

CHAPTER 12

THE BATTLE OF MUAR

THE blow dealt to the enemy by the Australians at Gemas, following so closely upon the arrival of the reinforcement convoy on 13th January, was seized upon as a means of reviving confidence in the outcome of the struggle for Malaya. A speaker over Singapore radio declared flamboyantly that the news gave good reason to believe that the tide of battle was on the turn, "with the A.I.F. as our seawall against the vicious flood". General Bennett was quoted in the *Singapore Times* of 16th January as saying that his troops were confident that they would not only stop the Japanese advance, but put them on the defensive. This elation was natural but short-lived, for disturbing reports soon began to come in from the left flank of Westforce in the Muar area (allotted, as has been shown, to the 45th Indian Brigade).

Two battalions of the 45th had been placed, at Bennett's instructions, on this flank, along the Sungei Muar's winding course, which on a map resembles an uncompleted edge of a jigsaw puzzle. The battalions were the 4/9th Jats, with one company in each of three areas—Grisek, Panchor, and Jorak—and fighting patrols north of the river; and the 7/6th Rajputana Rifles, from Jorak to the mouth of the river, with two companies north of it. The sectors were of fifteen and nine miles respectively. The 5/18th Royal Garhwal was in reserve based on Bakri, with a company forward at Simpang Jeram on the inland road from Muar, and a detachment south of Parit Jawa, where another road came in from the coast to Bakri. The brigade was allotted the 65th Australian Battery (Major Julius¹) of the 2/15th Field Regiment as support.

The main crossing of the Muar, from the network of roads in Malacca, was near the river mouth, by ferry across a wide expanse of water to the township of Muar. The river flowed through thick jungle and inevitably only sections of it were manned. The possibility of enemy coastal landings between Muar and Batu Pahat to the south was another hazardous element in the situation. Both the road along the coast and the one inland through Bakri offered access from Muar to the trunk road at Yong Peng, far to the rear of the main body of Westforce. The disposition of two companies of the Rajputana Rifles on the far side of the river no doubt reflected Bennett's policy of "aggressive defence" and his enthusiasm for ambushing the enemy, but it was at the expense of the forward line south of the river. However, the fact that he assigned to this inexperienced brigade the task of protecting his left flank seems clearly to indicate that he did not expect any strong enemy thrust in this direction; and as General Wavell had ordered that the 22nd Australian Brigade should join the remainder of its

¹ Maj W. W. Julius, DX141; 2/15 Fd Regt. Regular soldier; of Darwin; b. Grafton, NSW, 17 Jan 1909. Killed in action 19 Jan 1942.

division as soon as it could be relieved by troops from Singapore Island, he could regard the brigade as a prospective reserve.

On 15th January, the day on which the battle of Gemas ended, General Barstow, keenly cooperative but still uneasy about the prospect, strongly urged General Bennett to prepare lines of retreat. Bennett, who had been caustic in his comments about the rapid movements down the peninsula since the Japanese first struck, again told him there would be no retreat. Bennett felt confident that the performance at Gemas could be repeated at Batu Anam, which he expected would be the next point of contact with the enemy force advancing along the trunk road. Aircraft had reported congested Japanese traffic north of Tampin, where the road struck inland to Gemas (but also near a road and rail junction which gave access to Malacca, and the coastal road to Muar). At Bennett's request, Australian airmen attacked the area that day and the next, aided on the second day by six Glenn Martin bombers operated by Dutch airmen stationed with the Australians at Sembawang, on Singapore Island.

Successive Japanese air attacks on Muar from 11th January were followed by the appearance on the 15th of Japanese troops at the northern approach to the ferry. They were fired upon by the 65th Battery, but the telephone line to the battery's observation post on the far side of the river was severed, thus handicapping the battery in its task.² One of its guns, in charge of Sergeant Buckman,³ was thereupon brought to the southern end of the ferry crossing and fired over open sights. A Rajput company, also on the far side, reported just before its telephone line failed that Japanese were coming down the road from Malacca. The battalion's advanced headquarters in the township found itself out of telephone contact with two other companies also, and with rear headquarters near Bakri.

As there were no bridges in the vicinity of Muar and as all boats thought likely to be useful to the enemy had been removed from the northern bank, the river presented a difficult obstacle, and some 800 rounds of harassing fire during the night by a troop of the Australian gunners commanded by Captain Steele⁴ were a further deterrent. The Japanese nevertheless made rapid progress on the 16th January. Two guns under Lieutenant Withycombe⁵ were at one stage during the afternoon blazing over open sights from a position taken up on the southern bank at landing craft which appeared at the mouth of the river. Although these withdrew, enemy troops meanwhile had made a crossing upstream. The Rajput

² Lt J. N. Shearer (of Lindfield, NSW), subsequently posted missing, was in charge of the post. His driver, Gnr H. M. M. Fisher (Dural, NSW), was at the ferry crossing with a prisoner suspected of aiding the enemy when he was fired upon. He dived into the river, and hid all day under the ferry ramp. At nightfall he swam to the southern bank, and supplied valuable information to his unit.

³ Sgt G. I. Buckman, NX24072; 2/15 Fd Regt. Clerk; of Haberfield, NSW; b. Bowraville, NSW, 4 Jul 1912. Killed in action 18 Jan 1942.

⁴ Maj R. E. Steele, EM, NX34686; 2/15 Fd Regt 1940-42; with guerillas in Philippines 1943-44; Aust Army representative Allied Air Forces, Brisbane 1944-45. Commercial traveller; of Burwood, NSW; b. Eastwood, NSW, 25 Mar 1915.

⁵ Lt P. S. Withycombe, EM, NX70315; 2/15 Fd Regt. Solicitor; of Mayfield, NSW; b. Melbourne, 27 Jul 1916.

company east of Muar was attacked, and though the flanking company whose positions extended to the river mouth was sent to its aid, a company of Japanese reached the township from the east and overwhelmed battalion headquarters. Both the Rajput companies north of the river had been lost, and few men of the other two companies got back. During the night the remnant of the battalion withdrew down the coast to Parit Jawa, and thence to Bakri. The Rajput commander, his second-in-command, and all his company commanders had been killed or were missing.

Meanwhile, gunners under Lieutenant McLeod⁶ on their way with guns for attachment to the advanced headquarters of the 5/18th Royal Garhwal at Simpang Jeram had been ambushed near the headquarters early on the 16th, and one gun and three men were lost. The Garhwalis were attacked the same day, soon after 11 a.m., and moved off the road into the shelter of rubber trees. Close fighting followed, in which hand grenades and bayonets were used; but after a costly and unsuccessful counter-attack at 1 p.m. a withdrawal was ordered. By this time the officer commanding the force was among the killed. Communications to the rear had failed soon after the attack opened, and before the situation became serious. The 4/9th Jats on the right were not attacked, but having discovered that the enemy had crossed the river their commander withdrew the forward companies and concentrated on the road from Panchor to Muar. The Australian battery stuck to its task at Muar until 8.30 p.m., then made for Bakri by the coast road through Parit Jawa. The Japanese were then free to continue their advance by both this road and the one through Simpang Jeram.

The enemy force used to achieve this result was, as is now known, the *Guards Division*, which had occupied the town of Malacca on 14th January. Although he had intended to rest his troops at this stage, General Nishimura concluded that if he could quickly overcome resistance in the Muar-Batu Pahat area it would greatly assist the Japanese forces on the trunk road, and be a triumph for his division. Thus spurred, he decided to press on, with the *4th Guards Regiment* less one battalion on the right and the *5th Guards Regiment* on the left. The former was to occupy the attention of the forces holding the town of Muar while the latter made an upstream crossing of the river during the night and attacked from the east. The *4th* was then to make for Batu Pahat along the coast road while the *5th* thrust along the inland road to Yong Peng. The other battalion of the *4th Regiment* was to go by sea down the coast, land between Batu Pahat and Rengit and conceal itself until the time came to cut the British line of withdrawal from Batu Pahat down the coast road.

The Rajputs forward of the Muar were quickly trapped and overcome, but Nishimura was badly worried by the problem of how to cross the river. It was readily solved by the *5th Regiment* using a number of small boats, taken from rice-fields, to cross to larger craft on the opposite side. These craft were then brought back and used to transport larger parties of men. By dawn a sufficient number had been ferried over to continue the advance. Once the crossing had been made the untried Indians whom they encountered were no match for the *élite* troops of the Japanese Army, especially as the secrecy and suddenness of the manoeuvre took

⁶ Lt R. McLeod, NX70902; 2/15 Fd Regt. Clerk; of Bondi, NSW; b. Bondi, 24 Feb 1920.

the defenders by surprise. The boats which had been collected were used again for the main crossing at the mouth of the Muar, made without opposition on 17th January.

Bakri, headquarters of the 45th Indian Brigade, and only 30 miles from the trunk road at Yong Peng, was now threatened. Still worse, Japanese were reported late on 16th January to have landed south-west of the town of Batu Pahat (in keeping with the enemy plan just outlined) and to have moved inland. They were thus a threat to the 45th Brigade from its rear, and to Westforce communications, as well as to the immediate locality. On the east coast, strong Japanese patrols were being encountered north of Endau⁷—clear warning of attack upon the Australian 22nd Brigade in the Mersing area. Because of the collapse of resistance on the Muar, Bennett decided on the evening of 16th January to send his reserve battalion, the 2/29th (Lieut-Colonel Robertson), less one company and a platoon, to reinforce the Muar front instead of using it as he had planned to relieve the 2/30th after its action at Gemas. Unaware of the extent of the enemy forces in the Muar area, he directed that it should be used to counter-attack towards Muar, and gave it a troop of 2/4th Australian Anti-Tank Regiment and one of armoured cars from the Loyals for what he considered good measure. In briefing the officers concerned, he said that his information was that Muar had been taken with a force of about 200 men. He emphasised that the Muar-Yong Peng road was vital, and that should the enemy be encountered in strength it must be held for seven days to enable the forces north of Yong Peng to be withdrawn.

Dealing with the chessboard problems confronting him, General Percival decided that he would allot to the III Corps the task of protecting Westforce communications. He extended the corps' responsibilities to the trunk road from Ayer Hitam to Yong Peng and thence to Batu Pahat, and ordered the newly-arrived 53rd Brigade Group to the Ayer Hitam area. There, on 17th January, it came under corps command and was allotted to General Key, then commanding the 11th Indian Division.⁸ The 6/Norfolk was sent to hold the defile between Bukit Pelandok on the south and Bukit Belah on the north, near where the road from Yong Peng branched south-westward to Batu Pahat and north-westward to Muar. The 2/Cambridgeshire went to relieve the garrison at Batu Pahat. From Bukit Pelandok to Batu Pahat and to Muar were long stretches of road which would need constant and effective patrolling as a precaution against enemy penetration between the forces disposed at those places.

