

THE GLOUCESTERS

During the past two months six British regiments have been fighting desperately in defence of Burma against an enemy who greatly outnumbered them and is supported by a complete local mastery of the air. Until the Japanese take Burma, their whole plan remains in jeopardy. Unless the British hold Burma the path to an attack on India will be open, and China will be practically cut off from hope of foreign supplies.

So long as a large part of Burma is in British hands, an invasion of India will be a most hazardous gamble, China will not feel abandoned, and the Japanese armies will fear a sudden deadly blow at a fatal spot. One of the six British regiments who are doing good work in Burma under difficult conditions is the Gloucesters.

The Gloucesters have a long and glorious history. From the time of James II, when they were raised for special service abroad, until the present war they have fought for their country wherever duty has called them - in Europe, America, Africa, and Asia. "Mere English", as Queen Elizabeth proudly said of herself, they have been always a typical county regiment.

In Burma a regular battalion was in garrison at Rangoon before Japan came into the war. It was not sent to the frontier to meet the first attack, but remained behind to give confidence to the swarming mixed population of one of the great seaports of the east. That task was carried through with a discipline which counted for a great deal in the last days when an evacuation became inevitable. The Gloucesters saved public order, suppressing sternly the occasional outbreaks of arson and looting by criminal elements, and giving peaceful citizens a chance to leave quietly. Then the Gloucesters marched out to fight their way northward, along the road and railway to Prome and Mandalay, past rapidly increasing enemy forces.

The march of the Gloucesters tested their courage and endurance to the utmost. The situation was grave. Both at Rangoon and at Pegu, to the north-east, the Japanese were making great efforts. On March 7 the immediate future of Burma was decided in a few hours. The danger of a complete collapse had drawn very near. It was averted by a handful of British troops. The Hussars smashed the ring round them at Pegu. The Rangoon garrison, with the Gloucesters in front, drove resolutely into a road block at Tsukkyan. The enemy had brought up tanks, guns, and infantry. They had built across the road and the railway obstacles of earth, stone, trees, and were at intervals covering several miles and had flanked and dominated them by many strong-points whose fire swept every approach. The position was an improvised fortress.

With gallant but inadequate artillery support, the Gloucesters advanced to the assault. Pushing relentlessly up the road and through the woodland to right and left, bombed all the time from the air, shelled by 75s, under a hail of machine-gun bullets, they pursued the Japanese from cover to cover. That night the survivors of a sadly thinned battalion slept in the heart of the enemy defences. Next day the attack began again with the dawn. Much hard fighting lay ahead, but enough had been gained to open the way to success, and on March 8 the Rangoon garrison broke through.

/ Tsukkyan-Pegu

Taukkyan-Pegu was the first defeat inflicted on the Japanese army. It was a small battle, but one fought for a great prize. Had the Japanese won, Burma would have been lost to Britain. The success was shared by the Gloucesters, on whom fell the heaviest losses, the Hussars, a squadron of the Royal Armoured Corps, the Frontier Force Rifles from the Punjab, two Anti-Tank batteries, and some field artillery.

In spite of their reduced numbers and fatigue the Gloucesters were soon in action again. On March 19 at Letpadan, half way from Rangoon to Prome, they struck back heavily: less than 300 men of the regiment swept double that number of Japanese out of the town in a surprise attack, and afterwards, supported by a few armoured vehicles, cleared the neighbouring villages of the enemy. In this spirited action, which mightily encouraged the whole force, British and Indian alike, the West Countrymen killed and wounded nearly 100 of the enemy and rescued 17 men of the Gurkha Rifles, who had been taken prisoner.

Ten days later the regiment once more advanced to the attack. This time all the available British forces were employed in a counter stroke south of Prome, the river town of 30,000 inhabitants where the road and railway from Rangoon reach the Irrawaddy. In the last stage of the withdrawal to Prome the Gloucesters had surprised and moved down a Japanese advance guard which rushed headlong into the village of Paunde.

