

IMPHAL

MARCH—JULY 1944

FLYING into Imphal from any direction you pass over mile after mile of rolling green hills, along whose crests and wooded flanks brown pathways wind like serpents. Hardly a village is seen. Then, suddenly, these hills fall away steeply, “running down into the flat brown and yellow plain of paddy fields and swampy lakes like cliffs into the sea.”

At the end of March the encircling hills, having a colour of green and terracotta, clashed sharply with the greys and buffs of the parched plain, where the earth crumbled for want of rain. To dig gun-pits and trenches into the paddy fields was like cutting into iron. But the monsoon was not far distant, and then the dust of the tracks would be changed into mud, and the dry waterways into coursing torrents.

Imphal looked a small town to the troops who, in lorries or on foot, hurried through its blossomed avenues. The town, in reality a series of adjoining villages, has its houses of stone and white plaster, and its wooden thatched huts, surrounded or sub-divided by bamboo clumps. Further out, the small, rectangular villages are enclosed in bamboo hedges, with dusty tracks running through the middle.

The inhabitants of this capital of Manipur State, with its own maharajah, presented a contrast to the people of Arakan, for they wore clean white shirts instead of the coloured *longyi*, and could afford bicycles and wrist watches. As the Japanese invaders drew nearer, the bullock carts that hitherto had creaked slowly along the roads carrying loads of grain or wool were now turned to a different work. Refugees from the outer villages came into the centre of the plain. And their carts were piled high with household goods, with mattresses and wooden bedsteads, with furniture and cooking pots.

The 17th Indian Division was still fighting its way north up the road from Tiddim, along which it had with great skill staved off the constant threat of encirclement and total destruction. To help it reach our outer defence line a few miles south of Imphal, part of the 23rd Indian Division was sent across, the oncoming Japanese were stopped, and our positions stabilized. This done, the 23rd Indian Division took up posts on the east and north-east of Imphal. And the 20th Indian Division, pulling back from Tamu, against which the enemy advanced with the greater part of his tanks and artillery, held the south-eastern part of the front, centred upon Palel.

When the Fifth Indian Division, less 161 Brigade, first arrived in Imphal, on several different airfields, staff officers of Four Corps Headquarters quickly assembled units company by company, and rushed them to the front. One Commanding Officer, who arrived after two of his infantry companies, was astonished to find that they were both on their way to the front up different roads.

The first main action in which troops of the Division were engaged about Imphal occurred on March 22. Forward of a village named Litan, twenty-six miles north-east from Imphal on the Ukhrul road, the Japanese were attacking the 50th Gurkha Parachute Brigade, which had only two battalions and had been sent in as -reinforcement to Four Corps. To assist in the defence of this position, the 2/1st Punjab (Lieutenant-Colonel W. G. Smith) were sent from 123 Brigade.

As contact could not be made with the Parachute Brigade itself—the enemy was fighting on all sides—Colonel Smith took command of the administration box that had been formed a short way to the rear. During the night of March 24-25 one of his rifle companies holding a peak four thousand feet high had been fiercely attacked. When ammunition was all but exhausted and the strength much depleted by casualties, our men were withdrawn. Now Smith co-ordinated the defences, and called down an airstrike upon this hill vacated by his troops.

The news from the 50th Parachute Brigade further forward was most serious. The situation there had deteriorated. Litan could 'not be held, and the position was now too far out from Imphal to prevent it from becoming isolated. The mauled Parachute Brigade had to extricate itself and return to Imphal.

And when, on the 26th, Brigadier Evans arrived on the scene with his two other battalion commanders, it was decided that all the troops of 123 Brigade should be withdrawn by the next morning. The 2/1st Punjab covered the retiring administration troops, from the slopes of a peak half a mile west of Litan. 'Here only two of Colonel Smith's companies were properly dug in; the other companies had been obliged to move after setting fire to such stores as could not be evacuated. And at eight o'clock the enemy attacked.

Now began one of the most nerve-racking nights in the battalion's history. 'C' Company, on a small hill five hundred yards from Smith's headquarters, was attacked by a battalion of Japanese troops. Without a break the battle raged through the night. Part of the company was overrun. Hand-to-hand fighting was of the most ferocious. But the enemy was repulsed. The Company Commander, Major J. Walker, was killed at midnight while directing a precarious defence, and Subadar Walayat Khan took charge. Above the noise of battle his voice could be heard encouraging the men as they drove off one assault after another. He urged them on to kill the enemy troops, who rushed forward without regard for casualties. And with their war cry he led them, until after three hours' stern fighting this brave man, covered with wounds, was obliged to hand over command to another V.C.O. Walayat Khan's gallantry during this critical night was recognized by the award of the Indian Order of Merit.

Though our men held out until daybreak, only six of the fifty who had started the fight remained unwounded. Why the Japanese did not advance down the hill to one side of 'C' Company is not known. Had they done so, Smith's battalion headquarters could scarcely have avoided annihilation. For the men were not dug in; they were dispersed on the slopes. It says much for the fire control of the sepoy that not one shot was fired by headquarters company that night, for all the intense provocation and imminent danger.

It was a tired and shaken battalion that withdrew in the morning through the, positions of the 2nd Suffolks and settled into a village eight miles out of Imphal.

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During the next two weeks the three battalions of 123 Brigade patrolled the villages east and north-east of Imphal. Their efforts were directed towards cutting the Japanese supply routes up and down the valleys that skirted the Imphal plain, and daily our patrols fought engagements with groups of enemy soldiers. When local villagers reported the presence of Japanese looting parties, the Royal Air Force and Gunners bombarded the place. It was a battle for the lines of communication, upon which the enemy depended so much for his ability to hold out upon the hills which he captured and to maintain the impetus 'of his invasion, the opening phases of which had been so abundantly successful. Long reconnaissance patrols were sent out for several days at a time to search for the enemy. Raiding parties attacked villages from which the enemy was known to take food by night. Ammunition dumps were bombed and mule convoys strafed.

But although our men gained the, upper hand in these small brushes with the Japanese, and inflicted considerable losses upon them both in human lives and in war material, the enemy continued to make progress towards Imphal. And to arrest his advance meant full-scale battles that involved a battalion or more in action. The first of these battles occurred on the Imphal—Kohima road, fifteen miles north of the Manipur capital at a village named Kanglatongbi. By cutting this road, the Japanese had encircled Imphal. The town set in its plain was now besieged. All supplies had to be flown in to the airstrip, near which Four Corps Headquarters had formed the 'Keep,' a defensive box based upon a group of hillocks in the centre that stretched southwards into the plain to within a mile of Imphal. In order to cut down the strength of the garrison and, thereby, the rations needed each day, 50,000 non-combatant troops had either been evacuated before the road was cut, or were now sent out in returning aircraft.

At Kanglatongbi, spread over a considerable area, Four Corps had an Ordnance Dump and Reinforcement Camp. On the night of April 4/5 the Japanese penetrated the area. All the troops from our administration units had been withdrawn into what was known as 'Lion' Box, a mile farther south. The occupants of this box numbered some 12,000 men, of whom the only real fighting units were two Sapper Field Companies and a company of the Assam Rifles.

When the Japanese first attacked astride 'this main road from the north, Salomons' Nine Brigade was still in reserve. Its task had been to destroy any Japanese who succeeded in penetrating through or round 123 Brigade. The 3/9th Jats and 3/i4th Punjab had patrolled with vigour to find out the routes of any enemy enveloping moves, and to anticipate the enemy on any vital hill that covered these routes. But to counter this new threat the 2nd West Yorkshires, supported by one squadron of the 3rd Dragoon Guards with Lee tanks, were at once ordered out to the village of Sengmai, a mile south of Lion

Box. The battalion formed a firm base here, and had orders to ensure that the box was not overrun during daylight and that no enemy parties advanced any farther south. On April 5 and 6 West Yorkshire platoons, accompanied by tanks, patrolled forward to Lion Box, dealt with any groups of Japanese troops who had penetrated our defences during the previous night, and mopped up all resistance that remained, before returning to Sengmai at dusk.

