



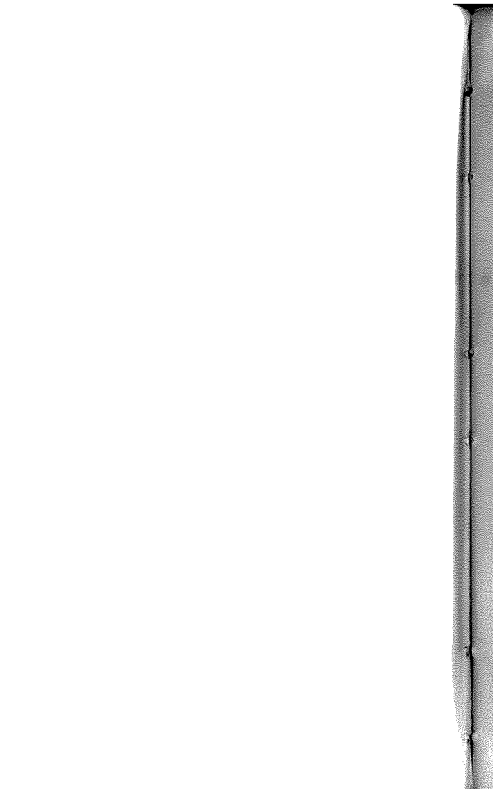
**THE**  
**JAPANESE INVASION**  

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**OF**  
**KELANTAN** IN **1941**  

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DATO' H L (M) (e)



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DATO' H L (MIKE) WRIGGLESWORTH  
November 1991

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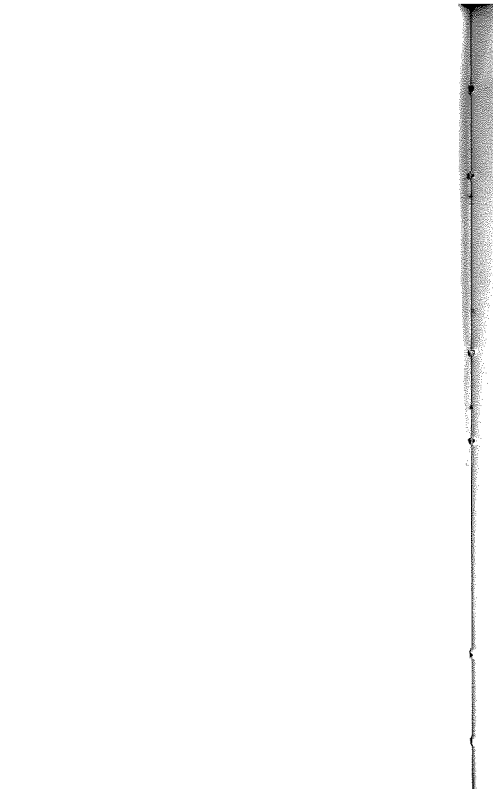
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# CONTENTS