Paunde, abandoned for the time being to a strong Japanese column, was the first target of the British blow. About sunset Gloucester patrols penetrated into the village after several brushes with the enemy. One party was resting in a wood when Japanese infantry emerged. At once the Englishmen sprang to their feet and in a rough and tumble put their opponents to a flight in which arms and equipment were left behind. On the information brought back by the patrols the assault was planned.

The Hussars, Duke of Wellingtons, West Yorks and the Gloucesters broke through the Japanese defences. One enemy battalion took refuge in the jungle, only to be ringed round by the British and wiped out with tommy guns, bomb and bayonet. In this hand to hand fighting among the trees the Gloucesters played a leading part.

The capture of Paunde served its main purpose. The Japanese plan for the swift encirclement of Prome was thrown into disorder. What remained for the Gloucesters and their comrades to do was to extricate themselves from an exposed position. At Shwedaung, where the road to Prome touched the river, the enemy had managed to cross the Irrawaddy and establish a succession of road blocks behind the British spearhead. The Japanese engineers had made the most of the possibilities of the ground and the little time at their disposal.

Hussars, West Yorks, Duke of Wellingtons and Gloucesters had to burst through several lines of stubbornly held defences. This time they had the help of the Cameronians and the Frontier Force Rifles. Hard fighting went on for many hours. When a number of strong points had fallen into their hands the British had to pause and reorganise. Then they went forward again. By the evening of March 30 the Japanese barrier had been overrun, heavy losses had been inflicted on the enemy, and the reunited British forces stood ready to resume the struggle.

At Prome, reduced to little more than a company, the Gloucesters could rest for a few days, content that they had been faithful to their traditions.

/The Gloucesters

The Gloucesters have won new fame in other theatres of war also. One battalion, with its Tanks, has done excellent work in Libya. Twice it has fought successful Tank battles at night in most difficult operations and one commonly considered impracticable. In recognition, the army has given it the admiring nickname: "The Night Fighters".

At Gambut, Zaafran, Belhamed and Bardia the West Countrymen proved themselves tougher fighters than either the Italian or the German armoured formations. To them and their tanks belongs not a little of the credit for the defeat of Rommel in the first part of Second Libya. At Gambut aerodrome, advancing due west from the Bardia region, the Gloucesters caught the enemy air force asleep, and thirty-three aircraft, still on the landing ground, fell into their hands.

Next day the Germans were found once more at Zaafran, about 7 miles from the nearest point reached by the Tobruk garrison in its attempt to break through the besieging ring. Time pressed. Contact had to be made with Tobruk and the 7 miles gap closed before Rommel, who was gathering his scattered forces, could drive through to the west. In the last hours of daylight the Gloucesters moved into their battle formation; at dawn they swept forward on a wide front and within an hour had seized their whole objective. They lost some men and tanks, but took 200 German prisoners. New Zealand infantry were co-operating with the Gloucesters. These followed behind the tanks and consolidated the conquered ground.

Zaafran was a sharply fought action. Belhamed, two miles nearer Tobruk, was a battle to the death. Crack German units held well-concealed, deeply constructed strong points, bristling with anti-tank and field guns. The New Zealanders attacked at night with the bayonet. They stormed the forward defences and sent to the rear many hundred prisoners, but met with intense machine gun fire on fixed lines and failed to overrun the whole position.

At dawn the Gloucesters, repeating their tactics at Zaafran, launched a sudden tank assault. This time the Germans were too well dug in and too strongly supported by artillery for the manoeuvre to succeed. A number of tanks were quickly knocked out by long range shelling and the survivors had to fall back. The Gloucesters, however, were tough fighters under the command of a resolute officer. Realising that his strength was not sufficient to overcome the highly organised system of defence which confronted him, the C.O. decided to attack again at night.

Even a highly trained tank crew has great difficulty in keeping its sense of direction in battle at any time. Darkness magnifies the difficulties a hundred times. The Gloucesters carried out their task in every detail.