Then, on the morning of April 7, strong enemy parties were reported to have, entered the box. So Colonel Cree sent one platoon and tanks to evict the Japanese. But, at nine o'clock, the evacuation of Lion Box was ordered. And the task of Cree's West Yorkshires became that of covering this evacuation. Accordingly, the battalion moved forward to position inside the box. At noon the withdrawal started. The troops marched back along the road into the centre of Imphal, while convoys of lorries were sent up to Kanglatongbi to bring back some of the more important stores from our dumps there. During this evacuation; the enemy shelled the place with a 75mm. gun. And it was during this bombardment that the A/Q of the Division, Lieutenant-Colonel Norman Maclaurin, was killed while trying to disentangle a traffic block near Kanglatongbi. He had been with the Division for eighteen months, since the days of Quetta Camp outside Baghdad. He was a delightful personality, of varied talents, for besides being a good caricaturist, he was an expert at Scottish dances, and a piper of merit. In rest areas he could be seen walking up and down outside his tent, playing his pipes. And, fittingly, a piper from the nearby Seaforth Highlanders came over to pipe a lament at his funeral.

After much insistence on the part of General Briggs, the vacant post was filled by Maclaurin's deputy, Major T. C. W. Roe, one of the most prominent and veteran members of Divisional Headquarters. .

The second main battle in which the Division was involved during April was on the slopes and summit of Numshigum. This, one of the most vital, hills north of Imphal, was a sprawling feature that butted far into the plain. Its green ridge extended over some seven thousand yards, its highest part rose to 3, 800 feet high, and the hill overtopped the surrounding paddy fields by more than a thousand feet.

So committed were Colonel Gerty's 3/9th Jats already across part of our northern front that the only troops available for holding Numshigum were a platoon from his 'B' Company and the Jat guerilla platoon. Of these 'men a number were newly joined recruits, and of automatic weapons the force had but three. To reach the summit meant a climb of an hour and a half up steep grassy slopes, 'and when Lieutenant Sam and his men did arrive on top they had little enough time to dig and wire a defence position before darkness fell upon the plain and its encircling hills.

At three o'clock in the morning of April 7 the Japanese sent two companies to attack Numshigum from the north. They chose a time when strong wind and a rainstorm had reduced visibility to a few yards and when the sounds of approaching troops would be

covered by the weather's violence. The brunt of this strong attack was borne by the platoon of 'B' Company. The havildar was killed early in the engagement. 'By half past six the Jats had suffered twenty-four casualties. The position on Numshigum was menaced from all sides by the enemy's superior strength and fire power, and permission was given by Colonel Gerty for the survivors of his two platoons to withdraw from the hilltop. Particular gallantry in this night action was displayed by Havildar Munshi Ram, who, when his platoon commander was killed, went forward to encourage his men. A grenade shattered his hand. He was badly wounded in the foot. And in darkness he was left for dead on the summit. Later that day Munshi Ram survived an airstrike when Hurribombers bombed and strafed the Japanese on Numshigum, but even then his misfortunes were not ended. The Japanese threw him down the hillside. Nevertheless, though weak from loss of blood and shock, this havildar struggled into Gerty's headquarters down beside the road. There he died from his wounds soon afterwards. He was posthumously awarded the Indian Order of Merit.

That Numshigum be recaptured, and with all speed, was imperative, for there was not one good defensive position between this hill and Imphal itself. Colonel Gerty sent 'A' Company (Major Risal Singh) and the hill was taken, with surprisingly light opposition. The enemy had found the cost of his night attacks so high that he withdrew without offering his usual tenacious resistance. And his counter-attacks that night were easily repulsed.

During April 8 and 9 the enemy made several half-hearted assaults against the Jats, and on the night of the 9th his efforts, though most determined and supported by five machine-guns, served him nothing. An entire battalion was used in these attempts to oust the Jats. It later transpired from a captured diary that the death of four Japanese officers in the early attacks had so incensed the remaining officers that they had determined to avenge their deaths whatever the cost.

The following night 'A' Company were harassed by machine-guns that worked steadily nearer to our positions. When at first light a Japanese 75 mm. gun fired a heavy concentration upon the Jat company, three of our Bren guns were struck. This was a serious loss. And its gravity was felt when, taking advantage of artillery fire, the enemy soldiers moved round the flanks with machine-guns and launched a fierce attack that was pressed forward regardless of casualties. By seven o'clock our forward platoons had been overrun. Ammunition was down to the last few rounds. The company had thirty casualties. And 'D' Company, then on its way up the hillside to reinforce the position, was still some way from the summit. Our men had neither strength nor weapons to keep back the pressure long enough to give time for this hurrying relief to arrive. And so permission had to be given for the mauled 'A' Company to retire from Numshigum, leaving this vital hill a second time in enemy hands.

But the enemy could not be allowed to remain on this dominant ridge. No effort to drive him back must be spared. The threat to our northern front of his presence on this buttress was too grave to be tolerated. Accordingly, Colonel Gerty sent in his 'B' and 'C' Companies, after an inaccurate airstrike and an effective artillery concentration. The plan

was for two platoons of 'B' Company under Major G. R. Sell to form base some three hundred feet from the top, while the third platoon secured a knob a short way farther south, in order to prevent enemy flanking fire from that direction.

Then, as soon as 'B' Company was firmly established, Sell's men would pass through to capture Numshigum itself.

There was no cover save a few foxholes 'B' Company was soon pinned down by heavy fire. The one platoon failed to capture the knob, its commander was wounded, and our artillery could not reach the enemy-machine-guns, so well sited were they. Major Graham Sell was killed early on. So was his subadar. When, at 1.30 p.m. , it became evident that both companies were losing men to no advantage, and that our attack could 'not make progress, Gerty brought his men back, after a morning of stern fighting and severe loss. During the withdrawal a party of stretcher-bearers was left behind, trying to evacuate a wounded Jat. For a time this was rendered impossible by Japanese machine-guns, but when, later that afternoon, our aircraft bombed and strafed Numshigum.—it was believed that the hill was clear 'of our men—the naik in charge, Yakub, took advantage of the noise and confusion. Seeing that the enemy had gone to ground, he lifted the wounded soldier on to a stretcher, and had him carried down. He buried two other Jats, and was not molested by the cowering Japanese. Naik Yakub was decorated with the Military Medal for this coolness and presence of mind.

Another day had passed. The Japanese still held the commanding heights. Many good men had been lost in a strong attempt to recapture the summit. The Jats could do no more. The battalion had suffered heavily, and something more powerful than an infantry battalion was evidently required to defeat the Japanese. Accordingly, General Briggs ordered Evans' 123 Brigade to assault Numshigum on April 13. Selected for this assault were the 1/17th Dogras, commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel F. G. Woods, who had served as Brigade Major to Messervy with Nine Brigade in Eritrea , three years before.

In the middle of the 13th morning three squadrons of Hurricanes swooped down upon Numshigum. One by one each aircraft dropped its two bombs,' rose again, circled, and entered the smoking lists a second time to spray the Japanese positions on the summit with fire. From the centre of Imphal plain came the thudding of many guns, as the Divisional artillery, aided by a medium regiment, pounded Numshigum with shells that landed amid the pall of buff smoke that swathed the crest. Meanwhile, in the hot sunshine two Dogra companies, one up each of the two main spurs that led to the summit from the east side, had set off, supported by two squadrons of 30-ton Lee tanks from the 3rd Carabiniers. No one knew whether the tanks would be able to climb the very steep gradients. This had never been tried before.

