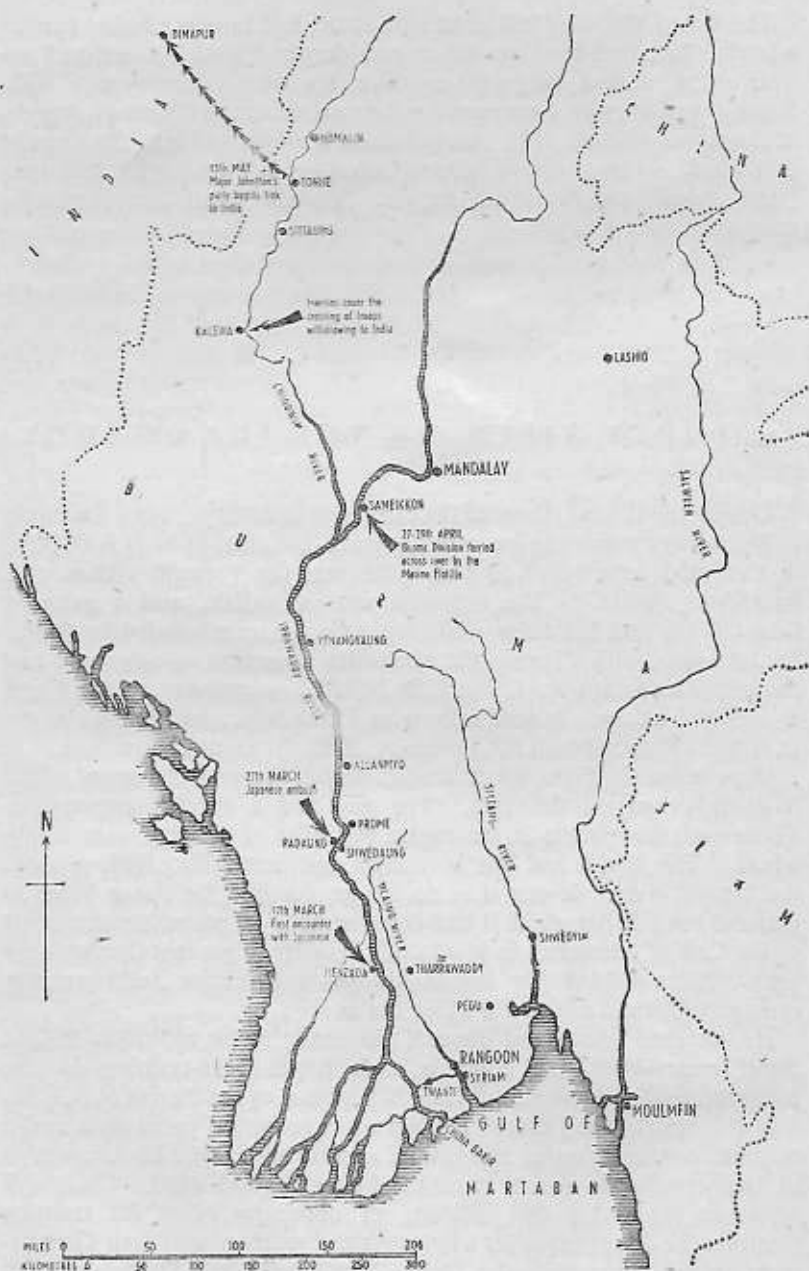


## 9. FORCE VIPER ON THE IRRAWADDY

During the closing stages of the campaign in Malaya, when the threat to Burma was becoming increasingly grave, the units of M.N.B.D.O.(I.) in Colombo were asked to find volunteers for "special service of a hazardous nature." The response was immediate, and a party of four officers and 102 other ranks was selected, commanded by Major D. Johnston, with Captain H. Alexander as second-in-command and Surgeon-Lieutenant A. J. Innes, R.N.V.R., accompanying the Force as medical officer. It was known as Force Viper and left Colombo in H.M.S. Enterprise on 8th February, 1942, for an unknown port.

Once at sea the Force learnt that its destination was Rangoon, where it disembarked on the 11th. The city had a derelict appearance. There were few people in the streets and piles of garbage were everywhere. The British had lost Moulmein and were falling back towards the Sittang river. It was thus no longer possible for Force Viper to perform the role for which it had been formed—to patrol the east coast of the Gulf of Martaban in small craft in order to prevent the Japanese from getting behind the British troops—and Major Johnston was ordered to form a flotilla for other duties.