Taken by surprise, the Germans were dispersed over the desert. Some of the Gloucesters, who had become prisoners the previous day, were freed. At small cost the British reached the outposts of the Tobruk garrison at El Duda. But the battle was not over. Within a few hours the Germans had begun a violent counter-attack which recovered Belhamed and snapped the link with Tobruk. The Gloucesters were on the Tobruk side of the gap. Around El Duda fighting went on for two days almost continuously. During the hours of daylight there was no respite even for a meal. Both sides flung in every reserve and the tanks struck blow after blow.

/The

The Gloucesters retook Belhamed, with 900 prisoners and much booty. Many hundred Germans lay dead on the ground. For three days more the battle continued. The Gloucesters and the New Zealanders were heavily shelled at every point from dawn to dusk. At times during the night the bombardment was resumed. At daybreak the Gloucesters were in their tanks and at their battle positions. There they remained until nightfall, withdrawing only for a few minutes now and again to replenish their stocks of ammunition and fuel.

After sunset the tanks returned to laager. Then the crews had their only meal, bully and biscuit and salty well water. Having eaten they turned to the heavy, imperative work of maintenance, made all the more difficult by the need to keep every light hidden. A short sleep, broken by alarms, snatched fully clothed, under a tank tarpaulin, was followed by another long day of battle.

At last, on December 1, using every tank and every weapon they had left, the Germans regained Belhamed and broke once more the British link with Tobruk. That morning the Gloucesters had only 9 tanks left to fling into the fight. All were pock-marked from direct hits by anti-tank guns: several had 30 or more such battle scars. The battlefield was a graveyard of charred and twisted vehicles over which hung black smoke from burning debris.

The Gloucesters were called upon for the last service of their heroic week. Through the afternoon and evening six surviving tanks fought a devoted rearguard action to cover the retreat of the New Zealanders whose position had become untenable. Largely by their efforts the New Zealand Division was saved from destruction and the gallant half dozen drew off, still able to limp and hit back. Rommel had not been held east of Tobruk, but his army had suffered such punishment that it did not turn to fight again until it had reached the salt marshes at El Agheila.

Although extremely tired, the Gloucesters turned back to be reinforced, re-equipped, reorganised and to fight once more. This time it was the 2nd South African Division who required their help and their objective was Bardia. Bardia, on the top of high cliffs overlooking the sea, was strongly defended with underground forts, barbed wire, land mines, and guns around a circumference of 35 miles from coast to coast. It had to be taken to give the British army in the desert shorter and better lines of communication with Egypt. On New Year's Eve and New Year's Day the Gloucesters and the South Africans fought their way in. The decisive attack was delivered on the night of January 1, the tanks leading. Eight thousand Germans and Italians surrendered.

One hundred and fifty years ago at the critical moment of the battle of Alexandria the Gloucesters dashed to pieces a double assault of the enemy delivered at the same moment, front and rear. On the word of command the rear rank faced about, and the Gloucesters, fighting back to back, routed two columns of French infantry. In commemoration of that day's gallantry the Gloucesters wear their regimental badge both on the front and the back of their caps. The tank crews of the Western Desert have proved that the old soldierly spirit is still alive: they have earned a right to emboss their badges front and back on their tanks.

In their officers' mess it is the custom when the King's health is drunk for the President to say "Mr. Vice" and for the Vice-President to reply, not in the usual form, "Gentlemen, the King!", but "Mr. President, the King!" He does so in the memory of a day of desperate fighting during which nearly every officer was killed or wounded. Only two remained to sit down to dinner.

One of the most essentially English of British regiments - Gloucestershire's own poet boasted "For I was born in Gloucestershire one of the Englishmen" - the Gloucesters have done deeds in the present war of which all England may well be proud. During the withdrawal to Dunkirk two years ago the first platoon of the regiment to be heavily engaged with the enemy counter-attacked at Ledringhem. It fixed bayonets and charged to the shout of its officer: "Come on Gloucesters, you are Englishmen."