At a conference between Percival, Bennett, and Key at noon on 17th January, the question of withdrawal from Segamat, consequent upon the situation at Muar, was discussed. Largely on the ground that this would be damaging to morale it was decided to try to hold both the Muar and

⁷ Contact by a 2/19th Battalion patrol (22nd Australian Brigade) had been made at 11 a.m. on 14th January, and thus constituted the first encounter with the enemy by the Australians in Johore.

⁸ General Paris had reverted to command of the 12th Brigade, then in Singapore for reorganisation.

the Segamat areas. Percival ordered that the 2/19th Australian Battalion at Jemaluang be relieved immediately by the 5/Norfolk and go to Muar, where it would operate as part of Westforce. Bennett was disappointed that the 53rd Brigade was not used to relieve the whole of the 22nd Australian Brigade of its tasks on the east coast, but Percival held that, apart from any other reason, there was not time in the existing situation to carry out the relief. Because of the inexperience of the 5/Norfolk, Lieut-Colonel Anderson, commanding the 2/19th Battalion, left his second-in-command, Major Oakes,⁹ with three other officers and several N.C.O.'s to help the newcomers to take over their positions.¹ It soon became evident in the conduct of the advanced party of the Norfolks that they were ill-fitted by their training for warfare in Malaya.²

Brigadier Duncan (45th Brigade) meanwhile had been ordered by Bennett to clear the Muar area of the enemy as soon as possible. Bennett's assessment of the situation on the information available to him at this stage was evident in an order which required that the 2/29th Battalion should revert to the main body of Westforce "on completion of immediate task".³ Duncan had allocated defensive positions about a mile from Bakri on both the Muar and Parit Jawa roads, and planned to launch counter-attacks once the isolated 4/9th Jats had come in and the Australians had arrived. When the 2/29th got to Bakri during the afternoon of the 17th the position on the Muar road was held by the 5/18th Garhwal, but it was to move by night to Parit Jawa.

After interviewing Duncan and discussing the situation with Major Julius of the 65th Battery, which was now available to support the 2/29th Battalion, Robertson decided to rest his men during the early part of the night about a mile and a half forward of Bakri, and then to attempt to capture Simpang Jeram at daylight on the 18th. He quickly gained evidence of the presence of the enemy, for an armoured car sent forward to reconnoitre the road returned with the information that it had been fired upon at a Japanese road-block about two miles forward of the battalion's position. A patrol clash followed this incident, and by 7 p.m. the forward troops were under heavy mortar fire. A small force of Japanese then arrived, and in the darkness hand grenades and bayonets were used in disposing of them. The Garhwalis were nearing Parit Jawa village when they were ambushed and dispersed. Only some 400 men straggled back to a position on the Parit Jawa road a mile from Bakri held by remnants of the 7/6th Rajputana Rifles. About midnight Julius reported to Robert-

⁹ Lt-Col R. F. Oakes, NX12525. (1st AIF: 3rd MG Bn and AFC.) 2/19 Bn 1940-42; CO 2/26 Bn 1942. Grazier; of Maryvale, NSW; b. Manly, NSW, 19 Feb 1896.

¹ The move by 5/Norfolk commenced, but was later cancelled.

² "They were a fine body of men," wrote an Australian officer later, "but almost dazed by the position in which they found themselves. Their training had been for open warfare, and not the very close warfare of the Malayan countryside. They demonstrated the unreality of their approach to the situation by lighting up all the buildings in the area, stringing their transport along highly vulnerable and prominent crossroads, and by the CO telling the second-in-command, in my presence, that his first job was to get the mess going." The 2/19th Battalion's diarist recorded: "Their personal gear was new to us; trunks, valises, baths, etc., all in the mud, much to the amusement of our lads."

³ Westforce Operation Instruction No. 1.

son the withdrawal of the Garhwalis from the Parit Jawa area, and asked for protection for his guns. Robertson consequently sent Captain Sumner's⁴ company of the 2/29th (minus a platoon which had been left in the Gemas area) to a position covering the junction at Bakri of the Parit Jawa and Muar roads. A troop of the gunners, however, came under counter-battery fire about 1 a.m. on 18th January. The fire was so intense and accurate that one of the guns was disabled, an ammunition trailer was set on fire by direct hits, and the troop had to withdraw.

With the rear of the 2/29th Battalion's main position threatened by penetration from the coast via Parit Jawa, five Japanese light tanks approached the position frontally at 6.45 a.m. unaware that an anti-tank gun awaited them at each end of a cutting through which the Muar road ran. Solid armour-piercing shells were first used against the tanks, but it was found that these went straight through them and out the far side. The tanks continued to advance, firing with all guns as they came. The leading tank was level with the foremost anti-tank gun when the gun sergeant (Thornton⁵) gave a notable exhibition of courage and coolness. Turning his back on the other tanks, he fired high-explosive shells into the first three as they went down the road. When the other tanks entered the battalion perimeter they came under fire of the rear gun also. All were disabled. Although he was wounded in the engagement, Thornton prepared his gun for further action, and soon three more tanks approached the position.

A couple attempted to turn and make a get-away (wrote Lieutenant Ben Hackney⁶) but still those boys with the anti-tank guns were sending a stream of shells into them. At last they could not move forward any further and became as pill-boxes surrounded, sending fire in all directions; until one by one they were smashed, set on fire, and rendered useless and uninhabitable. There came then from the tanks sounds which resembled an Empire Day celebration as the ammunition within them burnt, and cracked with sharp bursts, and hissed, with every now and again a louder explosion as larger ammunition ignited.

Those of their crews who had survived the shell fire were finished off by bullets and grenades. The loss of eight tanks by the enemy produced a lull, but the company in the left forward position then came under heavy automatic fire and sniping from the branches of trees by Japanese who apparently had infiltrated during the night. First one, then two more carriers came forward, and though their armour failed to resist Japanese bullets and nearly every man in them was wounded, they silenced the enemy machine-guns. Behind these were Japanese infantry, but they were held in check by the Australians.

⁴ Capt A. B. Sumner, VX39013; 2/29 Bn. Butcher; of Geelong West, Vic; b. Geelong, 5 Jan 1915. Missing presumed died 13 Sep 1944.

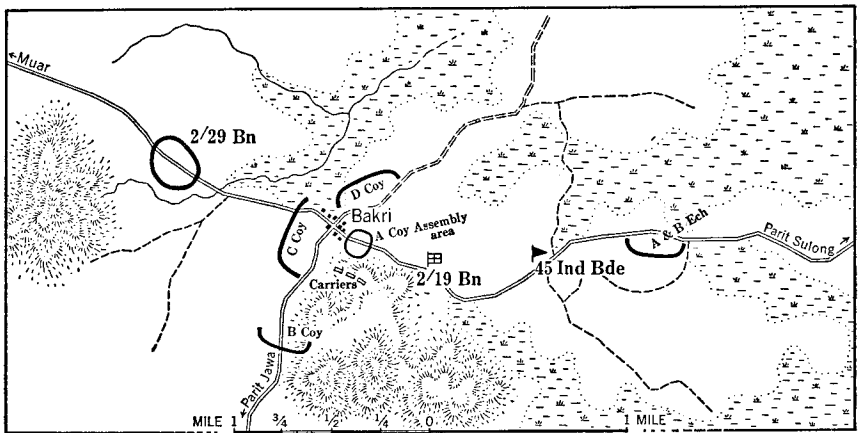
⁵ L-Sgt C. W. Thornton, VX42501; 2/4 A-Tk Regt. Farmer; of Berrigan, NSW; b. Berrigan, 10 Apr 1918.

The guns were part of a troop of four, commanded by Lieutenant R. M. McCure (North Brighton, Vic) of the 2/4th Australian Anti-Tank Regt.

⁶ Lt B. C. Hackney, NX71148; 2/29 Bn. Grazier; of Bathurst, NSW; b. Sydney, 2 Mar 1916.

Meanwhile Anderson and his 2/19th Battalion, 700 strong,⁷ preceded by its carriers (Lieutenant Pickup⁸) were met at Yong Peng by Colonel Thyer, General Bennett's senior staff officer, and joined by a troop of British anti-tank guns. Anderson, Thyer, and others comprising a reconnaissance party went ahead with Major Arthur Maxwell, sent to guide them to 45th Brigade headquarters.

During a conference with Thyer, Anderson, and Robertson at Bakri, Brigadier Duncan received the first report to reach the British forces that the Japanese *Guards Division* had joined in the struggle for Malaya, and was being employed in the Muar area. He explained that he had sent patrols to order the Jats into Bakri as soon as possible by an estate road which joined the road to Bakri near the 2/29th Battalion's position. It



Bakri, 8 a.m. 19th January

was decided to deploy the 2/19th to add depth to the position and, when the Jats came in, to take the offensive. On his way back to Westforce headquarters Thyer came upon disconcerting evidence of unpreparedness by the Norfolks at Bukit Payong defile—transport head to tail along the road and as Thyer later described it “a sitting bird for air action”.

Having left a platoon under Lieutenant Varley⁹ to guard the concrete bridge over the Sungei Simpang Kiri at Parit Sulong, the 2/19th Battalion, under the battalion second-in-command, Major Vincent,¹ reached Bakri during the morning of 18th January and deployed at Bakri village and in positions near by on the roads to Parit Jawa and Muar, covered by guns of the 65th Battery. At midday an armoured car patrol sent from Bakri towards the 2/29th Battalion position reported having encountered

⁷ “D” Company of the 2/19th comprised only one platoon and company headquarters, detachments having had to be left on the east coast.

⁸ Capt A. C. Pickup, NX34741; 2/19 Bn. Signwriter; of Bathurst, NSW; b. Bathurst, 17 Feb 1910.

⁹ Lt J. A. Varley, MC, NX60090; 2/19 Bn. Clerk; of Inverell, NSW; b. Inverell, 23 Sep 1920.

¹ Maj T. G. Vincent, MC, NX34967; 2/19 Bn. Barrister-at-Law; of Edgecliff, NSW; b. Sydney, 19 Nov 1905. Killed in action 9 Feb 1942.

a road-block, and having been fired upon from both sides of the road. As Robertson had been promised that Sumner's company would be returned to his positions, it was sent with carrier, armoured car, and mortar support, to dispose of the block and rejoin the battalion. Its initial attack failed but eventually, with the aid of platoons led by Lieutenant Glasson² and Sergeant Lloyd Davies³ of the 2/19th Battalion, Sumner's company got through, leaving the road free of obstruction. The company found Major Olliff⁴ now in command, for Robertson and a dispatch rider on whose machine the commander was riding pillion also had encountered a road-block. Although both were wounded they had managed to get to within a hundred yards of battalion headquarters before Robertson fell off. He was picked up by a carrier in charge of Lieutenant Gahan⁵ which rushed to his rescue, but died half an hour later. Trucks which came through with Sumner's company were sent back to Bakri carrying wounded men.