He acquired (that word appears frequently in his report) a 35-foot diesel motor-boat, the Alguada, and began boat-training on the Rangoon river. Lieutenant W. G. S. Penman, of the Burma R.N.V.R., was attached to the Force. He was an experienced yachtsman and a qualified engineer, spoke Hindustani and Burmese, and his knowledge of local conditions was to stand the Force in good stead. On Major Johnston explaining the difficulty of obtaining boats for training purposes, he disappeared for a few days and returned with four Government touring launches—the Doris, Rita, Stella and Delta—and the diesel motor-boats Ngazin and Ngagy, of the Irrawaddy Flotilla



THE OPERATIONS OF FORCE VIPER.

Company. Each launch was equipped with a Vickers machine-gun, an Aldis signalling lamp and a wireless telegraphy set. Bren guns and mortars were added later, as acquired. These launches formed the nucleus of the flotilla throughout the campaign.

Lieutenant Penman then took over the training of the boats' crews, when they could be spared from other duties, which included close defence of the oil refineries at Syriam, three miles from Rangoon ; and, since all the police forces in the area were withdrawn on 22nd February, the marines were given the task of maintaining order in the town. "In the racing tides of the Rangoon river this boat-training was a tiring and, at times, a hair-raising job," wrote Major Johnston in his official report, "but the troops were intelligent and keen to learn, so that within a fortnight we were able to start river patrol work with reasonable efficiency and an unimpaired fleet."

By that time the Japanese had crossed the Sittang and fighting was in progress in the Pegu area, 50 miles north-east of Rangoon. In Rangoon itself the feeling of insecurity grew. The question was no longer if, but when, the city would be evacuated. Arson and looting were on the increase and large fires were burning continuously both in Rangoon and Syriam. Major Johnston instituted car patrols and offenders were publicly flogged. Even so, the looting and the fires continued.

On 4th March Major Johnston received orders to patrol the Rangoon and Pegu rivers, the Twanti Canal and the Rangoon Docks. Looters were to be shot on sight. A party was to be left behind to assist in the demolition of the oil refineries. The Force was divided into three platoons, each taking one launch, with a motor-boat attached. The Delta was used as a store-ship and carried the demolition party. The motor-boats were manned entirely by marines ; the launches still had their Chittagonian crews, who remained loyal throughout the campaign. The Force had been given special permission to sail under the White Ensign.

### *The clash at Henzada*

The military evacuation of Rangoon began on 6th March. The demolition of the refineries and the docks took place next day. Soon the sky was filled with immense pillars of black smoke. In one refinery alone 20,000,000 gallons of aviation spirit were destroyed. The flotilla covered the embarkation of the demolition parties, then made its way through the Twanti Canal and the China Bakir into the Irrawaddy. The marines destroyed, or took in tow, all the power-boats they passed, and set on fire a large dredger.

"We steamed by day only," wrote Major Johnston. "Our routine was semi-naval. Reveillé at 0600. Scrub decks till 0645, by which

time it was light enough to see the buoys, and we got under way. Then breakfast, and quarters to clean guns. Lookouts were on watch at all times. We went ashore at the towns to buy local produce and get what information we could. We had been lucky enough to procure 50 crates of beer before leaving Rangoon. Grog was issued after anchoring each night."

The flotilla reached Prome on 13th March after a peaceful passage and was attached to the Seventeenth Division, which was in combat with the enemy in the area north of Tharrawaddy. Major Johnston's orders were to protect the Division's right flank by preventing the Japanese from coming up the river behind them and crossing from west to east. The store-ship was now replaced by the Cynthia, a 110-foot steam launch, the Ngazin and the Ngagy by another diesel boat, the Snipe, and two armoured kerosene motor-boats, the Xylia and the Delta Guard 9.

The first task of the flotilla was to assist Burma Commando II in carrying out demolition at Henzada, some miles below Prome. The Royal Marine demolition party was attached to the Commando, with the Rita as escort to the Hastings, an Irrawaddy Flotilla double-decker.

