrying along the road from Kohima, and on June 20th was reported to have reached Milestone 85. Now only twenty-five miles separated the two forces.

Major-General John Grover's 2 Division had begun its push down the road on June 4th against the usual Japanese fierce resistance, in this case put up by Sato's rearguard under Major-General Miyazaki.

In addition to the difficulties of the road itself, which often ran at 4,500 feet above sea-level, with a sheer mountain on one side and a drop of a thousand feet or more on the other, the enemy had taken every advantage of the many bends and nullah crossings to delay the advance. Bridges had been blown and an occasional deep ditch dug across the road and protected by mines sunk in tar taken from barrels left for the repair of the road. At the best of times mine lifting is a dangerous task, but when the mines are fixed in tar the work is even more so. The fact that they were removed skilfully and quickly by the Royal Engineers, and that Bailey Bridges were thrown across the demolitions, ensured that the advance was not unduly held up for these reasons alone.

As Grover drove along the road in his jeep on June 6th, he came up with the B.B.C. van and stopped to have a chat with Richard Sharp, the war correspondent, who gave him the heartening news of the landings in Normandy. While they talked there was a commotion on the hill immediately above them. Looking up, they saw, standing on the slope, a Japanese who, without further ado, jumped, claspng a grenade to his stomach. A shattering explosion followed as his remains hurtled through the air, spattering on to the road close beside them. Among some of the enemy, at least, there was still no question of being taken alive.

Passing through deserted villages, outflanking the enemy rearguard positions, 2 Division hurried on and captured the two-

hundred-foot-long bridge at Karong before the Japanese could blow it up.

In the village of Mao the enemy had scrawled in English on a wall: 'British — Too many guns, tanks and troops. Japanese going, but back in six months.'

By the evening of June 21st the leading troops of 6 Brigade, commanded by Smith, who had led 2/1 Punjab at Litan in the early days, had reached Milestone 103. Now only eight miles lay between 2 British and 5 Indian Divisions.

Perhaps it was in celebration of things to come that the morning of June 22nd broke bright and sunny, the first time for many days. On a hill two or three miles to the west of the road and on a level with the Japanese road block at Milestone 112 was 123 Brigade Headquarters. As soon as it was light enough to see any distance, Lance-Corporal Canning of the Intelligence Section, throwing away a half-smoked, mouldy ration cigarette — the packet bore the heartening sign of 'V' — climbed up the tree which had been his observation post on the previous day. He was a powerfully built young man of nineteen with red hair, a veteran of six months' fighting in Burma.

The Intelligence Section was a mixed one, and like many another British soldier, Canning had picked up a smattering of Urdu, sufficient to make himself understood to his Indian comrades. It was surprising how the language problem was overcome.

The work of the section was interesting and varied. Only a few days before, he and another man had been sent to locate an enemy gun which was sniping at one of the forward positions. This had entailed going out two to three hundred yards in front of the position at night, concealing themselves in a hiding-place from which they could obtain a good view of the hills about three thousand yards away across the valley and then watching the countryside through binoculars during daylight. A telephone had been provided so that they could send back any useful information.

At ten o'clock when the heat of the sun really began to make itself felt, the stench was nauseating. On looking round for the cause, they found that they were in the middle of a cluster of decaying Japanese corpses, the result of a previous battle. But there was nothing to be done about it, and they had to stay for two days and nights.

While searching the grassy slopes opposite to them, Canning's

suspensions were aroused as his glasses focused on what appeared to be a dark patch on the face of one of the hills. He watched it closely for a few minutes and then, sure enough, a cover was removed to reveal a hole in which he could see the outline of a gun!

It fired two or three shots in quick succession, the shells whistling over their heads to land in the position behind them. Then the hole was re-covered and silence reigned. Excitedly he telephoned back details of all that he had seen.

That night a gunner officer joined them, and on the following morning the shells of his battery crashed on and around the dark patch. No more was heard from that gun.

But now Canning was looking for something different as he pulled his binoculars from their case to watch the road from Kohima. He could hardly believe his eyes . . . moving southwards down the road were three or four tanks with infantry sitting on them.

Scrambling hurriedly down the tree, he ran to the brigadier, who was seated with his back against a rock, talking by wireless to one of the battalions.