A Jats officer reached Bakri at 4 p.m., and reported to Duncan that his battalion was six miles north-west of the village. By 5 p.m. Bakri and the 2/19th Battalion's positions were under shell fire, but nothing had been done to bring the Jats in. Anderson, chafing under the delay, which was playing into the hands of the Japanese, realised that the Jats now could not arrive in time for his battalion to take the offensive that day. He offered a jungle-trained Australian patrol to escort the Jats officer, but finally, as enemy patrols had been reported on the route he was to take, the officer's departure was delayed until early next morning. Duncan recalled to the brigade perimeter for the night those of the Rajputs and Garhwalis who were able to return. They had with them only two British officers, many had lost their equipment, and they were in poor condition for further fighting. A British field battery allotted to the 2/19th reported to Anderson during the night, but, on the ground that further artillery would be a drain on manpower for escort duties, it was ordered to rejoin the main body of Westforce. This left artillery tasks to the 65th Australian Battery which had resisted the initial attack on Muar, and was still in action.⁶

Bayonets and grenades were again successfully used in dealing with two attacks on the 2/29th Battalion's left forward troops as they were about to withdraw into night perimeter. The Japanese were dressed in an olive-green uniform and equipped with respirators, grenade dischargers, grenades and entrenching tools, and the officers carried Samurai swords. Captured Bren-type guns of Japanese calibre were found to be fitted with a bayonet

² Lt D. J. R. Glasson, NX12538; 2/19 Bn. Law student; of Double Bay, NSW; b. Blayney, NSW, 7 Aug 1920. Missing presumed died 22 Jan 1942.

³ Sgt J. L. Davies, NX56212; 2/19 Bn. Farmer; of Brobenah, via Leeton, NSW; b. Leeton, 19 Aug 1919. Missing presumed died 22 Jan 1942.

⁴ Maj S. F. Olliff, VX44193; 2/29 Bn. Manager; of Armadale, Vic; b. London, 17 Jun 1905. Killed in action 19 Jan 1942.

⁵ Capt N. J. Gahan, VX39021; 2/29 Bn. Bank officer; of Eltham, Vic; b. Ivanhoe, Vic, 20 Sep 1916.

⁶ The battery had fired 4,795 rounds by midnight of 18th-19th January

attachment. After the failure of these attacks, the night and the following morning were relatively quiet.

After the initial crossing of the Muar, General Nishimura had ordered his *5th Regiment*, with artillery and tank support, to attack the positions on the inland road to Bakri and cut the road immediately behind them, as quickly as possible. Perhaps under the heady influence of the success gained by Japanese troops in overcoming the defenders of Muar, a tank company advanced without infantry against the *2/29th Battalion* and was wiped out. Bereft of its aid, the infantry (*III/5th Guards Battalion*) were unable to break the resistance and, as later described by Nishimura, the engagement became "severe and sanguinary".

It was not until General Percival received the news that the *Guards* were being employed in the Muar area that he fully realised the danger of the situation.⁷ He learned also that a Japanese force had been seen crossing a ford some miles north of Batu Pahat; that the *6/Norfolk* had been attacked from the air near Bukit Pelandok; and that the *2/Cambridgeshire* had encountered enemy patrols south-west of Batu Pahat. In the Segamat sector artillery had ceaselessly pounded the enemy line of approach during the night of 15th-16th January, after the withdrawal of the *2/30th Australian Battalion* to the Fort Rose Estate. Ground action on the 16th and 17th consisted chiefly of exchanges of shell fire. The Japanese were busily repairing or providing substitutes for demolished bridges along the two railway lines and the trunk road which converged at Gemas, and were also engaged in flanking movements. During the afternoon of the 17th they pressed the southern flank of the *2/30th*, which was withdrawn during the night to an eastward position, nearer Batu Anam. Next day the invaders increased their artillery fire on Batu Anam and concentrated their infantry activities against the *1/13th Frontier Force Rifles* astride the main road and railway thereabouts. Late in the afternoon they overran the battalion's forward positions and two guns of the *16th Australian Anti-Tank Battery* were lost. Repeated air attacks were made upon townships from Batu Anam to Yong Peng, and upon the road between Gemas and Labis. By thus engaging the forces in the central sector the Japanese were gaining time for their major outflanking movements along the west coast from Muar.

General Bennett, his concern growing at the possibility of his force being cut off, obtained General Percival's assent on the afternoon of 18th January to a withdrawal behind the Sungei Segamat preparatory to consolidation farther back. Deciding that Bennett was likely to have his hands full in dealing with the situation on the trunk road and the railway, Percival placed the whole of the forces on the Muar front under command of General Heath as from 9.45 p.m. This, however, had little reality, for Heath's only means of communicating with *45th Brigade*,

⁷ Percival later explained (*The War in Malaya*, p. 228) that "throughout the campaign we were so blind from lack of ground visibility and lack of air reconnaissance that we frequently underestimated the strength of the enemy".

other than by dispatch rider,⁸ was by wireless through Westforce headquarters; and the course of events was again being dictated by the enemy.

As ordered by Bennett, the withdrawal from Segamat consisted of leap-frogging moves by his 27th Brigade and the 9th Indian Division to a new line covering the trunk road and the railway at Labis, about 25 miles north of Yong Peng.

Because of the danger to Batu Pahat, General Key early on 19th January ordered the 15th Brigade (Brigadier Challen) to defend the township, and reinforced the garrison with the British Battalion. He obtained permission to move the 5/Norfolk of the 53rd Brigade, previously allocated to Jemaluang, to Ayer Hitam. With the 2/Cambridgeshire at Batu Pahat and the 5/Norfolk so dispersed, the brigade had only the 6/Norfolk at this stage with which to hold the Bukit Pelandok defile, now threatened by the Japanese move inland from near Batu Pahat. Key therefore ordered the 3/16th Punjab (about half strength) to its aid. At a conference with Heath, Bennett and Key during the afternoon of the 19th, Percival decided that the 53rd Brigade should be further reinforced by the 2/Loyals (a battalion which had not left Singapore Island throughout its training in Malaya, but had been recently allotted to the 22nd Indian Brigade from the Singapore garrison); that the 45th Brigade should be withdrawn through the 53rd Brigade to west of Yong Peng; and that the withdrawal from Segamat should continue. A company of the Loyals which had been retained to garrison Blakang Mati Island, off the southern coast of Singapore Island, was sent up to the 6/Norfolk during the day, but rejoined its battalion on the evening of 20th January.

Meanwhile the situation in the west was rapidly worsening. Brigadier Duncan intended that an attack should be made along the road to Muar during the morning of the 19th by Lieutenant Beverley's⁹ "A" Company of the 2/19th Battalion, to allow the Jats to come in and to test the strength of the enemy. The company, which occupied a rubber-planted ridge to the left and a little forward of battalion headquarters, was relieved by a section of carriers, and assembled for its task, but was kept waiting for the British anti-tank gun support allotted to it. Captain Keegan's¹ "B" Company was held in reserve at its night position on the Parit Jawa road, and Captain Snelling's² "C" Company was on the Muar road. Both positions were near Bakri village.

Heavy firing from the carriers was heard at 8 a.m., and they were driven from the ridge under strong attack by a force which apparently had been deployed from the Parit Jawa road east of Keegan's company. Anderson quickly gave the Japanese a taste of the tactics they themselves had been employing, first by sending two of Beverley's platoons into the

⁸ Patrolling between the 53rd and 45th Brigades appears to have been neglected, and use of dispatch riders as a communications link with Bakri not to have been attempted at this stage.

⁹ Capt F. G. Beverley, NX34902; 2/19 Bn. Orchardist; of Griffith, NSW; b. Mildura, Vic, 4 Apr 1909.

¹ Maj R. W. Keegan, NX35027; 2/19 Bn. Barrister-at-Law; of Willoughby, NSW; b. North Sydney, 31 Aug 1907. Missing presumed died 11 Feb 1942.

² Capt R. R. L. Snelling, NX70191; 2/19 Bn. Master printer; of Clifton Gardens, NSW; b. Wellington, NZ, 26 Dec 1900. Missing presumed died 22 Jan 1942.

fight—one, led by Lieutenant Weily,³ to make a frontal attack, while Lieutenant Crawford⁴ led another along the ridge against the enemy's right flank. When the attack had been launched, Keegan's company was moved back, parallel with the road, towards the ridge, to come in on the enemy's rear. These tactics caught the assailants on the wrong foot. Lieutenant Reynolds,⁵ one of Keegan's commanders, recorded that the Japanese "literally ran round in circles". He was standing among a litter of dead around a gun position when one of the prostrate figures partly raised himself, with a grenade in one hand. Reynolds shot him, but was hit under the right arm and on the head when the grenade exploded. He urged his men on as he fell close to another badly-wounded Japanese.

I saw him pushing his rifle laboriously towards me (wrote Reynolds afterwards), so I picked up my pistol from under me and with my left hand took careful aim and pulled the trigger for all my worth, but it would not fire. I can tell you I was extremely annoyed. Luckily my batman saw the Jap up to his tricks, so he shot him. At the same time Captain Harris,⁶ 2 i/c., dashed up and kicked the rifle out of the Jap's hands.

After binding Reynolds' wounds, his batman was attacked by two Japanese wearing only short trousers. He disposed of them with two shots fired from his hip, and Reynolds was able to make his way to an aid post. The third platoon (Lieutenant Ritchie⁷) of Beverley's company was thrown in against the Japanese right flank, to complete their confusion. It joined Keegan's company in a bayonet charge and hand-to-hand fighting. The Japanese were routed, leaving some 140 dead, as against ten Australians killed and fifteen wounded, most of them in Beverley's company. While two men were searching the battlefield to see if all the Japanese were dead, and count them, a supposed corpse suddenly sprang to his feet and made a dash, unarmed, at one of them—Private "Bluey" Watkins.⁸ The company diarist recorded that "Bluey", "who had done quite a lot of fighting in Sydney, threw aside his rifle and bayonet and came to grips. A good fight was witnessed for a short time until [Private] Farrel⁹ came to the rescue with his .303. The explosion almost deafened Bluey, and for some time afterwards he was shouting loudly his story to his mates."