Colonel Woods directed that whichever company with its tanks reached the junction of the two spurs first would be given further orders on arrival. All communication was by wireless. Both companies, commanded by Majors Hugh Alden and L. H. Jones, reached the junction at almost the same time and unmolested by the Japanese, who were momentarily stunned by the shattering weight of shell and bomb brought down by our

Gunners and the Royal Air Force. But from this moment the attack became stiff. While the tanks, which had climbed up like big, slow, black beetles, balanced themselves on knife-edge ridges and pumped bullets and shells into every Japanese man and bunker that could be seen, the agile Dogras protected the tanks from interference. And under the armoured cover they assaulted the Japanese trenches and bunkers. The struggle flickered from bunker to bunker. If the successful co-operation between tanks and infantry imbued the Dogras with a sense of invincibility, yet their substantial gains were not won except at a price. Every single officer in that attack was killed or wounded. Jones was wounded, and then a second time in the chest. He was carried away all but unconscious. Alden was also wounded in the chest while directing operations beside a tank. And all Carabinier officers were killed by snipers, as they looked from their turrets to direct the battle. They were unable to close down because the ground was so incredibly difficult, and the position of the tanks so perilous and unusual.

The last half-hour of the fight was ordered by C.S.;M. Craddock of the Carabiniers and Subadars Ranbir Singh and Tiru. Between these gallant men language was allowed to present no problem. They continued the fight until no enemy troops remained upon the main Numshigum feature. Craddock won the Distinguished Conduct Medal, Subadar Tim ,the Indian Order of Merit. Both company commanders were awarded the Military Cross, and to Colonel Woods went a D.S.O.

By nightfall the two companies were dug and, wired in. The tanks of the Carabiniers rumbled down the hill again, taking the Dogra wounded. When that night the Japanese counter-attacked in force, from Turtle farther north along the ridge (so' called because of its contour shape), our artillery brought down such effective defensive fire upon our barbed wire that the disillusioned enemy was mauled and repulsed. His attack was decisively trounced.

These Dogras come from the foothills of the Himalayas , from Kangra and Jammu . Here, poor but industrious yeoman farmers that they are, they scrape a livelihood from their terraced hillsides. Geographical remoteness has made their education problematic and therefore backward, and they are conservative in their nature. But across the centuries their position among the foothills kept them isolated from the invasions and wars of the Punjab plains. It also kept them from adopting the Moslem religion common to the inhabitants of the Punjab , and in their beliefs they are Hindus.

Of their Râjput origin they are intensely proud, and in their own country, if asked, they say that they are Rajput, not Dogra. To them this means membership of an untarnished military chivalry. In their loyalty and reliability they have few equals. Though small of stature, they are wiry and their stamina and powers of physical endurance remarkable. Shy, in a childlike fashion, they respond at once to courteous treatment, but are quick to resent any attempt at bullying. They are charming little men, staunch, quiet, gallant fighters. And their natural good manners and bearing led their British officers, in more emotional moments, to refer to the “Gentlemen of the Dogra Regiment.”

In their hills of the Kangra Valley , Dogras are accustomed to wear little caps, woven by their women in complex patterns of coloured dyes on a white background. When the 1st Battalion was sent to Arakan for the first campaign, their ordinary forage caps could not be supplied. Having no *pagris*, and in need of an alternative to the steel helmet, the Dogras had their Regimental Depot at Jullundur produce these *chesi topis* in khaki. The men, and the officers too, began to wear them and, when official disapproval was expressed, became proud of their unauthorized headgear.

The 3/14th Punjab took over from the Dogras on Numshigum, and Nine Brigade prepared a further assault to drive the enemy from Turtle and the rest of the feature. But the Japanese withdrew.

Had they not done so, another attack was to have been made, this time by the 2nd West Yorkshires , from the west up two long spurs that led up to Numshigum and Turtle. This operation was planned but never executed. Instead, the battalion continued its patrolling across country, the very openness of which made this a difficult task. But when our patrols found that two important hills were unoccupied by the Japanese—Point 3938, and Runaway Hill, a very steep little feature guarding the road that ran up the left-hand side of the Numshigum massif—both were occupied by the 3/9th Jats.

It was by Runaway Hill that the Division's third Victoria Cross was won. Before dawn on April 6, during this original encircling movement, at a time when we could not be sure when they would appear next, the Japanese attacked one of Colonel Gerty's standing patrols. By driving the Jats off, they secured a hillock that overlooked the main company position. Jemadar Abdul Hafiz was ordered to recapture the hill with two sections of his platoon. After an artillery bombardment by Bastin's 4th Field Regiment, Abdul Hafiz led his Jats in to the attack. They charged up the hillside that was bare of cover, shouting their war-cry as they neared the top. Then the waiting Japanese opened fire with machine-guns. On the approaching Jats they threw down grenades. Jemadar Abdul Hafiz was wounded at the outset. A bullet struck him in the leg. Yet he dashed forward and seized the enemy machine-gun by the barrel, while another Jat killed the Japanese gunner.

The jemadar then took up a Bren gun dropped by one of his men who had fallen wounded, and notwithstanding the heavy fire from the enemy positions on this hill and on a feature to the flank, he shot a number of the Japanese soldiers. And so fiercely did he lead his men that the enemy ran away: hence the name Runaway Hill. But Jemadar Abdul Hafiz was mortally wounded in the chest, still grasping his Bren gun. To his men he shouted in his own language, "Reorganize ! I will give you covering fire." But he died, without having been able to pull the trigger. He was awarded the Victoria Cross, posthumously, and was the first Muslim soldier to win this decoration in the Second World War.

Already before his assault upon Numshigum, the enemy had been active in the Iril Valley , that ran from north to south down the right-hand side of Imphal town itself. He had occupied the principal massif north of the plain, a range that was higher than

Numshigum, though less dangerously close to Imphal. This expansive range stretched, as far as the enemy's hold upon its peaks was concerned, from the village of Mapao in the south, with its white-painted American Baptist Mission church standing out as a distinctive landmark, northwards to Molvom, by way of a series of humps and crests nicknamed Hump, Twin Peaks, Foston, Penhill, and Buttertubs. Parts of this ridge soared to a height of five thousand feet above the sea and half that altitude above the plain itself.

It was at first thought that the Japanese had also seized a feature called Wakan, lying between Molvom and Numshigum, but when a platoon of the West Yorkshires, followed by two companies, moved up the long climb to the top, they reported Wakan unoccupied. Cree's battalion established itself there.

On April 21 an operation order was issued from Divisional Headquarters, instructing Nine Brigade to secure positions on the Mapao—Molvom ridge two days later. On the left, the 3/9th Jats were to capture a saddle and a small hump called Wood Point, both a short distance north of Mapao. On the right the West Yorkshires were to take Foston and Penhill. Brigadier Salomons launched the attack on April 23. After Hurricanes had bombed and strafed Mapao, and the guns of the 4th Field Regiment had added to the pall of smoke and dust, the 3/4th Punjab fought their way into Mapao, and the Jats wound their way up the steep hillside to the saddle, and attacked south along the ridge towards Mapao Village. The operation succeeded on that side, but the West Yorkshires were unable to gain a footing on their higher and more precipitous range of hills.