'Excuse me, sir!' he exclaimed excitedly. 'I've just seen some tanks coming down the road with infantry sitting on them.'

The brigadier seemed a little sceptical.

'Are you sure?' he asked. 'I suppose it is possible. Where did you see them from?'

'From up that tree over there, sir.'

'Wait a minute, I'll come with you and have a look,' retorted the brigadier, and finishing his conversation on the set, he and the lance-corporal climbed up into the observation post.

Canning had been right. There were the tanks of 2 Division coming down the road, some firing their guns at small parties of the enemy, who were trying to escape up the hillside to the east. Reports from 1/17 Dogra pushing down on to the road at Milestone 107 at ten o'clock confirmed what had already been seen.

By ten thirty 9 Brigade had broken the road block and a force of tanks and infantry was just about to pass through. Salomons himself, having already had a message, was on the spot, so climbing into his jeep and taking two men as escort, he drove up the road to see if he could make any contact.

After two or three miles the welcome sight of steel-helmeted British troops marching on either side of the road greeted his eyes.

They exchanged smiles and waves as he drove between them. Three hundred yards behind the leading soldiers Salomons met Smith, striding along with a cigarette in his mouth and a long stick in his hand. General Grover, who had received a message at about ten o'clock that a meeting was imminent, had hurried up from his headquarters, and was walking with him.

'By Jove! it's good to see you, Smithy,' was Salomons' opening remark.

'We're jolly glad to have made it,' was Smith's reply. After other suitable comments, maps were produced and laid on the bonnet of a jeep, while Grover and Salomons made clear to one another the exact location of their respective troops.

Within half an hour both General 'Monty' Stopford, the commander of 33rd Corps which had been fighting at Kohima, and Briggs arrived on the scene. Together they fixed the boundaries between 2 and 5 Divisions and made plans for the immediate future, pending further consultation with Scoones.

This meeting was indeed an historic occasion. After three months of bitter fighting the road was at last open and 4th Corps was no longer cut off.

Waiting impatiently behind 2 Division was a large convoy of lorries carrying the much-needed supplies and ammunition. That night, with headlights blazing, it drove triumphantly into Imphal. The battle was as good as won.

CHAPTER XXV
THE DÉBÂCLE

'We may take it that without its baggage train an Army is lost; without provisions it is lost; without bases of supply it is lost.'

'On the field of battle the spoken word does not carry far enough. Gongs and drums, banners and flags are means by which the ears and eyes of a host may be focused on one particular point.'

Sun Tzu

IN his book *The Eclipse of the Rising Sun*, written in 1951, Kase Toshikazu, a Japanese Foreign Office official, had this to say about the battle of Imphal:

'Most of this force perished in battle or later of starvation. The disaster of Imphal was perhaps the worst of its kind yet chronicled in the annals of war. One of the regimental commanders who survived the retreat called on me in Tokyo in his tattered uniform. I could hardly recognise him. He told me how the ranks had thinned down daily as thirst [*sic*] and hunger overtook the retreating column and how the sick and wounded had to be abandoned by hundreds. In order to avoid capture these men were usually forced to seek death at their own hands.'

Albeit the defeat of the Japanese 15th Army may not have been 'the worst of its kind yet chronicled in the annals of war' it would be difficult to recall a retreat in which the conditions were worse for both victor and vanquished.

In the past it had always been considered that, with the arrival of the monsoon, operations on a large scale would become impossible, and both sides had taken up monsoon positions confining their activities to patrolling. Now General Slim, despite the weather, was determined not only to give the enemy no respite but to turn his defeat into a rout.

15 and 31 Divisions suffered most. 33 Division carried out an orderly withdrawal when the time came and, indeed, remained a cohesive entity until almost the end of hostilities in August 1945, a

year later. Admittedly it had the advantage of the Tiddim and Tamu roads behind it, whereas the other two divisions were compelled to retreat along tracks and footpaths through the mountainous jungle.

From Kohima, once the battle there was over, 7 Indian Division had begun to follow up 31 Division, forcing its way through the mountains and jungle towards Ukhrul from the north. Its 89 Brigade, recently with 5 Division, was at the same time moving eastwards from Milestone 109 on the Kohima road, acting as an anvil to the hammer provided by the bulk of the division. Farther to the east of 7 Division was 23 Long Range Penetration Brigade, commanded by Brigadier Lancelot Perowne, whose task it was to harass the flank of the retreating 31 Japanese Division and to cut off its retreat.