The two vessels reached Henzada on 17th March. The Hastings secured to the bank and the Rita lay off close to her. A small party from the Commando and Force Viper went ashore to reconnoitre. When they had advanced 200 yards towards the village a Burmese civilian called upon them to surrender, saying that they were covered by machine-guns. "They gave an unprintable reply to this," observed Major Johnston. Japanese then appeared in large numbers and the party started to fight its way back to the river. Hearing the firing, the Rita pulled out into midstream and drew most of the Japanese fire, which she returned vigorously with her Vickers and five Brens, the gunners "getting right in amongst the enemy." Mortar bombs began to fall round the ships and the Hastings pulled out from the bank, but went in twice to pick up the shore party. Mr. Rae, the Master of the Hastings, handled his ship from an exposed position for'ard with great coolness, and throughout the action the two Chittagonian serangs remained at the wheel unperturbed. Once the shore party was re-embarked both vessels made off upstream without being hit by the mortars. The Rita was hit repeatedly by rifle-fire, however, but the Japanese bullets had poor penetrating power, being stopped by such unlikely articles as a rolled blanket or a tin of sausages. One marine and two men from the Commando had been lost, and two men in the Rita were slightly wounded. Later information disclosed that the enemy lost over 100 killed.

This action showed Major Johnston that a force put ashore from the flotilla would always be at a disadvantage, and that his proper role was to destroy the enemy on the river. Even there, as he had come to

realize, the flotilla had limitations. The launches were slow and restricted to the main channels. The Burmans were cutting away the buoys and removing the crossing marks on the banks. The flotilla could not move with any certainty at night to make a surprise attack and its operations must be mainly defensive.

The patrols continued. The marines were learning the river. At first the motor-boats had been like a pack of unruly hounds, dashing off to chase country boats up creeks and often ending by going aground, so that a party would have to go over the side to push off. Now great caution was needed, for the river was falling and the channels were becoming increasingly difficult.

### *A desperate battle at Padaung*

Lieutenant-Colonel Musgrove now took over the Commando and Force Viper. On 27th March, when the Division was heavily engaged at Shwedaung on the east bank, the Commando received orders to hold Padaung on the west bank and to prevent the enemy from crossing the river. Two platoons and a Vickers section from Force Viper were landed. The flotilla remained inshore with skeleton crews. All was quiet on the Padaung side, although the sound of battle could be heard on the east bank. The villagers appeared friendly, selling the party ashore bread and fowls to augment their supper. But the Burmans had concealed the Japanese in their houses, and shortly after midnight the enemy emerged.

A desperate battle ensued. Major Johnston described it thus: "At 0030 there was a burst of tommy gun fire in the compound below us. The Colonel, Fayle and I dashed down to see what was happening. There was bright moonlight and the compound was quiet enough except for a subdued scuffling going on outside. I went out on the road and saw figures quietly crossing towards the compound farther down. Ten yards from me a figure was kneeling on the road, and another lying on the edge of it. I had a good look at him and decided that he was a Jap. I fired a revolver shot at him, but missed, and jumped behind a latrine. Meanwhile, the far corner of the compound nearest the river was filling up with troops. The Colonel and I got all the reserve platoon that we could see and sprinted 50 yards down the road to where it crossed a dry gully. As we went, there was a yell from the Japs, and tommy guns, automatic weapons and rifles opened fire. I had lost touch with Fayle. We took up positions along the gully and fired back into the compound, which was now seething with troops. After a little while we were fired on from behind as well as in front, and the air was thick with bullets. Our ammunition began to run out. One Bren had none left, another had only one magazine. There was no hope of contacting Cave's platoon in the *mêlée* and the

Colonel decided that we should beat it. We made our way back delicately, expecting to meet parties of Japs, but there was no further excitement and we reached the ships by 0430. By 0830 the whole of Number 2 Platoon had returned—they had not had a single casualty."

Lieutenant D. R. Fayle, who was in command of this platoon, was the last to return. During the attack he had found himself with a corporal and one marine. They opened fire on the Japanese at short range. The Japanese tried to rush them, but without success. Then a Japanese officer called upon them to lay down their arms. He was immediately shot. Again the Japanese tried to overwhelm the little party, who continued to fire as targets presented themselves until they ran short of ammunition, when they escaped unnoticed to the river bank, embarked in a canoe, and began to paddle upstream. The canoe sank under them. They regained the bank and made their way back to the flotilla on foot.