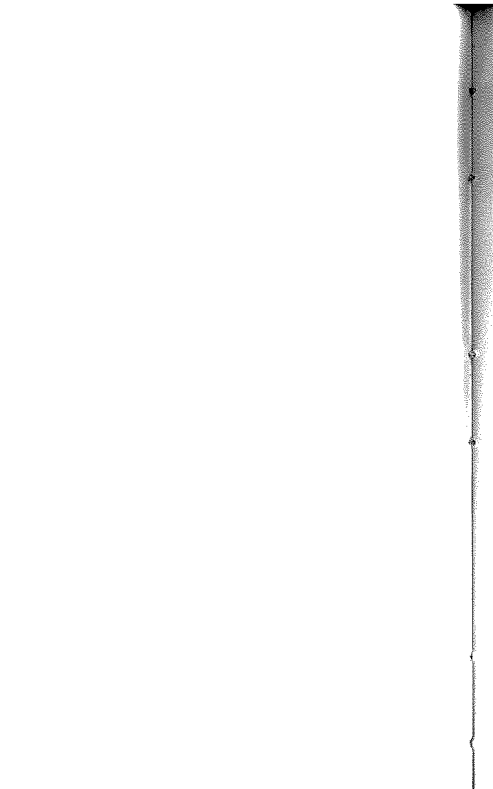
|  |    |
|--|----|
| <b>The prelude to the invasion</b>   | 1  |
| <b>The voyage of the Japanese invasion fleet</b>   | 3  |
| <b>The arrival of the Japanese ships off the coast of Kelantan</b>                                     | 13 |
| <b>The air attacks on the Japanese shipping off Kota Bharu</b>   | 16 |
| <b>The Japanese landing on the beaches of Kota Bharu</b>   | 24 |
| <b>Britain's responsibility for the defence of Kelantan</b>  | 25 |
| <b>The forces of the 8th Indian Brigade defending Kelantan</b>   | 28 |
| <b>The Japanese order of battle</b>  | 37 |
| <b>The battle on the beaches</b>   | 38 |
| <b>The air attack on the Japanese continues</b>  | 46 |
| <b>Comparative performance of Japanese and<br/>Defending Aircraft: Fighters</b>                        | 51 |
| <b>Comparative performance of Japanese and<br/>Defending Aircraft: Bombers</b>                         | 52 |
| <b>Attacks by the Japanese Air Force</b>   | 53 |
| <b>Confusion on the ground and the need for information</b>  | 55 |
| <b>The Japanese attack and capture the Kota Bharu airfield</b>   | 59 |
| <b>The evacuation of the Kota Bharu airfield</b>   | 60 |
| <b>the withdrawal of the 8th Indian Brigade</b>  | 64 |
| <b>The new line of defence covering Kota Bharu Town</b>  | 66 |
| <b>The success of the Japanese Takumi Detachment receives recognition</b>                              | 68 |
| <b>The Japanese losses</b>   | 70 |
| <b>The evacuation of Civilians</b>   | 70 |
| <b>The precarious position of Brigadier Key's forces</b>   | 72 |
| <b>The Japanese make further landings</b>  | 74 |
| <b>The Japanese continue their advance and Brigadier Key's<br/>forces withdraw south of Kota Bharu</b> | 75 |
| <b>The 8th Indian Brigade consolidates its position in the Machang area</b>                            | 77 |
| <b>General Percival decides to order the withdrawal from Kelantan</b>                                  | 78 |
| <b>Epilogue</b>  | 81 |
| <b>Bibliography</b>  | 82 |



## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

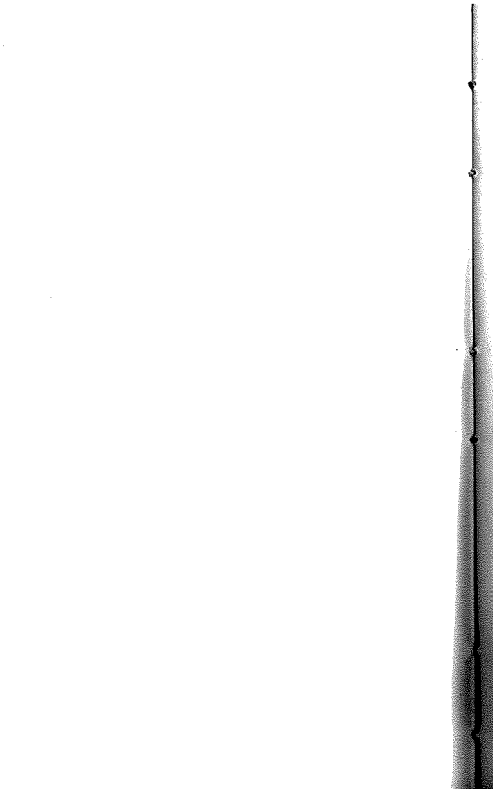
|  |    |
|--|----|
| 1. Officers of No. 1 Squadron R.A.A.F at Kota Bharu                            | 8  |
| 2. Lockheed Hudson Reconnaissance bomber                                       | 8  |
| 3. Catalina Flying Boat of the 205 Squadron R.A.F.                             | 11 |
| 4. The Hudson Bombers of Ft.Lt. Diamond DFC<br>after bombing the Awagasan Maru | 11 |
| 5. Air Vice-Marshal C.W.H. Pulford   | 21 |
| 6. Wing-Commander Davis, O.B.E.  | 21 |
| 7. Flight-Lieutenant O.N.Diamond. D.F.C  | 21 |
| 8. Flying-Officer D. Dowie   | 21 |
| 9. Lieutenant-General Sir Lewis Heath  | 27 |
| 10. Lieutenant-General A.E. Percival   | 27 |
| 11. Major-General B.S. Key   | 27 |
| 12. Kuala Pa'Amat  | 39 |
| 13. One of the pillboxes defending Kota Bharu aerodrome                        | 39 |
| 14. Japanese landing with equipment  | 43 |
| 15. Japanese crossing river on log bridge                                      | 43 |
| 16. Japanese troops entering Kota Bharu Town on<br>9th December 1941           |    |
| 17. Vickers Vildebeeste torpedo bomber   | 49 |
| 18. Beaufor reconnaissance aircraft  | 49 |
| 19. Bristol Bienheim fighter-bombers   | 49 |
| 20. Field-Marshal Count Terauchi   | 69 |
| 21. Lieutenant-General Yamashita   | 69 |
| 22. Colonel Tsuji  | 69 |
| 23. H.H. Sultan Ismail, the Ruler of Kelantan                                  | 73 |
| 24. The Guillemard railway bridge  | 79 |
| 25. Japanese troops crossing the demolished bridge                             | 79 |