On the road leading from Imphal to Ukhrul, Gracey's 20 Division was mopping up the remnants of Yamauchi's 15 Division as they struggled back towards the Chindwin. At Shenam, Yamamoto was still hanging on grimly, while Ouvry Roberts was preparing to encircle and destroy him before he could escape down the road to Tamu. Tanaka's 33 Division at Bishenpur, although badly knocked about, was fighting against 17 Division, which was making a final effort to smash it or at least to start it on its way back towards Tiddim.

In fact, the British and Indian troops of 4th and 33rd Corps were bursting out of Imphal and Kohima in a number of different directions to complete the rout of 15 and 31 Divisions, broken both physically and morally. But conditions were against them: physical exhaustion was increasing among the officers and men; the country and the weather were proving enemies no less formidable than the Japanese; digestions, already affected, had been further impaired, so that some men were unable to eat at all; many, whose religion permitted alcohol, kept themselves going on a diet of rum and tinned milk, of which there was fortunately a plentiful supply.

An added effect of malnutrition was that it weakened resistance to disease. With the coming of the monsoon there was an increase in the deadly 'scrub' typhus, of which the accepted cure was careful nursing, but since this was possible only in the hospitals in Imphal, numbers of officers and men died through the inability to evacuate them from the jungle. Often unable to wash either

themselves or their clothes, the bodies of many were covered with irritating skin diseases. Blankets had long been discarded. Sodden with rain, and with no opportunity to dry them out, they only added weight for the mules. In consequence, the soldiers lay down shivering in their dripping clothes to snatch what sleep they could, and from this angle alone they underwent extreme hardship.

Since the mountain ranges ran mainly from north to south, for many the direction of the pursuit was against the grain of the country, entailing ascents and descents of anything up to four thousand feet. The tracks, varying in width from three yards to four feet, were often partially washed away and frequently enshrouded in cloud. At times they ran along the narrow top of the mountains; often they had been cut into the steep sides, so that a false step by man or mule meant a drop of hundreds of feet to death in the trees below.

In contrast to the intense cold of the mountain summits, the valleys were hot and steamy. Through them flowed fast-running streams swollen by torrential rain, which tested the ingenuity of the engineers as they devised means of putting men and animals across them. Frequently the swamps and mud were death-traps for the mules, and no words of praise can be strong enough for the muleteers. Trudging along, dragging two or even three mules up and down the hair-raising tracks, through mud and water, these men displayed courage and determination of the highest order. Tired, hungry and not infrequently suffering from fever, they never gave up.

There was no question of setting up a line of communication along which to send supplies and ammunition; that was impossible in the circumstances. Instead, all supply was by air, although this was intermittent, due to the shocking flying conditions. Cloud and rain blotted out the mountains and valleys for days on end, so that aircraft were unable to fly and the troops on the ground went hungry. One battalion had no food dropped on it for four days.

Flat, open spaces for dropping parachutes were not always available and, even if it was on a mountaintop, the drop had to be made where the column had halted. In such cases the supplies had to be landed on the troops themselves. If it was what is known as a 'free drop,' that is to say without parachutes, the men on the ground spent an adventurous hour dodging the packages as they hurtled earthwards, often to burst on impact. Food, fodder for the

mules and bundles of clothing or equipment rained down from the skies, and a direct hit from one of these loads could well cause death or severe injury.

But dangerous as it was for the soldiers below, it was no less so for the British and American pilots, who flew with the utmost courage in conditions of great peril. Mountain summits concealed in mist, cumulous cloud, and a sea of jungle below them were the dangers which they had to face and did so, determined that those on the ground should have all they needed.

Finding sufficient men to push the loads out of the aircraft had always proved difficult, and volunteers, British and Indian, were called for to augment the numbers. It was not an easy task, and required careful timing for packages to be released at the exact moment to fall within the dropping zone. Extreme care had to be taken that the unloaders did not accompany the article which they pushed out of the aircraft, and tragedies sometimes occurred with inexperienced men. One story is told of a Gurkha volunteer who, due to a sudden and unexpected lurch of the aeroplane, found himself on the way out with a bale of fodder. With presence of mind, he hung on tightly to the load as it fell like a stone. Luckily for him, his grasp did not interfere with the opening of the parachute and he glided safely to earth, sustaining only a broken leg on landing.