In all, the Force lost 35 of its number that night, including Lieutenant P. Cave and the Vickers section. With the exception of the Delta Guard 9, however, the flotilla was kept intact by means of reduced complements.

On 4th April, at Allanmyo, the Force was attached to Burdiv, which had taken over from the Seventeenth Division. It consisted of the 1st and 13th Brigades on the east side of the river and the 2nd Brigade on the west. The flotilla continued its work, patrolling the river while Burdiv withdrew to the north, destroying boats and cutting teak rafts adrift, fighting small but exciting actions with the enemy on the banks, blowing up petrol barges, making contact with lost troops and, later, picking up refugees, and the staff and patients from a casualty clearing station. Sometimes the vessels were fired on from the shore, sometimes machine-gunned from the air. The Japanese broadcast a threat that if any of the marines were captured they would be roasted and cut into small pieces. That was the measure of Force Viper's success.

Some of the vessels had to be replaced, among them the *Stella*, whose engines could do no more. Her Chittagonian engineman burst into tears at seeing his ship destroyed. The time came when most of the Chittagonians had to be given their chance to return to India. Marines took their places. This meant a further reduction in the fire-power of the launches, but a gunboat, the small paddle-steamer *Viking*, was sent down from Mandalay to increase the flotilla's strength.

By 25th April the military situation had become even worse. A Japanese force was reported to be only a few miles from Lashio. It was imperative for Burdiv to cross the river at Sameikkon, and the flotilla ferried it over. The chief problem was the transport, which consisted almost entirely of bullock carts, but by towing a large "flat" continuously to and fro across the river from the afternoon of the 27th until the morning of the 29th, 320 carts, many of them loaded with

stores, 640 bullocks and about 500 mules were ferried, while other vessels of the flotilla were taking troops and equipment across. The Viking, anchored in midstream, acted as anti-aircraft guardship.

### *Up the Chindwin and to India*

The course of the troops was now up the Chindwin River, which Force Viper was ordered to patrol. The water was too low for the flotilla to enter, and all the vessels, with the exception of the small motor-boats, had to be destroyed. Sternwheelers were employed as far as Shwegyin. A troop of anti-tank guns was attached to the Force, which was ordered to dominate the river and cover the troops during the crossing of the Chindwin at Kalewa on their road to India.

The troops were ferried across by the sternwheelers, one of which was manned entirely by marines; the others had marine detachments to act as guards, anti-aircraft sentries, and stand-by engine-room crews. By the night of 10th May the whole Division had been ferried, including the Armoured and the 48th Brigades, which were acting as the rearguard. As the flotilla got under way from Kalewa, the Alguada broke down and had to be destroyed. She had been the first vessel the Force had acquired and was almost the last it was to use, and she had done more running than any other boat in the flotilla.

The last mission entrusted to the Force was at Sittaung on 14th May, when one motor-boat was ordered to take a lakh of silver rupees and a secret letter to the District Commissioner at Homalin, 86 miles up the river. On the way upstream Major Johnston learnt that the Commissioner had already left Homalin, but he decided to carry on and bring back refugees, who were already streaming down the river—in boats, on rafts, and on foot upon the banks. Many of them were in a pitiable condition. Some had been robbed by dacoits. Others had died on the way.