The beginning of May found Nine Brigade doing its utmost to clear the tenacious Japanese from the ridge between Mapao and Point 4364, a distance of six miles by the flight of an aircraft, but infinitely farther when each hump and crest is followed from one peak to the next. While the 2nd West Yorkshires were to hold a firm base on Wakan hill and send out fighting patrols to assail the precipitous heights of Penhill and Foston, Furney's 3/4th Punjab were, with a company of the 5/14th Sikhs under command, to attack the enemy troops holding Hump and Twin Peaks.

During this period 89 Brigade, which had recently arrived in Imphal and was now under General Briggs' command, would hold Sengmai, and clear the area of Kanglatongbi and Ekban Ekwan. And Evans' 123 Brigade would operate from a firm base held by the Dogras far up the Iril Valley. The 3/2nd Punjab would patrol north and west and the 2nd Suffolks would send patrols to Nurathen and to Modbung, always on the alert for any change in the enemy's dispositions, constantly seeking to disrupt his lines of supply by ambushing a mule convoy or destroying a stores dump or attacking a group of enemy soldiers. Villages where the Japanese habitually obtained food were raided. A *basha* in which some enemy soldiers were sleeping was shot up, and heavy casualties inflicted. In the course of these small raids and pinprick tactics, our troops inflicted upon the enemy more loss than we ourselves incurred.

But the main battles during the first part of May were carried out by the battalions of Nine Brigade. And no obstacle was more difficult to overcome, no hill was more fiercely defended by the Japanese, than Hump, which faced the 3/14th Punjab as it looked north

from Mapao and Wood Point. Before the month was out, this battalion had attacked Hump no less than seven times, and had sent patrols to test the defences on many other occasions. It was a corner slope, and refused to yield, for all the effort, bravery, and loss of life. Soon Hump stood out as a landmark on account of its bare face. Every wisp of greenery was churned and burnt away by the shells and bombs that landed on that small piece of hillside day after day, and often at night, when our Gunners were shooting harassing fire at the stubborn enemy.

On May 2 Hump was attacked by two platoons, but the enemy threw grenades and opened fire as our sepoy approached the top. Colonel Furney withdrew the platoons. Two days later repeated attacks were launched, but all in vain. One platoon was counter-attacked by the Japanese when only ten yards from the summit. It was estimated that the enemy was holding this feature with at least three platoons, armed with a high proportion of automatic weapons. And by the 5th, when the 3/1 4th attacked yet again, the defenders of Hump had been reinforced, for the opposition was stiffer than ever.

The situation was serious. Nine Brigade was making no progress, and whatever the total of casualties inflicted upon the Japanese, our own casualties were mounting. It was decided that on May 20 Furney's battalion should attack in strength, and to assist the building up of supplies for this operation, Salomons had a jeep track built by 20 Field Company up the face of the hill to just below Mapao.

But the attack on the 20th was no more successful than its predecessors. Though one platoon did reach the top, it was forced to withdraw by grenade-charger fire from the reverse slopes. On May 22 four platoons reached the crest of Hump, after killing the occupants of at least six pillboxes, and our men remained on the top for twenty-five minutes, lobbing grenades into Japanese trenches and bunker positions. But eventually we were forced off owing to a strong fusillade and showers of grenades from entrenched positions, as before on the reverse slopes. These were the slopes that our Gunners found all but impossible to hit, and the bombing and strafing by Hurricanes was disappointing in its results. On the 24th the ridge between Everest and Hump was strafed five times by our aircraft, but when patrols toiled up next morning, the enemy proved himself to be still in very resolute possession of his points of vantage. Attempts to gain a footing on the ridge between Hump and Twin Peaks and then to attack Hump downhill from the opposite direction, the east, also failed.

At the end of May the Japanese defenders were still on top, having endured a tremendous weight of shell and bomb and mortar fire. A prisoner reported that the company holding the ridge was reduced to seventy men, and that food and ammunition were running low. Given almost no respite by our Gunners, constantly harassed, almost isolated from their fellows, often swathed in damp clouds, sometimes wet from the early rains, these fanatics hung on to their solidly constructed bunkers, and kept at bay our every jab, pinprick, and full-scale onslaught. The monsoon broke in earnest on the 27th, and rain fell almost without a break for forty-eight hours, turning every track into a morass, making slippery every hillside path, and flooding many of the paddy fields.

The 2nd West Yorkshires had, during the first week of May, made attempts to gain a footing on the ridge between Twin Peaks and Molvom. Patrolling had disclosed that the enemy held all spurs running down from the ridge. Two efforts were made to secure a feature christened with the Yorkshire name of Buttertubs. On the first occasion the British troops were forced off the summit by machine-guns cleverly sited on reverse slopes and in the long grass. The second attempt was made by two companies, the one attacking Buttertubs direct, the other marching farther up the valley and climbing to attack from the north near Molvom. The latter company was delayed by the extremely difficult nature of the ground, and had to advance in daylight, instead of under the cloak of the hour before daybreak. When nearing Molvorn the men were engaged by machine-guns and grenade dischargers both from Buttertubs and another Japanese position to the north. All officers and the company sergeant-major were killed or/ wounded. And Colonel Cree had to withdraw the company. Major C. O'Hara, soon to be awarded the D.S.O. for his fine leadership throughout the campaigns in Arakan and Imphal, was wounded in the jaw and evacuated to hospital.

On May 6 a third attempt was made, but although one platoon of 'D' Company did reach its objective on top of Buttertubs, and beat off a small counter-attack, its strength was by this time so reduced by casualties that it was unable to consolidate the ground won.

Meanwhile, the 3/9th Jats had been sent up the Iril Valley with the purpose of attacking the enemy's line of communication in the Nurathen area. But the plan was changed, and the battalion ordered to capture Point 4364. As, on the morning of April 30, this hill was captured without opposition, Colonel Gerty was now instructed to capture the Molvom ridge from the north, and so to help the 3/14th Punjab in their battle for Hump, and the West Yorkshires' efforts to gain a foothold on Twin Peaks and the main ridge.

The Jats had two main objectives: first Murree, a hill named after the famous leave station above Rawalpindi, and then Everest, 5,521 feet, the highest peak attacked by troops of the Division since leaving Amba Alagi three years before. In moonlight two companies of Jats moved into thick cover on the eastern slopes of Murree. At 7 a.m. on May 4, after an artillery concentration, 'A' and 'D' Companies attacked. The lower slopes were quickly taken. While 'A' Company consolidated, 'D' Company climbed farther up towards the main crest. Japanese snipers and medium machine-guns were outflanked, and the position taken. Then Colonel Gerty sent forward Major S. Lambert's 'C' Company to take Everest, four hundred feet higher than Murree, and lying nine hundred yards to the south-west. After nightfall Lambert's men crept to within half that distance, ready for the morning's attack.

Early on May 5 the Company attacked by two routes. The leading section on the left hand was held up very soon after starting. Machine-guns and grenades made it seemingly impossible for any man to go forward alive. But the right-hand platoon did climb to within twenty yards of the summit. The main opposition came from grenades thrown from trenches ten yards away. Every time the Jats charged up the slope they were driven back by these hand grenades and by flanking machine-guns. Meanwhile, grenade-discharger shells had burst in Lambert's headquarters, and the wireless set belonging to

the Gunner F.O.O. had been blown down the hill. The aerial was blown off the small company wireless set, but this was repaired. Major Lambert now committed his reserve platoon on the right side, where the Jats had made least progress. Here the jungle was extremely thick. - Lambert walked forward to examine the situation. As he neared one of his forward platoons, a hand grenade burst directly on him. He was instantly killed.

And at this point, when Lambert's company had already had forty-seven casualties, Brigadier Salomons stopped all further attacks, and 'C' Company was withdrawn from the slopes of Everest.