Although conditions were bad for the men of 14th Army, they were infinitely worse for the Japanese. There was no food except what they could pick up in the Naga villages, already pillaged during the advance four months previously; no ammunition came up from the rear, and there was no medical attention for the sick and wounded. Communications had gone, and control was virtually impossible. Few 'banners and gongs' in the shape of wireless sets remained in action, as they had either broken down or their operators were too sick to work them. It would be hard to imagine a worse state of chaos.

If evidence was required of the degree of defeat which the Japanese had suffered, or of the terrible state to which their soldiers had been reduced, plenty was to be found on the tracks leading back to the Chindwin and along the Tamu and Tiddim roads. The sickly smell of death hung over the humid jungle, and signs of despair and misery were rife. As the pursuing columns struggled up and slithered down precipitous paths, they passed human corpses and carcasses of animals half concealed in the

churned-up mud; some, mere skeletons, had died where they had fallen, exhausted and worn out, without boots and much of their clothing. Many thousands of animals perished through overwork and lack of food.

Here the British and Indian soldiers would come upon a bombed transport column of lorries, made up of Japanese and captured British vehicles, some of which, blackened by fire, stood at the side of the track, while others could be seen way down the mountainside with their drivers dead inside the cabs. Then, on the Tamu or Tiddim roads, there would be a tank with one of its tracks lying broken alongside it and a dead member of the crew stretched out a few yards away; inside, the remainder sat in the grotesque attitudes in which they had taken their last breath.

On all sides were rifles, ammunition and equipment dropped by men too exhausted to carry them farther or else cast away in efforts to escape. From time to time a deserted camp or the remains of a makeshift hospital could be seen, half hidden in the trees and undergrowth. Besides the evil-smelling corpses lying around the hospital site, others would be found on the stretchers on which they had arrived. Many had a bullet hole through their forehead, evidence that they had been put out of their misery before the attendants had left. In one hospital, consisting of a few dilapidated bashes hidden in thick jungle, dead Japanese sat up or lay on improvised beds, their bones clean after the red ants had completed their gruesome work.

The few prisoners who were taken or brought in by the villagers were in a dreadful state. Half naked, without boots, suffering from malaria, dysentery, beri-beri or a combination of all three, often badly wounded and certainly starving, they were shattered in mind and body. Very few tried to do away with themselves; they were past that; although it is recorded that one was heard making noises during the night, and on investigation was found trying to cut his throat with a ration-tin lid.

When Perowne's men arrived on the outskirts of Ukhrul the night before the Japanese evacuated it they watched the flames shoot skywards in the moonlight as the enemy set the village on fire. It was a big place divided into two parts, the civilised and the pagan; it stood on a hill, and around the ruins of the *dak* (post office) bungalow blue hydrangeas still grew in profusion. The following morning when the brigade entered Ukhrul they found

that, among other structures, the hospital had been burnt to the ground together with those inmates who were unable to move. Within the ruins charred bodies bore silent witness to the happenings of the previous night.

Before setting fire to the village, the Japanese had released the elephants which they had been using for transport, and the 'oozies', the Burmese name for the drivers, had decamped, leaving the elephants, terrified by the flames, to stray into the jungle.

With the brigade was Captain R. McRae of the Royal Army Veterinary Corps, a popular little Irishman who had an uncanny way with animals. To all, he spoke in his soft Irish brogue, using a fantastic mixture of love and baby talk. 'You could see the animal addressed,' recalls Perowne, 'attracted to him by some magic power and slowly abandon all fear or resistance and do whatever he wanted.'

Earlier McRae had given a demonstration of this extraordinary talent when, on the way to Ukhrul, the brigade had come to a river which rose alarmingly, and the mules had refused to face the rushing water. What happened next is best described in extracts from Perowne's diary:

'On June 23rd a further rise had carried away the temporary bridge and the men were separated from their animals and equipment by a roaring torrent one hundred and fifty feet wide which barred the way forward. An air drop of collapsible boats and steel wire rope had been made but frantic efforts on the part of the sappers failed repeatedly to get the rafts across. An endless rope was eventually got across and the mules being attached to it one by one, with thirty or so Sappers and Nagas heaving, the animals were literally dragged across the torrent. Throughout the day little "Mac" stood, clad only in his shirt, in the water, calling the animals forward by name (he knew each one of them individually), leading them in, attaching them to the rope and launching them into the maelstrom.' Perowne goes on to make the point that no effort of their own leaders could get the mules near the water; but they responded to *his* voice and put their trust in him.