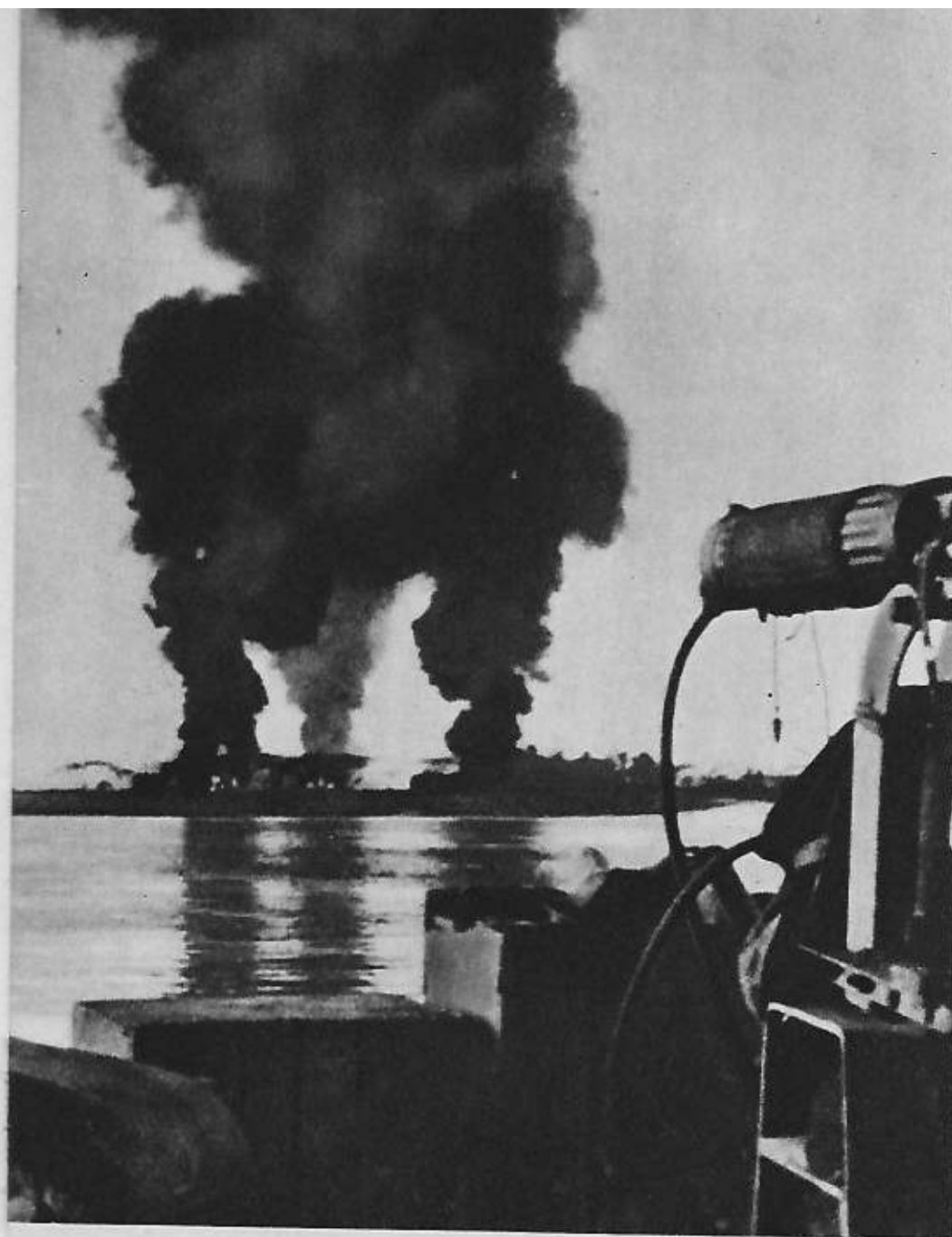
Major Johnston found Homalin almost deserted save for looters. He returned downstream, giving out handfuls of rupees to refugees on the bank—much to their astonishment. Human life being more precious than silver, he jettisoned some of the money-bags and took a number of refugees on board. Fuel and oil were running low, and the engines were in distress, but by going half speed and assisted by the strong current he reached Tonhe that evening.

At dawn next day he and his small party destroyed the motor-boat and set out on the 200-mile trek overland, crossing the Indian frontier on the second day, camping one night beside a stream, climbing mountains, spending another night in a Naga village high up on the windswept ridge, until at length they reached Dimapur, thence travelling by train to Calcutta, where the main body of the Force, under Captain Alexander, had arrived on the previous day, 25th May.

Thus ended as strange and as gallant an amphibious expedition as any the Corps had ever been called upon to perform. The losses had been serious. Of the original Force of 107 which left Colombo, only 48 returned. \* Some who had become casualties and gone to hospital, reappeared later. One at least found his way back alone and by devious courses. When he reported at Plymouth he explained that his officer had told him to make his way home if he ever became detached from the Force.

"What do you mean by home?" the Adjutant asked him.