During the action, the battalion's transport sergeant (Sergeant Meal¹) brought news that the transport, in charge of the headquarters company commander, Captain Newton,² and behind Bakri on the road to Parit

³ Capt J. G. Weily, NX58094; 2/19 Bn. Bank clerk; of Orange, NSW; b. Orange, 10 May 1920.

⁴ Lt B. D. G. Crawford, NX12601; 2/19 Bn. School teacher; of Summer Hill, NSW; b. Casino, NSW, 17 Apr 1909. Missing presumed died 22 Jan 1942.

⁵ Lt P. R. Reynolds, NX12527; 2/19 Bn. Grazier; of Cumnock, NSW; b. Cumnock, 20 Aug 1917.

⁶ Capt F. L. Harris, NX34662; 2/19 Bn. Grazier; of Tumut, NSW; b. Tumut, 29 Oct 1912.

⁷ Lt J. M. Ritchie, NX59618; 2/19 Bn. School teacher; of Yeoval, NSW; b. Rylstone, NSW, 19 Jun 1915. Missing presumed died 9 Feb 1942.

⁸ Pte J. Watkins, NX26753; 2/19 Bn. Carpenter; of Panania, NSW; b. Swansea, Wales, 28 Jan 1916. Missing presumed died 8 Feb 1942.

⁹ Pte A. B. Farrel, NX35902; 2/19 Bn. Butcher; of Griffith, NSW; b. Austinmer, NSW, 17 Sep 1916.

¹ Sgt F. C. Meal, NX56207; 2/19 Bn. Motor mechanic; of Temora, NSW; b. Junee, NSW, 4 Sep 1904.

² Maj R. W. J. Newton, MBE, ED, NX34734; 2/19 Bn. Electrical engineer; of Petersham, NSW; b. Sydney, 22 Dec 1906.

Sulong, had been suddenly attacked by 400 to 500 Japanese, who apparently had come from the direction of Parit Jawa. They were establishing a road-block, and Meal had been seriously wounded in getting through. This wedge between the battalion and its transport threatened the line of communication of the forces in the Muar area. A section of carriers was sent to force a way through to Newton, but was unable to get past the block.

Japanese airmen scored a direct hit on brigade headquarters³ at 10 a.m. Duncan was stunned and Major Julius, commander of the 65th Battery, was mortally wounded. All Duncan's staff, except Major R. Anderson, formerly liaison officer between III Indian Corps and Bennett, but now acting as brigade major, were killed or wounded.⁴ All copies of the brigade to Westforce signals cipher were destroyed, causing delay in re-establishing signals communication. At the brigade major's request, Lieut-Colonel Anderson took command of the brigade. Responsibility was thus thrust upon this Australian battalion commander for a brigade which but for the missing Jats had practically ceased to exist except as a liability. He quickly decided that in view of the threat to the line of communication, the 2/29th must be speedily withdrawn to a position behind Bakri road junction, and the front confined to the one road leading from there back to Yong Peng. He contemplated another stand at Parit Sulong if further withdrawal became necessary. Parit Sulong lay behind eight miles of straight causeway through swampy soil devoid of cover, and three miles of road nearest the village lined with rubber trees. If the force could gain the shelter of the rubber, it might concentrate fire on enemy troops coming along the causeway.

However, although the Jats were now due, they had not arrived at Bakri, and, rather than abandon them, Anderson decided to delay withdrawal of the 2/29th Battalion for the time being. The further delay resulted in his companies becoming fully committed as the morning of the 19th wore on to meeting threats from the south and north-west. Keegan's company was again heavily attacked, but with the assistance of Bren carriers and Indian mortars manned by gunners of the 65th Battery under Lieutenant Quinlan⁵ of the 2/19th, it drove the Japanese off and inflicted further substantial losses.

Meanwhile the enemy had further infiltrated between the two battalions. The long-awaited Jats, who had made a two-company attack on a small village on the 18th to drive off Japanese blocking their way, reached the

³ A truck loaded with wounded from the 2/29th Battalion, including Lieutenant Hackney, was parked near brigade headquarters at the time. "Outside the brigade headquarters was an ugly sight," he wrote, "—men's bodies lying about everywhere . . . —portions of soldiers' stomachs hanging on limbs amongst the leaves of the trees—torn bloodstained limbs scattered about with only a lump of bloody meat hanging to them to indicate the body from which they were torn—just beside the road a naked waist with two twisted legs lay about two yards from a scarred bleeding head with a neck, half a chest and one arm. . . . There were some still alive but bent over, and others crawling, with every manner of injury."

⁴ Anderson had volunteered to replace Duncan's former brigade major when news reached Westforce headquarters that the latter had become a casualty. He was "a tower of strength" during the subsequent withdrawal from Bakri, until killed by a bomb while firing a Bren gun at a Japanese plane.

⁵ Lt J. E. Quinlan, NX35443; 2/19 Bn. Clerk and stock classer; of Cootamundra, NSW; b. Coolamon, NSW, 30 Aug 1915. Missing presumed died 22 Jan 1942.

2/29th's position early in the afternoon. They had lost contact with their transport in moving off from where they had been waiting.⁶ About 200 of them came under heavy machine-gun and shell fire in the 2/29th Battalion area. Largely because of their inexperience, many were killed or wounded. Part of the Jats battalion detoured by a track through swamp past the position, but others were cut off and decided next morning to make for Yong Peng by the shortest route. Those of the Jats who mustered at Bakri numbered six officers and about 200 men. Their commander, Lieut-Colonel Williams,⁷ had been killed. Anderson ordered them to form up in the brigade area so that, when others who were expected came in, assistance might be sent to Newton. Olliff was ordered to disengage from the enemy at 6 (later 6.30) p.m., and an artillery barrage to assist his battalion's withdrawal was arranged. Such reserves as Anderson possessed were sent to help resist attacks, which had reached serious proportions, on his companies. Later, after he had sized up the condition of the Jats, and when the rest of them failed to arrive, Anderson reluctantly decided that endeavours to assist Newton would have to wait until next morning.

Japanese machine-gunners were beaten off the right flank of the 2/29th Battalion after the Jats had appeared. An attack in force on the left flank followed, but the Australians chased the enemy some hundreds of yards in a counter-attack. In the course of the battalion's withdrawal Olliff and others were killed, and contact was lost with the leading company, which came under heavy machine-gun fire while crossing open ground. The main body of the battalion swung east, and reached Bakri with relatively few casualties. After an attempt to clear the road had failed, others followed them. These, however, came under artillery and mortar fire and lost direction. Comprising seven officers and 150 others in several groups, including Jats, they were eventually gathered together by the battalion's adjutant, Captain Morgan.⁸ Finding themselves isolated, they set off across country towards Yong Peng. Most of them eventually fell into Japanese hands.

At Bakri that night a company commander of the 2/29th Battalion, Captain Maher,⁹ took command of the battalion, comprising seven officers and 190 others, and Lieutenant Ross¹ took command of the 65th Battery. The battalion moved into the 2/19th Battalion's perimeter, on the Parit Sulong side of Bakri. After waiting for others to come in, Captain Snelling's company evacuated the village by midnight. The Japanese attempt to get through Bakri to the rear of Bennett's force on the trunk

⁶ On finding that the Jat infantry had moved off, the officer in charge of their transport found the route they had taken had been blocked by the Japanese. After disabling the vehicles he set off with his men, guided by a Volunteer major who was familiar with the area, to try to reach the road between Bakri and Parit Sulong. With some Indians and Australians they met on the way, they succeeded in joining Anderson's column.

⁷ Lt-Col J. W. Williams; CO 4/9 Jat. Regular soldier; b. 28 Nov 1899. Killed in action 18 Jan 1942.

⁸ Lt-Col M. C. Morgan, VX38985; 2/29 Bn. Regular soldier; of Seymour, Vic; b. Hobart, 28 Apr 1916.

⁹ Capt M. B. Maher, VX39116; 2/29 Bn. Clerk; of Essendon, Vic; b. Tungamah, Vic, 13 Nov 1910. Killed in action 21 Jan 1942.

¹ Capt J. F. Ross, MC, NX70474; 2/15 Fd Regt. Engineer; of Newcastle, NSW; b. Melbourne, 13 Dec 1912.

road had so far been thwarted, but the cost had been heavy, and both Australian battalions, with the remnants of the 45th Brigade, had an enemy road-block immediately at their rear. To make matters worse, the two forward companies of the 6/Norfolk at the Bukit Pelandok defile had been surprised and forced back during the day by Japanese who had come in from the coast, and who thereupon gained control of the road to Bakri at that point. Unless they could be dislodged, Anderson's force would be sealed off in the Bakri area. Brigadier Duke² of the 53rd Brigade ordered a counter-attack at dawn next day.

The now-familiar Japanese tactics, by which the defending forces on the trunk road were being moved southward by threats to their line of communication, were again succeeding despite resistance by Australian troops in the Bakri area similar to that at Gemas, and were imperilling the whole of Westforce. Having regarded the Segamat-Muar line as the last real defensive position on the peninsula, General Yamashita was agreeably surprised.

In a complicated process of withdrawal as ordered from the Segamat sector on 19th January, the 8th Indian Brigade, in covering positions behind the Sungei Muar at Buloh Kasap in the central sector, was confronted by tanks and cyclist troops on the opposite bank. Despite bridge demolitions, a party of Japanese made a crossing; but serious infiltration was prevented. At night the 9th Indian Division was withdrawn through positions behind the Sungei Segamat, to which the 27th Australian Brigade and the 5/11th Sikhs had been withdrawn. The movement was hampered and endangered by the township of Segamat having caught fire as a result of an Australian officer's attempt to prevent foodstuffs falling into Japanese hands; but the men plunged through the heat and showering sparks, and at dawn on 20th January had reached the Tenang area, midway between Segamat and Labis.

In an attempt to recapture the Bukit Pelandok defile, two companies of the 3/16th Punjab led by the battalion commander, Lieut-Colonel Moorhead, set out at 4 a.m. on 20th January to reach a company of the 6/Norfolk which had retained its position on the northern slopes of Bukit Belah, overlooking from the north the road to Parit Sulong. Another company of the Punjabis moved to occupy a height about 500 yards farther north, and did so unopposed. It was intended that upon completion of these moves the Norfolks, assisted by covering fire from the Punjabis, should capture Bukit Pelandok. The two companies were mistaken for Japanese, however, and fired on by the Norfolks. As soon as this had been stopped, Japanese blazed at the troops from near-by concealment, with the result that Moorhead was killed and his men and the Norfolks were driven off the feature. So serious were the losses that despite the urgent need to clear the road to Bakri, Brigadier Duke decided that he would have to await the arrival of the Loyals before making a

² Brig C. L. B. Duke, CB, MC. Comd 53 Brit Bde. Regular soldier; b. 27 Nov 1896.

further endeavour. It later transpired that a Norfolk detachment which had relieved Lieutenant Varley's platoon at the Parit Sulong bridge, having been without rations since the 18th, and thinking that it had been cut off, had left its vital post during the morning of the 20th and set off across country to Batu Pahat. The Japanese were free therefore to establish themselves at the bridge also, thus blocking Anderson's line of withdrawal.