## MAPS

|  |    |
|--|----|
| 1. Route of the Japanese invasion convoy   | 4  |
| 2. Map of the Japanese landing at Kota Bharu<br>on 8th December 1941                               | 15 |
| 3. Location of forces defeding malaya  | 29 |
| 4. Map of Kota Bharu District showing deployment<br>of the 8th Indian Brigade on 8th December 1941 | 33 |
| 5. Sketch map showing beach defences   | 36 |
| 6. Map showing the Malayan campaign of the<br>25th Japanese Army                                   | 63 |



## THE PRELUDE TO THE INVASION

The Japanese landed at Kota Bharu at 12.25 a.m. on Monday, 8th December 1941 and first attacked Pearl Harbour at 8 a.m. on 7th December 1941. Nevertheless the Pacific War started in Kota Bharu 1 hour and 35 minutes before the attack on Pearl Harbour. This was due to Malaya and Hawaii being on opposite sides of the International Date Line.

The Japanese timed their attack on Kota Bharu so as to synchronize with their attack on Pearl Harbour on 7th December which was a Sunday when they expected that most of the U.S. Fleet would be in harbour.

On that day Japan had launched a seven point assault on British, American and Siamese territory by attacking Malaya, Hawaii, Siam, the Philippines, Guam Island, Hong Kong and Wake Island in that order and all in less than 14 hours.

Although this was when the Pacific War began the Second World War had begun on 3rd September 1941 when Germany invaded Poland causing Britain and France to declare war on Germany.

When France was defeated and over-run by the Germans in June 1940 Italy came into the war on the side of Germany so as to obtain a share of the spoils. Then in September 1940 Japan for similar reasons aligned itself with Germany and Italy in the Tripartite Pact. This was the opportunity Japan had long cherished of seizing the oil, rubber, iron, tin and other valuable resources of South East Asia and its entry into the war became only a matter of choosing the right moment.

After the fall of France Indo-China was in the hands of the pro-German Vichy French and it lay wide open to the Japanese who early in 1941 moved in and by July they had completed their occupation. This gave them a superb naval base at Camranh Bay that was ideally sited strategically being almost equidistant from Malaya, Siam, Singapore, Indonesia, Sarawak, North Borneo and the Philippines.

However, when Japan gained control of the whole of Indo-China, Britain, Holland and the United States imposed economic restrictions on Japan and froze all the assets in the countries controlled by these powers. This meant a total trade embargo preventing Japan from obtaining rubber,

tin and iron from Malaya, oil, bauxite and nickel from the Netherlands East Indies and iron, steel and oil from U.S.A. and gave support to those advocating a Japanese invasion of the countries in South East Asia that produced these commodities.

However, the Japanese Emperor and the Imperial Princes, around whom had gathered the highest aristocracy, were against an aggressive war. The Prime Minister, Prince Konoye, had asked for a personal meeting with President Roosevelt at Honolulu to which he had hoped to bring his military and naval chiefs and thus bind them to what might be settled. But his proposal was turned down by the President and the army became increasingly critical of this wise statesman who resigned in October 1941. His place was taken by General Tojo who not only became the Prime Minister but also War Minister and Home Minister. From that time on war became almost inevitable.

Malaya and the Straits Settlements were therefore now under an imminent threat of a Japanese invasion for which they were ill prepared. Singapore was strongly defended against an attack from the sea but the land and air defences of Malaya and the Straits Settlements were woefully inadequate. Britain was responsible for their defence but it was itself then under threat of attack from Germany and Italy who had by then occupied most of Europe. Britain's first priority was to resist the threatened German invasion of its own shores and its next was to keep its life lines open by protecting its convoys of ships sailing all over the world. This tied up a large part of its navy and air force. Britain was also engaged in a major war against Italy and Germany in North Africa and was itself mounting attacks on occupied Europe. It therefore had few ships, planes or soldiers available to send to Malaya. Most of those it did send arrived in Singapore too late to take any effective part in Malaya's defence.