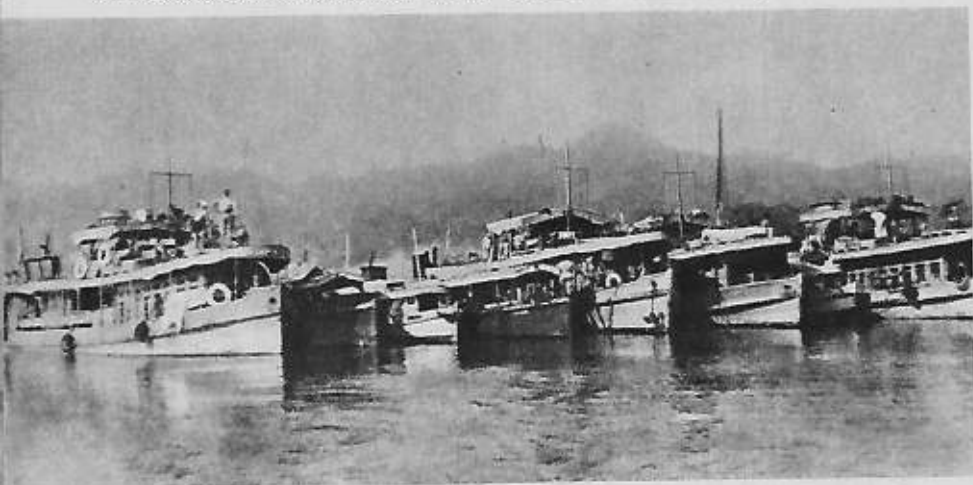
"Stonehouse Barracks, sir," he said.



**Force Viper in Burma.** It is 7th March, 1942. The Japanese are advancing towards Rangoon. Three miles south of the city the oil tanks of Syriam have been fired. Billowing smoke is reflected in the Rangoon River, where the launches of Force Viper, one of them in the foreground, cover the demolition parties.



(1) The 106 men of Force Viper were marines ; they had volunteered in Colombo for special service in Burma. Two of them, bearded, are seen above in the Doris with the Chittagonian captain of the native crew. These crews tended the engines of the launches.

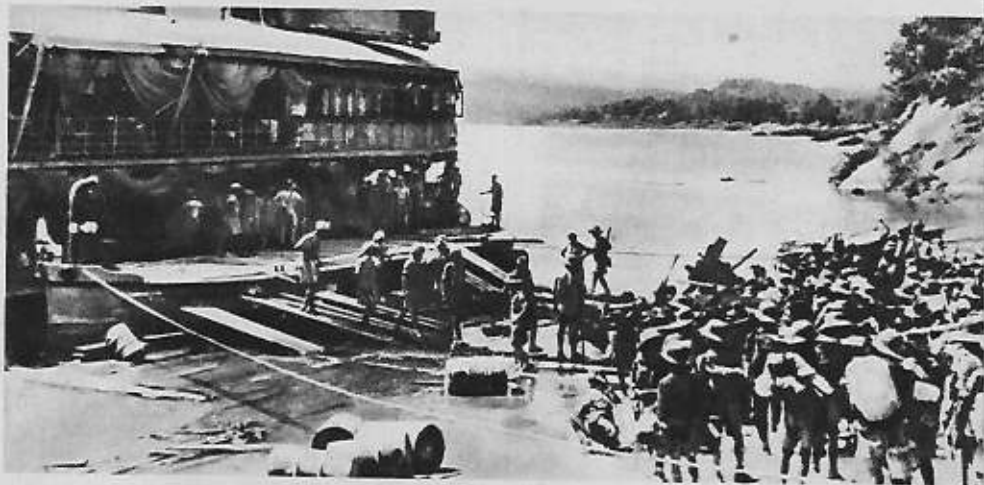


(2) Above is the improvised flotilla of touring launches and motor boats from which Force Viper fought. It is now mid-March. The flotilla has passed into the Irrawaddy, where (below) the oil stores of Yenanyaung, Burmese oil centre, are being destroyed.





(3) Now the flotilla sails farther upstream, protecting the army from Japanese infiltration by river. The land fighting was going badly, and turning into the Chindwin, Force Viper (below) covered the crossing of the British land forces from the east bank to the west.



(4) Their ten weeks' voyage of more than 600 miles from Rangoon over, the marines set out on 13th May from Sittaung to India. The last party left Tonhe, still farther upstream, on 15th May. Ten days later, 48 of the original party gathered in Calcutta.