Nor was this line of attack pursued. Instead, two of Gerty's companies remained to hold Murree and Point 4364 while the rest of the battalion moved across to Nine Brigade's firm base on Wakan, and here relieved the West Yorkshires, who moved into reserve by Runaway Hill. The Jats remained here three weeks, operating against the enemy in the Everest—Penhill area, and patrolling Japanese cookhouses, water points, rest areas, and all approaches to the Molvom ridge. One notable exploit was the destruction by a platoon of sixty maunds of rice, a serious loss to the rice-eating Japanese troops, who were already hard put to it to slip food and ammunition through our screen and carry it up to the hilltops. As 123 Brigade was now switched across to the main road by Sengmai and Kanglatongbi, to join 89 Brigade, General Briggs entrusted to Nine Brigade the task of denying to the enemy all use of the Iril River as an L. of C., and of holding the ground vacated by 123 Brigade.

This Imphal battle was a prolonged fight against an enemy who approached from every side. The green plain must be held. The Japanese must be driven from the hills that had been lost or never defended during the initial onslaught. No hill that dominated the plain, no ridge or crest from which the enemy could threaten still further our very existence in Imphal, could be left in his hands. One hill after another was attacked by our aircraft, guns, and infantry. Time and again our leading platoons were forced back from the summit by withering machine-gun fire from well-concealed bunkers. The Japanese troops endured the bombardments and constant harassing fire with a fortitude born of fanaticism. When our men lost a hilltop, this had to be recaptured without delay. And patrols and columns were sent up and down the valleys that ran round the foot of these hills, in order to cut the Japanese supply routes and so to starve out the defenders on high.

These were weeks of failure and success, of slogging effort, often severe casualties, and infectious disappointment. But slowly the tide turned against the enemy. Gradually his grip upon the framework to the plain was broken, for all his tenacity and aggression. All this time the 17th, 20th, and 23rd Indian Divisions were fighting south and east of Imphal. Their battles were of the fiercest and most bloody nature. Brigades and battalions were switched from one part of the front to another, depending on any new Japanese threat that had to be smothered, or on a counter-offensive planned by our own commanders.

Every section, company, and battery within the Division was working at full stretch. The Gunners, under the C. R.A., Brigadier Mansergh, dug their gunpits out in the open paddy

fields, or in small re-entrants among the hills. And they fired day and night on targets that varied frequently, but were most often on summits. At night the flash of the guns slashed the darkness that lay across the Imphal plain. The thumping and the more distant explosions echoed round the hillsides.

The Divisional Sappers, now commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel E.C. R. Stileman, were hard pressed with the varied tasks laid upon them. Greatest of these was the construction of jeep tracks up the sides of certain hills. These tracks were needed to take supplies and ammunition to the fighting troops—on a scale impracticable with mules alone—and to bring back on stretchers men who had been wounded in battle. The building of such tracks was a formidable task, involving rock blasting and the most skilful use of bulldozers. Culverts and drainage systems were required, and places where two jeeps could pass. Water storage cisterns, tarpaulin water tanks, water points and pumping equipment, bridges, tank routes—all these had to be built, strengthened, improved. There were mines and booby traps to render harmless and remove. Many of the tracks used by the mules were inadequate and needed constant repair. The resources of the three Field Companies and 44 Field Park Company (Major M. Keating) were taxed to their limit even in dry weather. But when the monsoon came the work was delayed and became far more difficult to achieve.

For Divisional Signals it was much the same. Problems faced their commander, Lieutenant-Colonel E. J. C. Harrison, and had always to be overcome. The fact that so many battles were fought on the hilltops meant telephone lines of unusual length, and supplies of cable almost unprecedented in the Division's past campaigns. Mile upon mile of cable that in dry weather crossed the paddy fields on the ground had to be raised on poles when the rains flooded the fields. To lay cables up hillsides while keeping clear of mule and jeep tracks taxed the ingenuity of the Indian linemen—Madrassis, Punjabi Mussulmen, and Sikhs. The dispatch-riders taking messages and official letters between brigade and battalion headquarters had long distances to cover, and often when they reached the foot of a hill no track existed for a motor-cycle. The hill had to be climbed on foot, and this lengthened the twice-daily delivery round by several hours.

For mule-drivers the Imphal siege was a nightmare, so great were the distances they had to trudge, tugging their strings of mules from the valley up to the summit, from the crest of one hill along a wooded ridge to the top of another, and then down again to the valley and across the paddy fields on a rough track that was deep in dust when not surfaced with soft mud. To keep the far scattered units of the Division supplied each day was a problem admirably tackled by Lieutenant-Colonel R. A. Willis and the companies of the Royal Indian Army Service Corps, which had to collect stores, rations, ammunition, clothing and boots, saddles and straps for mules, and a thousand other items of infinite variety and necessity.

It is necessary at this point to interrupt the narrative and to turn aside from Imphal in order to return to Kohima and follow the final battles among the Naga Hills, and the sequence of events that resulted.

By May 23 Brigadier Warren had collected his three battalions together once more, and 161 Brigade was resting for a short period in Dimapur. On the 11th, after already severe fighting and several vain assaults, the 6th Brigade of the 2nd British Division and the 33rd Brigade of Messervy's Seventh Indian Division, which was arriving at Dimapur from Arakan, had started a full-scale attack against the main positions in Kohima still held by the Japanese: Kuki Picket, F.S.D., D.I.S., and Jail Hills. More than half of these objectives were taken, though at severe cost in killed and wounded. The 2nd Queens captured Jail Hill, and the 4/1st Punjab took F.S.D. So confused did the fighting become that the artillery were ordered to smoke the entire battleground, to allow our troops to dig in. Such a rare smoke screen was a nightmare experience for the infantry. Two days later, and after a day when fighting was prevented by the weather, the ruins of the District Commissioner's Bungalow were recaptured. By the end of the day, the whole of Kohima had been wrested from the enemy. So ended one of the bloodiest periods of fighting known on any front. In this bitter struggle, companies of the 1/1st Punjab and 4/7th Rajputs took over ground that had been regained from the enemy. And the batteries of the 24th Mountain Regiment, fired thousands of rounds in support of those attacks.

A description has been preserved of Kohima at the end of the battle. "There was not a tree standing that was not blasted and littered; the more primitive houses were knocked flat, and others were holed and battered beyond recognition. The place stank. The earth everywhere was ploughed up with shell fire, and human remains lay rotting as the battle raged over them. Flies swarmed everywhere, and multiplied with incredible speed men retched as they dug in, and a priority task was to clear up as far as possible. But even then the stink hung in the air' and permeated one's clothes and hair. It made one realize once again how sub-human the Japs were. A bunker was found in which about twenty men had fought and lived for several days—a bunker littered with their dead companions and their own excreta. These are memories one would like to forget, but they are inevitably linked with the name 'Kohima'

Now 161 Brigade was placed under the command of the Seventh Indian Division, which had completed its move from Arakan. Warren's troops took the place of 89 Brigade, which was now fighting under General Briggs in Imphal. The Division's final objective was to capture Tuphema, some twenty-two miles south of Kohima, thus guarding the 2nd Division's left flank. But its first task was to open the track eastwards from Kohima to Jessami and, by operating in the hills north of Kohima, to clear such villages as Cheswema and Nerhema, thereby protecting the traffic using the main road between Dimapur and Kohima.

