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THE BATTLE OF THE SANGSHAK PLATEAU.

Amongst those who took part in the ferocious fighting on the Sangshak Plateau on the Assam border were Gunner C.D. Reed of 6 Palm Grove, Eastbourne Street, Hull, and Gunner A.G. Bersey of Russell Road, Whetstone, London, N. They belonged to the mortar detachment of a British Artillery Regiment, which was part of a force opposing the Japanese advance through the Somra Hill Tracts. This is the story of the fight.

Running north-east from Imphal is the road to Ukhral, thirty-odd miles away. This was the area threatened by the main Japanese thrust. Advancing up a track suitable for vehicles, the enemy reached Ukhral in a rush to get on through the mountains and establish themselves across the main Dimapur - Imphal road near Kohima.

Near Ukhral, on the Sangshak Plateau, was a British force. It consisted of battalions of Punjabis, Gurkhas and Mahrattas, with Punjabi Brahmin mountain gunners and a detachment of mortars of a British Artillery Regiment. Although greatly outnumbered, this force was told to hold on to its positions and to inflict casualties and delay on the enemy. This the force did, deflecting the enemy column from its objective and splitting it up into smaller columns, which are more of a nuisance value than a real threat.

In this action on the Sangshak Plateau there was grim and desperate fighting. Patrols met the advancing Japanese force and retired in front of it, ambushing parties of the enemy and inflicting casualties as opportunity presented itself.

The first major action occurred when the Mahrattas decoyed a large force of Japanese on to the guns and mortars. The gunners waited until the enemy were only three hundred yards away and then opened up. The Japanese fled in disorder, the guns and mortars tearing great gaps, and there was terrible carnage.

Then the Japanese set to work to annihilate this obstinate British and Indian force, which was holding up their rush for the Manipur Road. The Plateau was quite literally swept by enemy fire. Trees, cut in two, crashed to the ground; the dried grass fell in swathes as if cut by a mower. Attack after attack was beaten off. They came from first one side and then another; from two sides at once or even all around simultaneously. For seven days and seven nights the battle went on.

The jungle took fire in places, and flames and smoke added to the lurid scene. The Japanese, like evil little gnomes, would come rushing forward through dark jungle only to be thrown back with fearful slaughter by rifle and tommy-gun, bayonet, kumri and dah. When driven from their positions by flames the British and Indian soldiers would retire a short distance, then dash forward through the flames to reoccupy the position and hurl the enemy back once again.

The force was completely surrounded, and supplies were delivered by air. Ammunition and food drifted down under parachutes from the transport planes, and men dashed out to pull the precious bundles under cover.

Gunner Reed of Hull praised the work of the three Medical Officers, one British and two Indian. "There was no cover for the dressing stations," he said, "but the doctors were oblivious of danger as they worked among the casualties. Some of the Gurkhas refused anaesthetics and watched the doctors removing the bullets out of their wounds."

Then over the wireless came the order to retire; the force had delayed the enemy while reinforcements came forward along the main road. But the Ukhral road was closed. The only route lay over the mountains. Equipment that could not be carried was destroyed; the severely wounded were carried on stretchers. Yet the going was so bad that often the men had to be carried on the backs of others.

"Time and again the Japs tried to ambush us," declared Gunner Bersey. "They would set fire to the dry jungle in squares to trap us inside. They covered possible exits with machine guns. Some of our men were killed by the machine-gunners; others were burned to death. We trusted to luck and dashed through the flames."

By the route followed, it was a five-day march to Imphal. As they debouched on to the Imphal Plain they were met by a Regiment of Indian cavalry in tanks, who covered the withdrawal to Imphal. The cavalry saw these British and Indian soldiers burst from the jungle. They were burned and blackened, all unshaven, many wounded, and tottering like drunken men in their extreme weariness. But still they carried their arms. They formed up again and marched in the last bit together. They carried their wounded still. The British helped the Indians and the Indians the British. These soldiers were the true comrades-in-arms, utterly proud of their feat and of the nine hundred Japanese bodies they had left to rot in the jungle.

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