Now McRae was to try his hand on two frightened elephants found wandering near by. Slowly he went forward and, literally 'talking' them into his hand, he secured their picket chains and arranged for their feeding and watering till the oozies came in twenty-four hours later.

During its advance Perowne's brigade had overrun the rear headquarters of 31 Japanese Division, capturing pay chests, cases of documents and a number of medals for making 'on the spot' awards for gallantry. After Perowne had entered one village deserted by the enemy and set up his headquarters in the Public Works Department inspection bungalow, an agitated Naga appeared from nowhere.

'The Japanese have just sent up a party to collect the tin bath in the bungalow. What are we to do?' he enquired.

The Political Officer with the column, who could speak the language, was quick in his reply:

'Tell them that you are very sorry that they can't have the bath as a British officer is sitting in it.'

The Naga was delighted with the answer and, splitting his sides with laughter, went back to deliver the message.

Outside Ukhrul itself a quantity of brand-new equipment, still in packing-cases, had been dumped by the Japanese at the side of the track. Among the more important articles they contained were teleprinters, scheduled to be installed when the battle had been won, wireless sets and even a binocular microscope, which the medical officer at once took into use.

At Sangshak the whole surroundings were a ghastly shambles. The Japanese had paid no attention to the ordinary rules of sanitation, and in addition corpses littered the area, including those of men of 50 Parachute Brigade, which had been left unburied after the battle at the end of March.

'We arrived very tired at Sangshak just after dark,' recounts Geoffrey Bamford, 'and having arranged for the defences for the night I went to sleep. When I woke up in the morning it was to find that I had been lying next to a dried-up skeleton. On the track, under the trees, were fifty lorries, nose to tail, which the Japanese had been forced to abandon through lack of petrol; and as we had none, we had to leave them where they were.'

A Japanese account tells of the arrival of the remnants of Colonel 'Saku's' 214 Regiment at a small village near Tiddim containing a supply depot in which the conditions were deplorable. There was extreme reluctance on the part of those in charge to provide either food or accommodation for the exhausted and famished new arrivals. The place was infested with deserters and stragglers who were engaged in bartering fruit and putrescent

meat for cash, fountain pens and other articles of value. A tattered soldier came up to Lieutenant Naga and Sergeant Kokura, trying to sell them some of this disgusting meat for two hundred yen. And Naga's batman, left unconscious on the outskirts of the village, had a horrifying experience. When he came to, it was to find that he had been robbed by troops from the depot of what few possessions still remained to him and shortly afterwards these ghouls returned, expecting to find him dead so that they could cut up his flesh — presumably for food. In his mind there was no doubt about their intentions, and luckily for him he had sufficiently recovered by then to scare them off.

Yet despite starvation, sickness, lack of ammunition and with everything crumbling to pieces around them, small parties were still prepared to do battle and delay the advance — brave men who must have known the hopelessness of the situation.

At Burma Area Army Headquarters and at 15th Army Headquarters, both Kawabe and Mutaguchi were loath to accept defeat. It was not, therefore, until July 10th that the former would admit that thoughts of further attacks were unrealistic, that the battle was lost and that instructions should be issued authorising the withdrawal of 15th Army to Tiddim and the line of the Chindwin. Ten days later, on July 20th, Mutaguchi gave orders to his divisions to this effect.

At the conclusion of the ill-fated Operation 'U' came many changes in the Japanese High Command and staff, the most notable being that Generals Kawabe and Mutaguchi, together with their Chief Staff Officers, were relieved of their appointments.

Meanwhile, General Slim was preparing to advance into Burma for the eventual capture of Mandalay. After their long and arduous struggle which had begun over two years before, Headquarters 4th Corps and 17 and 23 Divisions were being sent back to India to rest and refit; and Stopford's 33 Corps, reinforced by a fresh division, 11 East African, was taking over the pursuit before the enemy could properly reorganise. Down the road to Tiddim, 5 Division was closely following up the already severely battered 33 Japanese Division, and in the Kabaw valley the East Africans were driving the enemy back towards Kalewa.