It was stressed by Fourteenth Army Headquarters that no effort must be spared either by the 2nd or 7th Division to open the road to Imphal, for with the monsoon rains falling it was becoming increasingly difficult to supply the garrison by air. It was precisely with the object of delaying the opening of this road to Imphal that the Japanese 31st Division was deployed north-east and south of Kohima. The enemy planned to deny us the Jessami track as a base for any outflanking move round his positions. For the first time on the Kohima front the enemy was, on his own admission, on the defensive, and he was preparing for stubborn if not desperate resistance. The hill country was formidable in its

nature, for the height ranged from 3,000 feet in the valleys to 8,000 feet on the ridges, and any operations that aimed at speed were bound to be restricted to the few roads and tracks. And the track to Tuphema would not be passable even to jeeps, once the monsoon rains fell in their full deluge.

But problems of supply and movement also faced the Japanese troops, whose lines of communication were long and tedious. Rice and meat they might find where they did battle, but not ammunition, which had to be carried through the wild hills from the distant Chindwin River. The lengths of the enemy's two main supply routes both exceeded a hundred miles.

On the southern front of Kohima, Grover's 2nd British Division was to attack along the Aradura Spur towards Phe sema. Having captured these, the advance would be pressed south along the road to Imphal. On May 27-28 Grover's battalions attacked the Aradura Spur and, although not all objectives were attained, considerable ground was gained in the face of the most tenacious resistance. The Japanese found themselves obliged to counterattack, but to no abiding effect.

During the first fortnight of June the 2nd Division made strenuous efforts to dislodge the Japanese from the line they were defending between Viswema, Kidima, and Kekrima. Here was encountered fierce opposition. Here were fought most bloody engagements, and the British battalions made several vain and costly assaults against the enemy's positions before they achieved success. But once the Japanese main defence line had been broken, the Division's advance became more rapid, for the enemy offered but intermittent and temporary resistance from hastily prepared positions at various points along the Imphal road.

Meantime, 114 Brigade advanced along the Jessami track, and 61 Brigade under General Messervy's direction had begun to pursue the enemy northwards along the Bokajan track, and to drive him from the villages north and north-east of Kohima, centred upon Merema and Chedema. On June 6 the news of the invasion of France coincided happily with the successful opening of the Brigade's drive along the jeep track. But the monsoon weather appalled all who fought beneath its teeming fury. It barely ceased to rain, and the mules of the battalions and of the 24th Mountain Regiment in support were generally walking hock deep in mud. The mule drivers performed an outstanding service in ferrying stores and ammunition to the forward troops, an achievement only equalled by the young Indian jeep drivers who drove their loaded jeeps and trailers along the treacherous tracks, bringing ammunition to the guns without fail, but living through nightmare journeys to do so.

At this period a special jeep supply column was formed from a London Territorial Regiment. In its ranks were numbered many London taxi-drivers. General Messervy tells a story of one of these jeep crews. "All races produce tough, brave soldiers, but only the British soldier really has that sense of decency and kindly humanity which nothing can upset.

“A Jap was seen skulking in a bush near Jessami, by the side of the track. Out leapt the Gunners and seized him. ‘Shall we kill the little bastard ? It’s what he and his like deserve.’ . . - ‘Oh, no, we can’t. We’ll take him back with us.’ “After a few hundred yards—”Ere, Tojo, you look pretty miserable. ‘Ave a fag.’“A mile farther on they had a puncture, and it was ‘Come on, Tojo, give us a hand.’ “By the time Kohima was reached, ‘Tojo’ was a mascot, if not a friend.”

By June 10 the Brigade were nineteen miles along the Jessami track, with the 4/7th Rajputs in Kekrima, and the Royal West Kents at Chakabama. For two days the Rajputs were blocked by the Japanese on a hill named Charlie, but when the 1/1st Punjab made an outflanking march to skirt Kekrima to the north-east and occupied three hills aptly named Faith, Hope, and Charity, the enemy withdrew. The 15th saw 161 Brigade in Pfutse-Ro, but faced with ever-increasing problems of supply and maintenance, problems raised by the monsoon and by the extended line of communication.

On June 17 the two Indian battalions cut the Tuphema—Kharasom track, along which the Japanese had left ample evidence of their recent flight: dead mules, discarded boots, clothing, recently opened fish and meat tins, ashes of camp fires—some still smoking

—and fresh footprints. The 1/1st Punjab reached Milestone 78 on this track next day, but beyond this point 161 Brigade’s advance farther west was blocked by heavy landslides. Accordingly, the Brigade was brought back to the Imphal road, while the 1/1st Punjab remained to guard the Kharasom track until relieved by the Bombay Grenadiers - of 268 Brigade, which arrived to take over the positions of Brigadier Warren’s three battalions.

So soon as the road to Imphal was opened, 161 Brigade moved into Imphal, and 33 Brigade of Messervy’s Seventh Division was sent across country to eject the enemy from Ukhrul, operating with columns from the 20th and 23rd Indian Divisions. But the sequence of events has been forestalled, and we must return to the battlefield of Imphal, to follow the hard-fought advance of the- Fifth Indian Division northwards up the road to Kohima, to meet the 2nd Division and to crush the fast losing Japanese like nuts in a nutcracker.

During the second half of May Evans’ 123 Brigade battled north from Sengmai to gain ground along the Kohima road. The ground was difficult, the jungle thick, and the site of our dumps in Kanglatongbi wired and mined. Astride the road the three battalions took their turn in hammering at the Japanese. The guns of the 28th Field Regiment supported our attacks, and Hurricanes of the Royal Air Force bombed and strafed enemy-held positions when called upon to do so. Road-blocks had to be cleared, enemy troops driven from bends in the road, from hillocks that overlooked this road, from stream beds and patches of jungle on the right of the road.

89 Brigade was also fighting up the road. But for a week almost no progress was made. Then the Japanese did quit a low hill named Pyramid, on the left of the road, that had delayed our advance, and 123 Brigade’ moved forward to the northern outskirts of Kanglatongbi, sixteen miles north of Imphal itself. Then General Briggs changed his

plans, for it was now of the first importance that the road towards Kohima be opened.' The Japanese on Hump and Twin Peaks and Molvom must stay where they were, prevented from taking the offensive against our flank, and perhaps a successful drive up the road below them would force them to leave their sternly defended hilltops. Accordingly, at the beginning of June Nine Brigade was brought across to the road, to reinforce Brigadier Evans' three battalions, the 2nd Suffolks, 3/2nd Punjab, and 1/17th Dogras.

While 89 Brigade took over our positions on Wakan, Mapao, and Runaway Hill, and Nine Brigade settled into Sengmai and Kanglatongbi, Evans' 123 Brigade, which had been fighting up this road for some weeks, continued to battle its way forward along the line of foothills that ran parallel with the road on the eastern side below Molvom. Such a move was no easy one. Space had to be found to house each battalion, Brigade Headquarters, and the Gunner Regiment attached (in this case 4th Field Regiment commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel George Bastin). There was no direct route across, and vehicles, men, and mules had either to go right back into Imphal and out again along the main road to Kohima, or find their way by a series of rough tracks made by cutting down the earth bunds that cut the paddy fields into rectangles. And when the rains came many of these tracks became at once unusable.

On the 6th it was Nine Brigade's turn to take the lead. While Furney's 3/i4th Punjab set out on a left hook to cut the road' behind the enemy at a culvert nicknamed London Bridge, the West Yorkshires prepared to assault a low hill on the left-hand side of the road called Zebra. After an airstrike on the 6th and an artillery concentration upon Zebra early on the morning of the 7th, 'C' Company under Major J. B. Miller, supported by tanks of the 7th Cavalry, moved forward to attack. 'B' Company guarded the L. of C. of the 3/14th Punjab, while 'D' Company and another troop of Stuart tanks took up positions to guard the flat, open ground on the right of the road, by the Imphal Turel. Before the attack began, 'A' Company had moved round behind Zebra.