When Key visited Bennett's headquarters the same morning Bennett naturally urged upon him the need to clear the defile and send a relief force to Anderson. As his Australian reserve troops had been committed, he asked that the 53rd Brigade be employed for this operation. Key feared, however, that the brigade, or a substantial part of it, might find itself also cut off in attempting such an operation, thus adding to the already heavy losses and further endangering Yong Peng. The issue was therefore referred to Percival, who instructed Bennett to withdraw the 27th Brigade to Yong Peng instead of halting it near Labis as had been intended. An order to the 45th Brigade to withdraw had been sent by the III Corps during the night. Key instructed Duke during the afternoon to make a further attempt to clear the road to Parit Sulong. On Duke representing that the troops hitherto employed were not in condition to attack, Key agreed that the 2/Loyals, who had been continuously on the move for three days and nights and had not yet fully assembled in the brigade area, be used with artillery support as early as possible next day.

With his force hemmed in at Bakri, Anderson had given orders before daylight on the 20th for a five-mile withdrawal towards Parit Sulong by nightfall, to the edge of the open swampland where further passage in daylight would expose it to air attack. The force was now organised as a battalion of five rifle companies, with two companies of Jats (Major H. White) and a composite force of Rajputs and Garhwalis (Captain Woods) attached. The advance-guard was Captain Keegan's company, followed on the right of the road by Captain Beverley's and on the left by Captain Westbrook's⁴ (comprising two platoons of the 2/29th and one of the 2/19th). The body of the column included transport, guns, Indian troops, and Captain Snelling's company of the 2/19th (in reserve). The rearguard, commanded by the adjutant of the 2/19th (Captain Hughes⁵), comprised the 2/29th's "B" Company and two companies of Jats. One anti-tank gun was detailed for work at each end of the column, and all gunners not required as such served as infantry. The 2/19th's Intelligence officer (Lieutenant Burt⁶) acted as adjutant of the force.

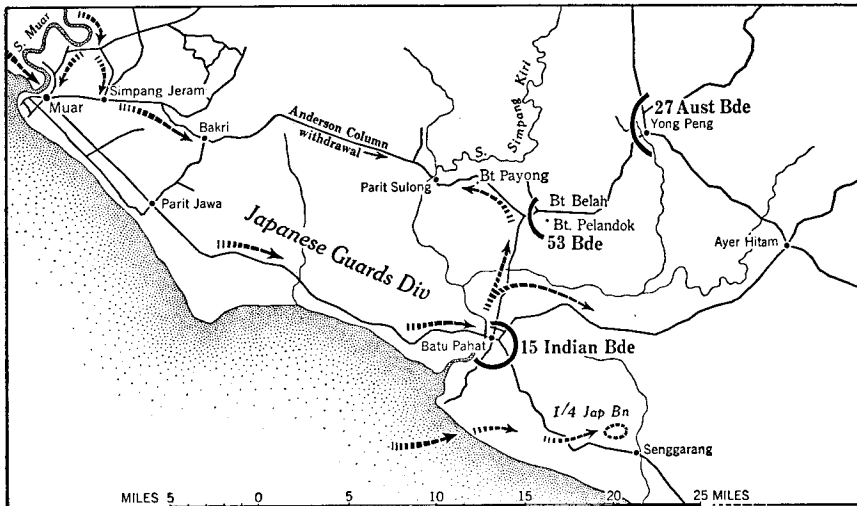
Keegan's company moved off at 7 a.m., but was held up at a swamp defile by Japanese dug in on a slight rise south of the road, and by a

⁴ Capt K. L. Westbrook, NX34771; 2/19 Bn. Estate agent-auctioneer; of Bowral, NSW; b. Mayfield, NSW, 9 Apr 1916.

⁵ Maj L. Hughes, NX35079; 2/19 Bn. Branch manager retail store; of Wollongong, NSW; b. Chilton, Durham, Eng, 10 Apr 1910. Killed in action 9 Feb 1942.

⁶ Capt S. F. Furt, NX34960; 2/19 Bn; Aust Intelligence Corps. Farmer and grazier; of Wallendbeen, NSW; b. Dunedin, NZ, 18 Feb 1908.

road-block. The company fought vigorously, and Lieutenant Ibbott⁷ led a gallant flank attack in which he and three of his men reached the Japanese trenches before they were killed. The delay imposed by the Japanese was serious, however, for the force had not gained sufficient room, and being so bunched together was very vulnerable to air or artillery attack. The fact that Keegan's company was so close to the enemy prevented it being given supporting fire. Anderson therefore decided that



The withdrawal from Bakri

a rapid and spirited assault was necessary to gain space, and ordered Beverley to lead his men singing into the the struggle. This he did, and these were the words they sang:

Once a jolly swagman camped by a billabong
Under the shade of a coolibah tree. . . .

"Waltzing Matilda", never sung by Australians with more enthusiasm than when they meet in surroundings strange to them, had become a battle song.

Although the attack went wide, the company drove the Japanese from its course, reached the area, now abandoned, where Newton and the 2/19th's transport had been, and then attacked the enemy from the rear. The halted column now came under shell fire, and the situation again called for swift and decisive action. Keegan's company again attacked, and in a final assault, led by Anderson, the Japanese were routed and their road-block was destroyed. Anderson himself put two machine-gun posts out of action with grenades (which, as a result of his 1914-18 war experience, he always carried), and shot two Japanese with his pistol.

⁷ Lt A. G. C. Ibbott, NX12600; 2/19 Bn. Farmer; of Cootamundra, NSW; b. Benalla, Vic, 20 Jan 1906. Killed in action 20 Jan 1942.

Beverley's company now became the advance-guard as the force forged slowly ahead through Newton's former transport harbour, where bodies and disabled vehicles gave evidence of a prolonged struggle.

The body of Captain Macdonald⁸ was found there. A man who had escaped related that Macdonald was leading a party withdrawing from the area when he was badly wounded. He handed over his men to a sergeant, gave covering fire as they departed, and remarked that it was "like shooting grouse on the moors". The diarist who recorded this incident added that "before he died he did a wonderful job, as was evident by the number of dead Japanese around him".

The attack on the transport group had opened at 7 a.m. on the 19th, soon after it had been joined by the platoon under Lieutenant Varley which had been relieved at the Parit Sulong bridge by the Norfolks. Newton's and Varley's men, numbering about 150, were disposed in perimeter formation, but a gap was forced in it and the quartermaster, Captain Duncan,⁹ was killed. When the firing started, the transport officer, Captain Bracher,¹ had ordered drivers to take their vehicles back towards Parit Sulong, and about twenty vehicles, including a carrier, reached the road. It was in one of these that Sergeant Meal got to battalion headquarters at Bakri. Three, despite constant air strafing, reached Yong Peng; one had to be abandoned at Parit Sulong. The driver of the carrier was shot, and it ran off the road into a ditch. A water truck overturned and caught fire. With the road to Yong Peng thus blocked, the others tried to reach the battalion, only to be barred by the road-block Meal had passed as it was being constructed. Another carrier, trying to force a passage, was wrecked by a land-mine.

The attack on the transport group continued until late afternoon. With the enemy almost surrounding his position, Newton thought that the battalion must have been overcome, or have withdrawn in another direction. He therefore ordered his men to withdraw across the road and through the jungle. Varley's platoon became separated from the others in this movement. Next day, after hearing that the Parit Sulong bridge was held by the Japanese, Newton decided to strike south through Batu Pahat, and grouped his men in small parties for the purpose.²

Anderson's column encountered another and stronger block soon after midday on the 20th, comprised of some of Newton's vehicles reinforced by tree-trunks, and with troops entrenched on a slight ridge beside it. The strength of the Japanese at this point was estimated at two companies or more, with six heavy machine-guns covering the road where it ran between swampy, tree-covered country, and Beverley's company as the advance-guard became closely engaged. The rear of the column was now

⁸ Capt H. C. H. Macdonald, NX12599; 2/19 Bn. Grazier; of Wagga Wagga, NSW; b. Melbourne, 28 Mar 1904. Killed in action 19 Jan 1942.

⁹ Capt D. I. McI. Duncan, NX70233; 2/19 Bn. Clerk; of Cremorne, NSW; b. Inverell, NSW, 11 Jun 1906. Killed in action 19 Jan 1942.

¹ Capt W. P. Bracher, NX12594; 2/19 Bn. Telephone linesman; of Wagga Wagga, NSW; b. Hastings, England, 3 Jan 1897.

² Some of Newton's men rejoined Westforce later; some reached the coast and got to Sumatra; others, including Newton, were captured where they fought.



(Australian War Memorial)

Two of the nine Japanese tanks knocked out by anti-tank guns forward of Bakri on 18th January.



(Australian War Memorial)

The crew of the rear anti-tank gun, which accounted for six of the nine tanks destroyed.



(Australian War Memorial)

The Parit Sulong bridge towards which the survivors of the 2/19th and 2/29th Battalions and of the 45th Indian Brigade fought their way. The wreckage of some of the column's vehicles may be seen to the right of the bridge. Post-war photograph.



(Australian War Memorial)

The hut at Parit Sulong into which the Japanese forced wounded Indian and Australian prisoners. Most of the wounded were afterwards massacred.

being pressed by the main body of the enemy. Westbrook's composite "D" Company was brought in on Beverley's left flank, and a platoon led by Lieutenant Cootes³ was sent round this flank to test the enemy's strength but was cut off.⁴ Shells again burst among the closely-packed transport, by now increasingly occupied by wounded men. The Jats at the rear became difficult to control, and the rearguard gave ground. Four trucks were lost before Brigadier Duncan rallied his men and led a counter-attack by Jats and Australians. The trucks were recaptured, but Duncan lost his life.⁵

Anderson had gone to the rear when news of the trouble reached him, and had left his second-in-command, Major Vincent, to direct the forward attack.⁶ Lieutenant Carr⁷ (2/29th Battalion) was killed while leading a left forward attack during this period. Anderson found when he returned that Vincent had done excellent work, especially in directing mortar fire on to the enemy. As it was now necessary to press on if the day's objective was to be reached, and the morale of the Japanese appeared to have been shaken, Anderson decided to use his reserve company (Captain Snelling) to add momentum to the assault. Under cover of a small rise, Anderson addressed the company, directing them through Beverley's company, on the right, as he considered their best chance of success lay in this direction. As rapid fire commenced preparatory to the endeavour

Every man was fighting mad (wrote the 2/19th Battalion's diarist). Mortar shells were directed on to targets by infantrymen a few yards from the target; gunners were fighting with rifles, bayonets and axes (range too short for 25-pounders except to Jap rear areas west). A gun crew pushed its 25-pounder round a cutting and blew out the first road-blocks (vehicles) at 75 yards' range. Carriers pushed within 5 yards of Japanese M.G.'s and blew them out. . . . Men went forward under heavy M.G. fire and chopped road-blocks to pieces. . . .