* * *

In a long-drawn-out battle involving such a large number of troops, it is difficult to assess casualties with complete accuracy. Suffice it to say that by the time the Japanese 15th Army reached the Chindwin only a third of the original number which set out on the invasion of Manipur were still effective. Their losses in killed, wounded and dead from disease left on the battlefield amounted to thirty thousand, while the grand total could hardly have been less than fifty thousand. The greater proportion of their tanks, guns and other equipment had been captured or destroyed, yet the number of prisoners taken was negligible compared with the killed and wounded — a testimony to the ferocity and determination of the Japanese soldier.

Against this must be weighed the British and Indian casualties, which, from all causes, amounted to thirteen thousand in the Imphal garrison alone. But there was a great difference between the opposing forces in that excellent medical arrangements existed in 14th Army, and it was due to the devoted care of the doctors and nurses that the lives of so many sick and wounded were saved, some being so far restored to health that they were able to fight again in a matter of months. Had it not been for the skill of the medical authorities in providing antidotes against the innumerable diseases which infested the battle area, the casualties from sickness would have been immeasurably higher.

In retrospect, there are many features of this four months' battle for which it is particularly memorable.

Undoubtedly one of the most remarkable was the part played by the Royal Air Force, the Indian Air Force and the United States Army Air Force, without whose contribution the outcome of the battle could well have been very different. Besides preventing the Japanese Air Force from taking any real part in the operations, so that few soldiers ever saw an enemy aircraft, for four months they kept Scoones' large force supplied with all its needs in the worst possible conditions. They also provided the means of reinforcing 4th Corps in the nick of time, by flying in 5 Division. Nor did their activities end there. The indirect support they gave to the Army by wrecking the enemy lines of communication and the direct support they provided for the troops on the ground — the Battle of Nungshigum being a typical example — were, in great measure, instrumental in dashing any hopes the Japanese had of capturing Imphal.

Then there was the Japanese soldier himself. However strong one's views may be of the Japanese methods of waging war and of the inhuman manner in which they treated their captives, one is bound to admit to the astonishing fighting qualities and powers of endurance of the soldiers. Sustained by their unusual attitude to death on the battlefield, they were most formidable opponents. It was due to these qualities that, despite inadequate supplies of all kinds, inferior guns and tanks, negligible air support and scanty medical arrangements, 15th Army was able to achieve more than probably any other army in the world could have done.

Account too must be taken of the peculiar circumstances of country, all in contrast to most other theatres of war. The Western Desert offered free range to tanks and vehicles, few diseases and an equable climate, the only real natural problem being the scarcity of water. In Europe there were first-class roads, railways and airfields; there were large cities, brick-built villages and open fields. For most of the troops taking part the surroundings had much in common with their own countries, and they were accustomed to the vagaries of the climate. In addition, the battlefields were close to home, to which they could go when wounded or to see their families during such short periods of leave as were granted.

Conversely, Burma was a very long way away, and the country itself presented one huge obstacle of mountains, dense jungle, unbridged rivers and swamps. Roads had to be built before modern equipment could be used; airfields had to be made, and structures erected to house men, hospitals and stores. Civilisation on the scale to which British soldiers and airmen were accustomed did not exist, and they had to live and fight in the claustrophobic atmosphere of the jungle. For months on end they had no opportunity of seeing or talking to a white woman. The climate — rain and heat — added to their difficulties and discomfort, while all the diseases of the East flourished in their most virulent forms.

Perhaps the most outstanding feature was the high stakes involved, since the outcome of defeat to the losing side meant disaster. Had the fortunes of war gone the other way, there is no knowing how serious would have been the repercussions. Of two things one can be certain. First that Allied morale in South-East Asia would have sunk to a very low ebb and that the security of India would have been in the gravest peril. Whether considerations of supply would have allowed the Japanese to advance farther

west and if so, how far, is a matter of conjecture. There would have been little to oppose them. Second, that all ideas of staging an offensive to turn the enemy out of Burma would have had to be abandoned until such time as the war in Europe had been won.