It should be noted here that the Divisional artillery, under Brigadier Mansergh, was restricted to six rounds per day per gun. This had' to include defensive and harassing fire, and was only relaxed when a regiment was shooting in support of a set-piece attack.

The attack succeeded, and Miller's men took Zebra, though the ground had to be fought for yard by yard. The Japanese from their bunkers defended stubbornly, and had to be driven out from one position after the other. The objective was not finally taken until six o'clock that evening, and the West Yorkshire company was heavily mortared during the night. And next day a Japanese light machine-gun suddenly started firing in the middle of our positions. It was quickly silenced. The tanks were held up on the road by mines, and Lieutenant Yearsley in charge of the Sapper mine-detecting party that went forward with the leading infantry platoon was wounded.

Our own casualties were twenty, mostly wounded, and twenty six Japanese bodies were recovered after the battle. Further advance up the main road was for the time being prevented by a road-block three hundred yards north of Zebra. This block was covered by

a 75mm. gun and a platoon of Japanese. When 'D' Company and a troop of the 3rd Dragoon Guards tried to clear the obstacle, they were forced to withdraw.

Meanwhile, the 3/14th had been engaged in heavy fighting in the enemy's rear. They had come on to the road a little farther south than intended, and were attacked throughout the night of June 8/9. 'C' Company under Major Anthony crossed the road and secured one of the line of hills east of the road. It was named Squeak, the centre of three, the others being Pip and Wilfred. The latter was held by the enemy, who attacked Anthony's men three times during the night of their arrival. When the Punjabis tried to evict the Japanese from Wilfred they were unable to do so. Colonel Furney had brought the rest of his battalion up to London Bridge, distinctive by its white railings on either side of the road, and on the night of the 9th/10th a large force of fifty Japanese soldiers bumped into the Punjabi positions and were, scattered and mauled by firing. Fourteen bodies were counted next morning, and much wireless and other equipment was collected. But time was pressing. The road could not be opened until the road-block was cleared. The 3/14th Punjab had taken three days' rations on their march, and had now to be supplied by parachute drop, but this was difficult in the area involved, and certain important items could not be dropped without considerable warning being given. Anthony's company on Squeak was alone and surrounded, with the enemy sending jitter parties, even though they did not launch a serious attack.

But in the meantime 123 Brigade had made good progress along the ridge of foothills east of the road. Led by the 2nd Suffolks (now commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel K. C. Menner), they had attacked two features named Isaac and James, by Modbung village, throughout the first nine days of June. The fighting had been severe, and when the Sappers built a track up to the summit and the tanks climbed up to assist the infantry, they got into difficulty. One tank slid over the edge of a spur and had to be abandoned. The monsoon rains had made the slopes slippery, and the tanks needed winches to enable them to reach the crest of the hill. The country was thickly wooded; the hills were surrounded by waterways that made any advance still more difficult than it would otherwise have been against a determined enemy.

All day long on June 7 the Suffolks attacked Isaac, but were held up by enemy troops on the reverse slopes. In the day's fighting we lost nine killed and twenty-eight wounded. On the 8th a strike by Hurricanes produced little result, and one of the tanks was hit and blew up; the crew escaped.

Next day Isaac was cleared, and the 3/9th Jats climbed up to Modbung to resume the advance. This was on the 11th, and the attack was successful. Three tanks had roared up to the top, and waited in the cover of thick trees to help the Jat companies forward along the line of hills. But there was no need, for when the infantry went forward that afternoon they found that the enemy had vanished into the valleys. We secured all the hills, and the Jats linked up with the 3/14th Punjab company on Squeak.

That same morning tanks and the West Yorkshires cleared the road-block, after an intense concentration by mortars. The enemy left sixteen dead. Meanwhile the 3/14th had

pushed up the road as far as the ruined village of Safarmaina , and the road was clear to that point by the evening of June 12.

On June 13 the Jats advanced northwards from Squeak to Wilfred. They had orders to brush aside slight enemy opposition and, when the main Japanese defences were encountered, to consolidate their ground. Three days' rain had made the very steep slopes of this ridge slippery. It was impossible to supply the leading companies by mule. Trees grew thickly on the hills, and even where the jungle had clearings, these were covered in high elephant grass that impeded our progress. The leading Jat company under Major Sanson drove some enemy outposts off a knob called Bye. And when 'C' Company passed through to occupy Button, another thousand yards farther north along the ridge, the enemy offered no resistance.

Jat patrols now crept through the jungle to probe the defences of the main hill along this ridge, Liver. There seemed to be little opposition. But this supposition proved to be false, when an attack was made at half-past two by Captain Muskett's guerilla platoon and a platoon of Rowling's 'B' Company, led by a newly joined officer named Armstrong. The Japanese on~ Liver threw down scores of grenades. Their four machine-guns took a saddening toll. Armstrong and his jemadar were killed, Muskett was wounded by a grenade, and the 'B' Company platoon suffered in all twenty-four wounded and two killed out of a strength of twenty-seven.

The Jat, probably the best farmer in Northern India , comes from the Eastern Punjab , Delhi Province , the Rajputana States and the United Provinces . In the Hindu hierarchy he occupies a position below that of the Rajput, who is of the warrior class that for so long strongly opposed the Muslim invasion of India . But the Jat has also a long and memorable history as a fighting man. He is a great lover of animals and all living creatures, and venerates the cow as a sacred animal almost more than does even the Brahmin. Possibly this explains his inordinate love of milk and of foods made from milk. Some Jats, especially those from the Eastern Punjab , never touch meat in any form, and dislike any dish prepared from animals, birds or fish.

The Jat is of independent character, somewhat intolerant of those he does not know, but his sense of humour is marked. And he loves a party round a communal *huqqa*, which he produces and lights on every possible, and sometimes impossible, occasion.

On the cross-roads below Eye, in the ruins of what had been Safarmaina village, the West Yorkshires had established their headquarters, and on the road thronged men and mules, jeeps and the tanks of Major Dimsdale's squadron of the 3rd Carabiniers, now supporting Nine Brigade. All day and all night the rain poured down. The Jats on the ridge, having neither bedding nor waterproof sheets, remained soaking wet for hours on end. Even those more fortunate soldiers who had tents or tarpaulins, or members of Brigade Headquarters who lived in derelict lorries that had been towed from a nearby dump, found it hard to keep dry. Puddles grew wider and deeper. Water rushed down the hillsides, flooded the streams that already were foaming brown torrents, and tore down plank bridges. The river, which had been fordable at knee-depth, was now swirling

branches along at great speed. And men who undressed and tried to ford the torrent were soon out of their depth. Soldiers squelched through inches of water in the fields, and hoisted themselves up slippery paths by means of branches and telephone cables. The mules laden with supplies for the Jats struggled and kicked and floundered up the muddy hillside. Over the dark green peaks to the west of the road hung a white mist, and the whole valley became more depressing and sombre as the hours passed. Even the sun when it broke through the low clouds did little to relieve the gloom that prevailed.

The date was now June 15. After an early strafe by Hurricanes, Liver was attacked by Major Risal Singh's 'A' Company of Jats. When two platoons reached within a hundred yards of the top, fierce fire from bunkers on neighbouring hills held up the climbing infantry, whose sole line of approach was a bare spur. As had occurred before, our shells and bombs, far from ousting the enemy, had effectually diminished what cover grew on the upper slopes. Risal Singh withdrew his men to allow the tanks and guns to fire a concentration, but this failed to silence the Japanese machine-guns, which, as usual, were placed where artillery fire could not reach them. Then a platoon from 'C' Company pushed up from Button by way of Carter to within twenty yards of the crest of Liver, only to be driven back by showers of grenades.