Leading the assault, Snelling had his thigh shattered, but the Japanese were routed, many at the point of the bayonet. His company pursued the enemy along the road while the block was being removed under fire from snipers.

The number of wounded with the convoy now became a serious problem. As Hackney saw the situation from the truck in which he lay:

During each halt more wounded fellows would be brought in and placed on the vehicles; sometimes lifeless-looking bundles being carried by their mates, others being helped along. Each time a few words as to how it happened, and always it was while they were doing a job, somewhere, perhaps in front or along the sides, or in the rear, as all the time the enemy surrounded this ferocious little force. . . . Overhead always circling around and around were enemy aircraft which often added

³ Lt R. J. G. Cootes, VX39165; 2/29 Bn. Cartage contractor; of Kyabram, Vic; b. Malvern, Vic, 30 Jan 1917. Killed in action 12 Mar 1942 (after capture).

⁴ Survivors eventually reached Yong Peng.

⁵ In a narrative of the withdrawal, Anderson referred to Duncan as "a very able and gallant officer, whom the Indian troops held in highest regard".

⁶ Anderson wrote subsequently: "Vincent was a first-class officer. He had an imaginative brain in training, so that his conduct in battle was that of a veteran, with personal courage and great stamina."

⁷ Lt W. P. Carr, VX39014; 2/29 Bn. Estate agent; of Geelong, Vic; b. Geelong, 1 Oct 1916. Killed in action 20 Jan 1942.

their lot, by either bombs or machine-guns, to the efforts of their ground forces. . . . Very often a bullet or a shell splinter would find its way to our truck. . . . On one occasion a burst of machine-gun bullets tore a line of holes along the off side of the vehicle. I heard a peculiar grunt beside me, and looking round saw that the poor fellow sitting there, already badly wounded, had been killed. His body slumped forward, revealing a fresh blood patch where a bullet had entered his back.⁸

Darkness fell upon the battered and weary but still dogged column, and it moved on, through the open country it had had to avoid in daylight. At its next halt, three miles ahead, it was joined by Varley and his platoon. By midnight, Anderson had learned that an Indian soldier had reached the column with a report that Parit Sulong was now held by Japanese. Two dispatch riders sent to investigate found the village looted, were challenged in an unknown tongue at the bridge, and quickly raced back. Thus, when it had seemed that the column had fought its way to freedom, another and perhaps more desperate struggle had to be faced.

Meanwhile the withdrawal from Segamat had continued, with little pressure by the enemy. Soon after dawn on 21st January the 27th Brigade took up positions covering the junction at Yong Peng of the road from Muar. The 22nd Indian Brigade was a little north of Labis, and the 8th Indian Brigade twelve miles to its rear. The consequent shortening of communications made it easier for General Bennett to control both the force under his command on the trunk road and those on the Muar road. Movement of these forces obviously required close coordination and, as mentioned, the only communication with Anderson was by wireless telegraph through Bennett's headquarters. General Percival therefore ordered at 8.33 a.m. that Bennett should command all troops on the Muar road, at a time to be arranged with Key.⁹ The latter went to the headquarters of the 53rd Brigade to see what was being done about the attack he had ordered, only to find that for some reason, stated to have been faulty transmission of the order by a liaison officer, no arrangements for it had been made. In the absence of Brigadier Duke on a reconnaissance, the brigade major informed him in response to his inquiries that an attack could be organised by 2 p.m. Leaving tentative instructions for this to be done, Key visited Bennett, offering his assistance in preparing the necessary orders. The upshot was that the brigade was ordered to attack accordingly, with the Loyals as the attacking battalion. The order was conveyed by Major Parker,¹ a West Australian in the Indian Army, serving on Key's staff, who reached the 53rd Brigade headquarters about noon. Colonel Thyer, sent forward to Brigadier Duke by General Bennett, reached the headquarters of the 53rd Brigade soon afterwards. Finding Duke absent

⁸ From a narrative by Lieutenant Hackney.

⁹ Percival later commented: "There are very obvious disadvantages in such rapid changes of command, but in very mobile operations they are not easy to avoid. The problem is further complicated when the army is made up of contingents from different parts of the Empire which, quite naturally, prefer to serve under their own commanders. But the avoidance of too much insularity should in the future be one of the corner stones of our military doctrine." (*The War in Malaya*, p. 231.)

¹ Col P. W. Parker. GSO2 11 Indian Div. Regular soldier; b. 15 Apr 1900.

on reconnaissance, Thyer went forward to the Loyals where he was informed that the battalion was ready for its forward move; but in fact considerable delay appears to have occurred in organising its transport. At 2.30 p.m. at the far end of the causeway through swamp to the Bukit Pelandok defile Thyer and the commander of the Loyals, Lieut-Colonel Elrington,² met Brigadier Duke. As Thyer later recorded, he found the reconnaissance for the attack and the issue of the plan being made completely in the open, in full view of the defile only a thousand yards away. When it was suggested that this was an unsound and risky manner in which to conduct the preparations for an attack . . . [I] was informed by the brigade commander that he was convinced that there were no troops on the hill feature. It was then suggested that if this were the case, the forward battalion, the Punjabs, should be sent forward to occupy the hill immediately instead of waiting for a set-piece attack by the Loyals. Failing this, at least fighting patrols should be sent forward to probe the position and locate enemy localities.

Because of what he had seen at the causeway, and when, an hour after the scheduled time for the attack by the Loyals, it had not begun, Thyer decided to report the situation to his commander. Signals communications had been destroyed by an air raid on Yong Peng, so he made the report in person. He got back to the Loyals soon after 4 p.m. with orders from Bennett that the attack begin immediately. He found, however, that the battalion still was not in position. Duke told him that the artillery was not yet ready to give adequate support, and reconnaissance had been hindered by transport difficulties. The time for the attack was moved to 6 p.m., and later to 6 a.m. next day. The commander of the Australian divisional artillery, Brigadier Callaghan, was informed by Bennett that the brigade had asked for additional artillery support for the attack, but Bennett considered such a measure neither practicable nor necessary. At the 53rd Brigade headquarters, Callaghan was informed at 9 p.m. by the brigade major, in the absence of Duke, that a field battery had completed its preparations, and "the Brigadier was quite happy that the support it would provide would be adequate".

Meanwhile (at 12.30 p.m. on 21st January) Percival had held another conference at which it was decided that a further reorganisation of forces should occur upon withdrawal from Yong Peng.³ They were to comprise:

Eastforce: All troops in the Mersing and Kahang area, to hold Jemaluang with detachments forward in the Mersing area.

Westforce: 9th Indian Division and the A.I.F. (less its 22nd Brigade) under General Bennett's command, covering Kluang on the railway and Ayer Hitam on the trunk road.

11th Indian Division: 53rd Brigade when released from Westforce, 15th Brigade, and 28th Brigade, commanded by General Key, to hold the Batu Pahat area and operate on the west coast road.

This day of continued and exasperating delays by the 53rd Brigade—arising it seemed at the time to Australian officers from failure to realise

² Lt-Col M. Elrington, MC. CO 2/Loyals. Regular soldier; b. 28 Dec 1897.

³ A decision to withdraw from the Mersing-Yong Peng-Batu Pahat line had arisen from circumstances related in the next chapter.

the urgency of the situation, and no doubt largely from the brigade's lack of training and experience for the task it was set—was a day of disaster to Anderson's column. Making the most of the cover of darkness, the force came to the end of the open country, and was halted in the shelter of rubber trees at 2 a.m. on 21st January. A detachment led by Sergeant Lloyd Davies, sent to reconnoitre the bridge at Parit Sulong, was attacked there, and returned at 7.15. Although two Malays who had been encountered insisted that the bridge was held by the Sultan of Johore's men, Anderson disbelieved their report, and deployed his forward companies through the trees. Soon, after its night-long trek, the column had to fight again. The leading men met rapid fire, and were charged by 120 Japanese, whom they halted and held in the open by means of a flank attack. While Japanese heavy tanks came up to the rear of the column, where they were stopped by a section of 25-pounders of the 65th Battery under Sergeant Barton,⁴ carriers came forward and disposed of the frontal assault. Thus the head of the column, now comprising Keegan's and Beverley's companies, reached the outskirts of Parit Sulong about 9.30 a.m., only to find that houses and other vantage points had been turned into Japanese machine-gun nests. The rear of the column (Maher's and Westbrook's companies) was being increasingly assailed by tanks and mechanised infantry. Between the head and rear of the column there was now a distance of only 1,200 to 1,500 yards. Aircraft were swooping down and spattering it with bullets. Wireless communication with Westforce had failed during the night, but was re-established by the signallers despite the inferno in which they were working. A message was received during the morning that assistance (by means of the attack sought by Bennett) was coming. So, with this hope, and cheered also by the sound of guns between Parit Sulong and Yong Peng—which they took as evidence of the approach of a relieving force though in fact they were registering shots—the column fought on.