For the Japanese, although it was not the final knock-out blow — that was to come later in 1945 — the defeat at Imphal was the greatest on land that they had yet suffered in the course of their history. It meant that the back of their Army in Burma was broken, that the belief in its invincibility had gone for ever and that their days in Burma were numbered. While from the British point of view this was a victory as decisive as any of the war, for the Japanese the Imphal campaign can best be summed up in an old Japanese proverb: '*Ryuto-dabi*', of which the literal translation is 'Dragon's head, snake's tail', but which in the proverbial sense means 'A thing which started vigorously ends miserably'.



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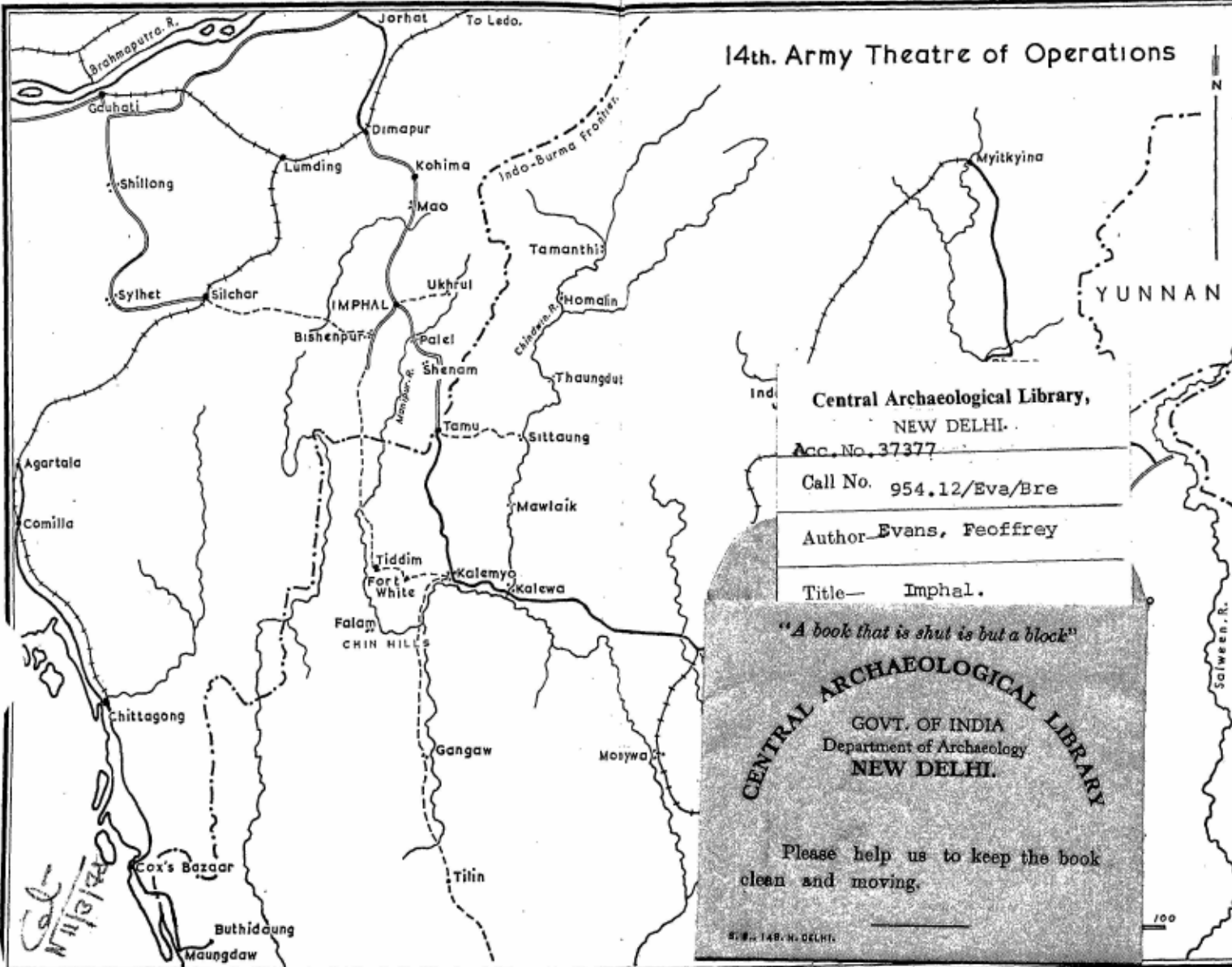
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