-Later, as a result of a two minutes' concentration on Liver and its neighbouring hilltops, and of a prolonged burst of firing from two troops of tanks at all the re-entrants separating these features, 'C' Company (Major J. Campbell) was able to secure Carter. Here the Jats spent a terrible night in pouring rain, overlooked by the Japanese on Liver at a range of one hundred yards. Next day Colonel Gerty had to withdraw the company.

In the meantime Cree's West Yorkshires had been ordered to capture an enemy road-block that was level with Liver but divided from the hills by the flooded, swirling Imphal Turel. The three buildings shown on the map had been nicknamed Driffield, and the nullahs through the jungle there were known as Swale, Ouse, and Avon. One company was to infiltrate round the flank and cut the road behind Driffield at a low ridge called Octopus. When this had been reached, a second company supported by tanks would advance along the road, with a 'scissors' bridge to enable the broken bridge to be crossed.

While moving across a nullah, the leading 'D' Company, commanded by Major Brian Sellars, were suddenly fired at from two directions out of the close jungle. Sellars and his second-in command, Mallinson, being mortally wounded, refused to be carried back, for this would have endangered other men's lives. But Sellars ordered his company, who had in these brief and alarming moments suffered many casualties, to make their way back. They should try to cross the road and rejoin the battalion by way of the more open strip of country near the Imphal Turel. This was done, and small parties of West Yorkshires did succeed in getting back in the course of that disastrous day. But of a total of three officers and seventy-four other ranks who set out, only the Company Sergeant-Major and forty-seven men returned. And of these, twenty had been wounded. The remainder of the operation was cancelled.

The Division was not making progress. Something new must be tried, for neither the West Yorkshires nor the Jats could make headway against resolute and well-prepared enemy resistance. General Slim had ordered that the limit of our northward advance from Imphal should be Kangpokpi, a village another seven miles ahead. But it seemed that even this would be reached first by the hurrying 2nd British Division, which had by now reached Milestone 78, thirty miles south of Kohima.

General Briggs conferred with Salomons at Nine Brigade Headquarters. It was decided that the 3/14th Punjab, now commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel H. C. A. Baker, who had been second-in-command for a long period, were to make a left hook through the jungle. The road was to be cut behind the Japanese, and the low feature called Octopus seized. Possession of this would give our troops a dominating position by the road. The object would be to force the enemy holding Liver and Driffield to retire, for fear of being cut off and destroyed.

The battalion set off on June 19, and by eight o'clock next morning had reached their assembly point on the left flank. When the guerilla platoon reported that the bend in the road by Octopus was clear of enemy troops, Baker sent his companies forward to occupy the hill. This was achieved, without mishap, but during the afternoon the two leading companies were attacked three times by the Japanese, who realized the danger of Indian troops in their rear, and made fierce efforts to oust them before they could establish firm positions. But every attack was repulsed.

Meanwhile, a still wider left hook had been ordered, this time for 123 Brigade. The 3/2nd Punjab and I/17th Dogras had been sent through the jungle on the left flank with the object of cutting the road in two places near to Keithelnambi, three miles south of Kangpokpi. It had been intended that the Dogras should cross the road at Milestone 109 (from Dimapur) and establish two companies on hills near Heinoupok on the east of the road, behind Liver; but progress through the jungle was seriously delayed by heavy rain, which impeded both porters and mules, who were hard pressed enough making their way without tracks to follow.

On the morning of June 21, a day on which the 2nd Division advanced sixteen miles as far as Milestone 103, three squadrons of Hurricanes bombed and strafed Liver for half an hour. Then 'A' and 'C' Companies of Gerty's Jats, who had lain in cover on the bank of the Imphal Turel, advanced up to capture a lower knob called Pill, just above the road and to the west below Liver. Its possession would give our troops a 'much needed alternative axis of advance on the summit. Twenty minutes later the artillery fired a concentration so close to Risal Singh's men that three sepoys were wounded by our own shells, but this was worth it, for Pill was taken. The enemy had left their trenches when the shelling began, and had not time to reoccupy their defences before the Jats rushed in and drove the Japanese off the hillock.

At one o'clock a second airstrike was delivered, this time not on Liver itself but on Milk Loaf, a feature that overlooked it from the north, five hundred yards away. During this bombardment Risal Singh and two platoons had climbed up from Pill, Major J. Campbell

had brought his 'C' Company up towards Liver from the south-west, and was lying up in thick cover two hundred yards from the top, and Sanson's 'D' Company had worked forward from Button towards Carter. Another platoon was to get astride the spur joining Liver and Milk Loaf, and so take the enemy in the rear. The Jats would in this way approach from four different directions.

Then, at half past one, the 4th and 28th Field Regiments, aided by a troop of 8th Medium Regiment, fired a concentration that lasted three minutes and provided spectators with an awe-inspiring spectacle as the shells tore into the hillsides, ripped off branches, splintered trees, flung up earth, and covered Liver in smoke and dust. The three Jat companies climbed up as far as was safe, and Risal Singh took one bump below Liver and above Pill. But while reconnoitring for a further advance, this fine officer, who had won a Military Cross on Nurnshigum, was killed by a burst of machine-gun fire from a Japanese bunker. This was a severe loss to the battalion. Major Campbell left Risal Singh's company where it was, and went on with two platoons to attack Liver.

In his turn, was held up by savage fire that crackled down the bare slope. Meanwhile, the platoon trying to force itself on to the spur behind Liver had lost many men in the attempt, and Sanson's men had only been able to gain a footing on the slopes of Liver. Though a few Jats did get on the summit, they were beaten off by grenades and fire from Milk Loaf.

In view of the many casualties suffered, Colonel Gerty ordered his companies to consolidate where they were for the night. At dawn next day Jat patrols found Liver and Milk Loaf abandoned. The Japanese, having had enough, had slipped away by night. The 3/9th Jats had lost thirty-three officers and men killed, and 111 wounded in the fighting that week.

On June 22 men of the I/17th Dogras met troops of the 2nd British Division at Milestone 109 on the Kohima—Imphal road. At two o'clock that afternoon a formal meeting by the roadside took place between Lieutenant-General Stopford, commanding Thirty-Three Corps, and Major-General Grover, commander of the 2nd Division, on the one hand, and, on the other, Brigadier Salomons of Nine Brigade. The road had been opened after prolonged efforts and severe loss of life. And that night the first convoy drove into Imphal from the north, the headlights shining into the darkness like a beacon of victory.

Nine Brigade was now withdrawn into reserve in hospital buildings north-west of Imphal, while I 23 Brigade stayed for a few days in the area of Keithelmanbi, before moving to the south of Imphal, towards Bishenpur and Bun Bazaar.

The decisive battle had ended. Imphal had been relieved. The Japanese forces had received a severe mauling on the plain and surrounding hills. Indeed, the flower of their army had been destroyed. 'They had attacked long after such attacks could achieve any result. And the enemy was now faced with no alternative but to retreat south and west through the hills towards the Chindwin, at the height of the monsoon.

General Briggs asked for a rest. He had been told by General Scoones that operations would stop for the monsoon, and that we should not advance beyond the 34th milestone south of Imphal. The plan for this had already been made, and now Briggs told Scoones that he felt stale, having had no break since the beginning of the war. General Auchinleck had asked for either Messervy or Briggs to command Ranchi area, the training ground for Burma . The two events coincided. Briggs accepted the new post, and General Slim agreed. If ever a man deserved a rest it was Briggs, but for the Division he had led for two years in Desert and Jungle his departure was a tragedy.

To fill his place Brigadier Geoffrey Evans was promoted.

FROM the website of the Burma Star Association