Such mortar ammunition as remained had to be used in maintaining the column's position, and hampering the enemy at the rear, rather than in supporting an attack on the village. A bend in the road, high rubber trees and short range prevented artillery being trained on the bridge. All gunners and drivers who could be spared, and the less seriously wounded men, were sent to fight on the flanks while the main strength of the column was exerted at its head and tail. Reynolds, though wounded at Bakri, did notable work on the left flank. At 11 a.m. Indian troops, led by Major R. Anderson, were ordered to attack the village from the west. Coming under heavy fire they swung wide, but got round to the north bank of the Simpang Kiri west of the bridge, and exchanged fire with Japanese across the water. Keegan's and Beverley's companies were held up until, with the aid of Pickup's carriers, which soon after midday engaged the enemy machine-guns at point-blank range, the companies managed to thrust through the village and also reach the north bank. Beverley was now sent

⁴ Sgt S. J. Barton, NX30078; 2/15 Fd Regt. Station hand; of Walcha, NSW; b. Rookwood, NSW, 16 May 1909.

to investigate the possibility of attacking the bridge, but as the afternoon wore on, and pressure from the rear increased, Anderson decided that the column's remaining resources, especially of mortar bombs, were insufficient for attack with any real chance of success. Air strafing increased, and soon after 4 p.m. bombs added many more casualties. The lot of the wounded had become pitiable in the extreme, and at 5 p.m. the medical officers of the two Australian battalions, Captain Cahill⁵ (2/19th) and Captain Brand⁶ (2/29th) suggested to Anderson that the Japanese be asked to let through two ambulances carrying men who were dying for lack of treatment.⁷ Anderson considered the chance remote, but agreed to the suggestion with the proviso that the men sent forward should be only those whose condition the doctors considered hopeless.

During the late afternoon and until after dark, the rearward part of the column was under intense fire. In a lull which followed, the rumble of approaching tanks was heard, and Lieutenant Ross and Sergeant Tate⁸ ran to a gun already set up in an anti-tank position on the road. In the darkness they were unable to locate the ammunition, but found some grenades. Armed with these, they jumped into the ditches lining the road and made towards the tanks. Forty yards from the gun they used the grenades to such effect that they stopped the leading tank. Racing back to the gun, they found its crew in position, and though the tank could not be seen at this distance the gun was aimed at where Ross and Tate had encountered it. The first shot hit the target, and after others had been fired it burst into flames, forming a temporary road-block behind which the gunners continued to fire on the enemy armour. This gallant incident, in which Tate was wounded, gave the column's oddly assorted fighting parties, made up of such men as became available from time to time, the opportunity to get at the other tanks during the night. Using grenades and anti-tank rifles, they went to work on them with grim resolve.

Distant gun fire had again been heard, but it seemed (rightly) that it had drawn no nearer the bridge. The column had had little food for two days, and its mortar and 25-pounder gun ammunition was almost exhausted. Anderson therefore sent a message to Bennett asking that if possible aircraft be used at dawn to bomb the approaches to the far end of the bridge, and to drop food and morphia. As the cipher books used by the signallers in the Muar area had been destroyed, he received a reply "Look up at sparrowfart". It had been framed by Thyer to convey (as it did) to him but not to the enemy that planes would be over at first light next day.

⁵ Capt R. L. Cahill, MBE, NX35149; AAMC. Medical practitioner; of Bondi Junction, NSW; b Sydney, 20 Jan 1914.

⁶ Capt V. Brand, MC, VX39085; RMO 2/29 Bn. Medical practitioner; of St Kilda, Vic; b Melbourne, 16 Jul 1914.

⁷ "These RMOs with the limited facilities at their disposal had done magnificent work under the grimmest conditions," wrote Anderson afterwards. ". . . The fortitude and cheerfulness of the wounded was amazing. . . . Captain Snelling, who was wounded twice again by air strafing, was outstanding for his example of courage and cheerfulness."

⁸ Sgt B. Tate, NX28467; 2/15 Fd Regt. Barman; of Bondi, NSW; b. Daylesford, Vic, 17 Dec 1905. Missing presumed died 15 Sep 1944.

Captain Maher was wounded by shrapnel, and then killed when a shell blew up the car in which he had been placed. At 10 p.m. a volunteer driver of one of the ambulances returned with news that the commander of the Japanese at the bridge had demanded the surrender of the column, offering to take care of the wounded in that event. He had ordered the ambulances to remain on the bridge approach to act as a road-block, covered by machine-guns which would be fired if they attempted to move. Anderson's decision was hard to make, but still with hope of relief he refused to consider the Japanese demand.

After dark Lieutenant Austin,⁹ gravely wounded in the neck and shoulder, and a driver, also wounded, released the brakes of each vehicle, rolled them down the slope away from the bridge, and then amid the din of battle drove them back to the perimeter. There, throughout the night, they and the rest of the column were assailed by the fire of tanks, artillery, and machine-guns.

The Loyals were in position before dawn on 22nd January for their delayed attack on Bukit Payong, but Brigadier Duke insisted on further testing of the range of his artillery preparatory to opening up a barrage to cover the operation. As the ranging shots fell short,¹ he ordered further postponement of the attack until 9 a.m. All prospect of taking the Japanese by surprise now had been lost, and the troops on the start-line were heavily attacked from the air.

With no artillery support forthcoming (Thyer wrote later), Brigadier Duke felt that he would have little chance of getting through to Parit Sulong. . . . It was further contended by 53rd Infantry Brigade that the chances of holding the defile, after it had been captured, were remote. Also the failure to capture and hold it successfully would have jeopardised "their main task of preventing the enemy penetrating to Yong Peng". The fact that they had been relieved of this responsibility does not seem to have been completely understood. Brigadier Duke decided to cancel the operation and reorganise into a defensive position. This decision was made after reference to H.Q. Westforce.

The brigade was accordingly grouped to prevent enemy advance along the causeway.

No such frustration afflicted the Japanese in renewing shell fire on Anderson's column at dawn the same day; but then—during a brief period while Japanese aircraft were absent from the scene—two cumbersome planes came over, dropped the food and morphia for which Anderson had asked, and went off after releasing bombs upon the Japanese at the far end of the bridge.² Anderson decided, however, that the effect of the bombing had been insufficient to make it practicable to cross the river;

⁹ Lt R. W. L. Austin, NX70159; 2/19 Bn. Law student; of Woollahra, NSW; b. Sydney, 16 Mar 1919.

¹ Thyer reported a 100-yards margin of error. The failure was attributed by Heath to faulty fuses, and climatic conditions.

² Anderson was under the impression that there was only one aircraft, "an old fashioned Vilde-beeste", but the rubber trees amid which he was engaged gave only a limited view overhead. Australian Air Force records state that the task was performed by two Albacores escorted by three Buffalo fighters, from the RAAF station at Sembawang.

and though the distant gun fire of the promised relieving force still seemed no nearer, it was reasonable for him to hope that further assistance would follow. Enemy tanks were again active, and made a flank attack supported by infantry. The number of casualties became so great that the column would be unable to fight much longer.³ As a last bid, when relief failed and hope was fading, Anderson ordered Beverley's company to test the resistance at the bridge. The response by the Japanese convinced Anderson that no chance of success lay in this direction. At 9 a.m., when the column faced annihilation if it remained where it was, he ordered destruction of carriers, guns, and transport, and withdrawal eastward through swamps and jungle by all capable of attempting it.⁴

Our fellows, although so far fewer than the enemy in numbers, had seemed for ages to be sending back nearly as much fire as came into our area (the wounded Hackney subsequently wrote), but now there was noticeable a definite slackening off of the fire from our position. It was not very long before we knew why—it became known to most that orders had been given for all men to get out as best they could. An odd burst from a machine-gun, and some rifle fire kept going out from our troops, but as time went on there were less and less of our men about. In small parties and sometimes singly, we could see our fellows going up the northern bank of the river east of the bridge.

The gallant 65th Battery had fired 6,519 rounds in the action from the Muar to Parit Sulong. Wireless-telegraph communications had been maintained by Corporal Bingham⁵ and Signalmán Benoit,⁶ of the 8th Divisional Signals, under constant shell fire in an open truck in Anderson's column. By 10 a.m. an orderly withdrawal from Parit Sulong had been made, except by Anderson, Major Vincent, Captain Hughes, and Padre Greenwood⁷ of the 2/19th, Lieutenant Bonney⁸ of the 2/29th, and twenty men whom it was still possible to assist from the shambles; by a platoon of the 2/19th led by Sergeant Hunt⁹ who failed to receive the withdrawal order;¹ by a small party under Sergeant Davies; and by Private Quigley,²

³ The vehicle carrying Hackney and other wounded was at last without a driver, so Hackney drove it whenever movement was necessary, manipulating the clutch, hand throttle and hand-brake with his hands and the leg he was still able to use. "Even the sight of a fiddling little aeroplane from our fellows outside bucked everyone up considerably," he wrote later. But a shell burst near him as he stood during a pause propped against the vehicle, sending splinters into his back and the leg he had been still able to use. When a move again became necessary and his truck was impeding others, he dragged himself back to the driving seat and somehow got the truck along. "I had ceased to care how the damn thing went forward," he added, "as long as I got it out of the way and along the road."

⁴ The withdrawal order anticipated a message sent soon after by Bennett to Anderson stating that there was little prospect of relief reaching the column, and leaving it to his discretion to withdraw. "Sorry unable help after your heroic effort," ran the message. "Good luck."

⁵ Cpl G. J. Bingham, DCM, NX51770; 8 Div Sigs. Telegraphist; of Petersham, NSW; b. Merriwa, NSW, 2 Nov 1913.

⁶ Sig M. A. W. Benoit, MM, VX32772; 8 Div Sigs. Electrical testman; of Bayswater, Vic; b. Ballarat, Vic, 26 Sep 1919. Missing presumed died 24 May 1943.

⁷ Chap Rev H. Wardale-Greenwood, VX38675. Presbyterian minister; of Rainbow, Vic; b. Durham, England, 20 May 1909. Died Borneo 18 Jul 1945.

⁸ Lt L. G. Bonney, VX39068; 2/29 Bn. Farmer; of Alvie, via Colac, Vic; b. Colac, 26 Dec 1917.

⁹ Capt W. G. Hunt, MM, NX52483. 2/19 Bn; 44 Bn; 19 Garrison Bn. Labourer; of Epping, NSW; b. Sydney, 4 Jun 1918.

¹ Hunt and his platoon fought their way out by way of the west coast.

² Pte J. B. Quigley, NX32671; 2/19 Bn. Transport driver and mechanic; of Emu Plains, NSW; b. Paddington, NSW, 7 Mar 1901. Missing presumed died 22 Jan 1942.

Lieutenant Crawford's batman, slightly wounded in the forearm, who chose to remain with Crawford and other badly wounded men.

Anderson's force had done all that could reasonably have been expected of it, and more. That did not alter the fact that another heavy loss, amounting to a brigade and a large part of two Australian battalions, had been inflicted on the defenders of Malaya. Looking to the battles of the future, however, it was significant that, as Anderson later commented:

The well-trained Australian units showed a complete moral ascendancy of the enemy. They outmatched the Japs in bushcraft and fire control, where the enemy's faults of bunching together and noisy shouting disclosed their dispositions and enabled the Australians to inflict heavy casualties at small cost to themselves. When the enemy was trapped they fought most gamely. In hand-to-hand fighting they made a very poor showing against the superior spirit and training of the A.I.F.

Further, by their stand at Bakri and by their dogged struggle along the road to Parit Sulong, the force imposed delay on the Japanese advance which was of vital importance at the time, particularly in the area of Bennett's command. Percival was to record:

The Battle of Muar was one of the epics of the Malayan campaign. Our little force by dogged resistance had held up a division of the Japanese *Imperial Guards* attacking with all the advantages of air and tank support for nearly a week, and in doing so had saved the Segamat force from encirclement and probable annihilation. The award of the Victoria Cross to Lieut-Colonel Anderson of the A.I.F. was a fitting tribute both to his own prowess and to the valour of his men.³

Those left behind at Parit Sulong soon met a fate largely typical of what many already had experienced, and many more were to experience, at the hands of the Japanese. Among the wounded who could not be taken away was Hackney, who has been quoted freely not only because of his courage and stamina during the struggle, but also because later he wrote a vivid and compelling account of what happened to him and to those around him.⁴ The aftermath at Parit Sulong cannot be better described than by drawing further upon his narrative, and by quoting it in part.

Hackney and Lieutenant Tibbitts⁵ were together when the withdrawal occurred. Tibbitts obtained a Bren gun, and while he was away looking for more ammunition, Hackney blazed away from beneath the truck, hoping thereby to give those who had left a better chance to get clear of the enemy. When Tibbitts returned, and in the period of suspense till the Japanese would reach them, they spoke of "a wash; being in other than bloodstained, torn, filthy clothes; a bed and a sleep", and of other things they "had not known before were so good". The Japanese were slow in moving in, but at last, when firing from the column had ceased, "from all directions, but particularly north and west, chattering creatures began to come into sight, often screaming something to somebody not far away". They herded the wounded together with kicks, curses, blows from rifle

³ Percival, *The War In Malaya*, p. 233.

⁴ "Dark Evening" (in typescript of 116 pages) by Ben Hackney.

⁵ Lt A. H. Tibbitts, VX57746; 2/29 Bn. Clerk; of East Kew, Vic; b. Melbourne, 15 May 1916. Missing believed killed, 22 Jan 1942.

butts, and jabs from bayonets. Unable to walk, Hackney was aided by Tibbitts, both of them under a series of blows. Across the bridge, they and the other prisoners were made to strip and sit in a circle. Hackney estimated that this maimed and bloodstained remnant of the force numbered 110 Australians and 40 Indians.

Many Japanese seemed to delight in kicking where a wound lay open, and so great was their satisfaction at any visible sign of pain that often the dose was repeated.

No part of the prisoners' bodies was spared from the brutality of their captors. Their clothes were searched by an English-speaking white man dressed as a British soldier, and then returned to them in a heap. As many as possible were forced into a shed, which became so overcrowded that many were piled on top of others, thus adding to their excruciating pain. Appeals for water and medical attention were ignored, and a move to another building was made under compulsion of more brutality. Japanese guns, tanks and troops streamed by throughout the rest of the afternoon. Whenever they stopped, troops ran to see the prisoners and add to their sufferings. One of the dead was placed in an upright position on a table top propped against a truck. There the body "seemed to create enormous amusement to the Japanese concerned, and was an object of ridicule to many Japanese afterwards". An Indian lying in front of the building regained consciousness. The Japanese in charge at the spot gave him a series of kicks, bashed him with a rifle, thrust into him again and again with his bayonet, then heaved the corpse into the water near by.

Then, it seemed, the outburst of savagery was to be checked. An officer shouted orders; helmets and mugs filled with water were produced, and packets of cigarettes. While these were held just out of reach of thirst-crazed men, newly-arrived Japanese photographed the scene. The water was then thrown away, and the cigarettes were withdrawn.

At sunset the prisoners were roped or wired together in groups. Jerking the fetters, kicking and bashing the victims, their captors led them away, except a few, including Hackney, left for dead or about to die. Petrol was collected from the column's stranded vehicles. Feigning death, Hackney later heard a stutter of machine-guns, and saw a flicker of fire. Crawling inch by inch later in the night, but steeling himself to suffer inertly more kicks, blows, and bayonet thrusts, even letting his boots be tugged off his feet despite agonising pain, Hackney dragged himself to a coolie building. There, by a protracted process of rubbing against a corner of a foundation block, he severed the rope binding his wrists together. After more agonised crawling, he found water and came upon two members of his battalion—one of them Sergeant Ron Croft.⁶ Both smelt strongly of petrol. Croft told Hackney that he and his comrade had been among a few who were not tied when the prisoners were fired upon. They fell, though not

⁶ Sgt R. F. T. Croft, VX39208; 2/29 Bn. Salesman; of Richmond, Vic; b. Richmond, 14 Jul 1914. Missing presumed died 15 Apr 1942.

hit, and feigned death. Petrol was then thrown on the group, and ignited, but Croft managed to free himself and the other man, who was badly wounded, from the rest.

Croft now helped this man to thick jungle near the river. Weak and nerve-racked, and smaller than Hackney, who weighed fourteen stone, he yet managed to return and stagger off with Hackney across his shoulder.

Sheer strength alone did not enable him to carry his burden. It was something more than that—his wish and willingness to help; courage, guts, and manliness.⁷

On a hillside track north of Parit Sulong, where it had been agreed that the parties withdrawing from the village should meet, Keegan received a report that Anderson had been killed. Obviously even the men who had remained unwounded were in no condition for further fighting until they had been rested and re-equipped. Keegan therefore gave them orders that, grouped as nearly as possible in their original companies, they should make their way to Yong Peng, about fifteen miles away. Ahead lay more swamp, rubber plantations, and jungle with its tangle of vines and roots. The unwounded men hacked a way where necessary. Night fell on the main body of the survivors—Captain Harris, Lieutenant Reynolds, and 310 others—before they reached an island amid swamp as shown in their maps, so all lay where they could. Mud and water oozed around their bodies, but to most exhaustion brought sleep. The group pushed on next day, aided by Chinese, and with frequent pauses for the sake of the wounded. The sounds of fighting grew louder as they neared Yong Peng. Thanks to arrangements made by Harris, who led an advanced party, they were given drinks of tea or water at each Chinese shop or house on the way. Major Vincent, coming up with a party of fifty men of the 2/29th Battalion and some Indians, gave them news that Anderson, far from having been killed, was close behind. Then ambulances for which Harris had arranged picked up the wounded, and one of the drivers dryly remarked "My word, we are glad to see you fellows! You don't realise what we have had to put up with, waiting here for you during the last few days." The rest of the group and others, including Anderson and his party, reached Yong Peng during the evening.⁸ Keegan and ten others

⁷ The man whom Croft had first rescued died next day, after the three had been joined by an English soldier. The survivors reached a Malay house, where they were given food and allowed to wash and sleep for a while. Hackney, still unable to stand, persuaded the others that it would be best for him to stay at the house while they pushed on next day.

The rest of Hackney's story concerns chiefly his personal survival after he had been carried off by the Malays and left some distance from the house. Though his body was riddled by wounds, sapping his physical strength, he managed to crawl from place to place until 27th February. He was mostly refused help by Malays, who appeared to fear reprisals if they harboured him, but generally aided by Chinese, at the risk of their own and their families' lives. Then, thirty-six days after he had begun his attempt to escape, he was caught by a party of Malays, one of them dressed as a policeman, taken back to Parit Sulong, and handed over to the Japanese. There he received more of the brutal treatment he had previously endured, but this lessened in the course of a series of moves. When he entered Pudu gaol, at Kuala Lumpur, on 20th March, he had lost more than five stone in weight, but his wounds had almost healed, and he found himself again in the company of Englishmen and Australians—including Captain Morgan, adjutant of his battalion. Later, Hackney and others were transferred to the main prisoner-of-war camp at Changi, on Singapore Island.

⁸ One party of 137 had been led on a compass bearing to Yong Peng by Pte M. Curnow of the 2/19th, who had been outstanding as a runner between Colonel Anderson and "A" Coy during the action at Bakri.

had arrived in the morning. An armoured car—one of two in charge of Sergeant Christoff⁹ of the 2/30th Battalion, which had made a series of spirited sorties westward from Yong Peng while the fate of Anderson's column was at issue—helped to bring in survivors.

Before he washed or had a meal, Anderson reported to Bennett, who wrote: "He was cool and calm and talked as if the whole battle was merely a training exercise. From this I understood why he was able to keep his men in hand. With such coolness, self-control, strength of character, and with such kindly affection and consideration for his men, he could overcome all difficulties."¹

The 45th Brigade now had no commander or headquarters, no battalion commanders or officers second-in-command, and only one of its adjutants. Only two or three of its remaining British officers had had more than a few months' experience. Anderson had 271 left of his battalion, including fifty-two wounded who made their way back. Of the 2/29th Battalion, which had first taken the weight of the main Japanese advance near Bakri, only 130 men mustered at Yong Peng. Its commander and most of its officers had been killed or were missing. The 65th Battery numbered 98 at this stage, including 24 wounded who had made their way from Parit Sulong. Both battalions were ordered to be ready for battle again within a few days.

From Nishimura's viewpoint, the resistance between Bakri and Parit Sulong had been again a cause of anxiety. The British troops in the Bukit Pelandok positions had been dispersed by two battalions of the *4th Guards Regiment* sent to the area between Bukit Pelandok and Parit Sulong from near Batu Pahat to prevent reinforcements reaching Bakri; but the delay imposed on the force engaged against Anderson's column had been overcome only after Nishimura had "strenuously encouraged" attack. In his hour of triumph when the struggle ended, he contemplated leaving the battalion he had disposed in concealment south of Batu Pahat to fend for itself while the rest of his division stole a march on the *5th Division* by continuing the pursuit to Yong Peng and taking the lead along the trunk road. However, when he learned of the stage reached in the Westforce withdrawal, he decided that after his men had completed their task on the Muar-Yong Peng road he would swing his main force to the area of Batu Pahat.²

The enemy losses in the Muar area were a company of tanks and the equivalent of a battalion of men. Japanese accounts pay tribute to the valour of the troops who fought them there and at Gemas.

⁹ Sgt. G. J. Christoff, DCM, NX54034; 2/30 Bn. Motor driver; of Collarenebri, NSW; b. Walgett, NSW, 25 Aug 1911. Killed in action 30 Jan 1942.

¹ Bennett, *Why Singapore Fell*, p. 146.

² In a subsequent account of events at this stage Nishimura said he considered that it would not be *Bushido*—the Japanese soldier's equivalent of good form—to intervene in such circumstances. He congratulated himself, however, upon having forced the Westforce withdrawal.