Japan on the other hand had carefully planned its invasion of Malaya down to the minutest detail. Its army had in November 1941 built an airfield on Phuquok Island in the amazingly short time of 15 days by working round the clock. This island is off the north west coast of Indo-China (Vietnam) in the Gulf of Siam only about 300 miles from Kota Bharu, Patani, Singora and Bangkok enabling Japanese aircraft to give continuous air cover for their invasion fleets all the way from Camranh Bay to each of these places. This operation was to be carried out by the 3rd Air Division under the command of Lieutenant-General

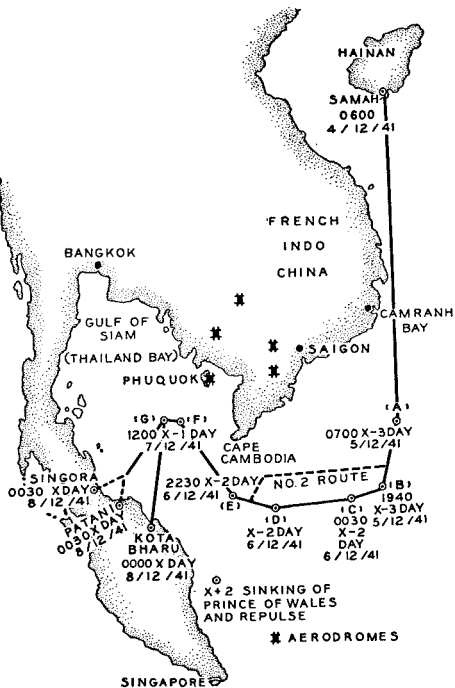
Sugawara of the Japanese Army Air Force who had been ordered to complete its concentration of aircraft on the airfields in Southern Indo-China by 5th December.

On 15th November a conference of the commanders of the land, sea and air forces that were to take part in the Malayan campaign was held in Saigon. It was attended by General Staff Officer Lieut.-Colonel Prince Takeda, representing Field Marshal Count Terauchi, the Commander-in-Chief of all Japan's Southern Armies. At this conference General Yamashita, whom the Japanese Imperial Headquarters had appointed commander of the 25th Army and ordered to invade and occupy Malaya, spoke of the difficulties of simultaneous disembarkations at Kota Bharu, Patani and Singora whereupon Vice-Admiral Ozawa, the Commander-in-Chief of the Southern Squadrons of the Japanese Navy said "I shall do everything possible that is desired by the military forces. I will be responsible for the protection of the convoy of ships and the disembarkation at Kota Bharu."

## THE VOYAGE OF THE JAPANESE INVASION FLEET

The 25th Army comprised the 5th and 18th Divisions and the Imperial Guards Division. It was the detached 56th Regiment of the 18th Division under Major General Takumi that was destined to land at Kota Bharu. This detachment was then at Shanghai but shortly afterwards it embarked for Hainan where it assembled together with the 5th Division from Canton at the port of Samah on the southern tip of the island of Hainan. There they were joined on 25th November by General Yamashita who had flown in from Saigon where for the past two months he had been preparing his plans for the invasion of Malaya.

On 2nd December the order was received from the Japanese Imperial Headquarters for the whole of the 25th Army to proceed southwards in order to commence operations on 8th December 1941 for the occupation of Malaya. However, there was a proviso that these military operations would be suspended if the Japanese negotiations with



America were satisfactorily concluded before that date. In the event they were not.

Thus it was that at 5.30 a.m. on 4th December 1941 the Japanese convoy of 19 transport ships slipped out of Samah Harbour and headed south. The convoy was escorted by one light cruiser (Sandai) and three flotillas of destroyers. The following day the 143rd Regiment sailed from Saigon in 7 transports escorted by a light cruiser (Kashie). Vice-Admiral Ozawa, flying his flag in the cruiser Chokai was in command of the whole operation. Close cover was provided by the four 8-inch cruisers of the 7th Cruiser Squadron (Rear-Admiral Kurita) screened by a flotilla of destroyers. Distant cover was given by Vice-Admiral Kondo commanding the Southern Force consisting of two battleships, two cruisers and some destroyers.

Both convoys were to be at a rendezvous in the Gulf of Siam 9 degrees 25' north, 102 degrees 20' east at about 9 a.m. on the 7th December. The convoys were routed close to the coast so as to be under land-based air cover and to keep out of range of British reconnaissance aircraft for as long as possible. The rendezvous was selected to give credence to the rumours, spread in Indo-China and elsewhere, that the convoys were proceeding to Siam. From the rendezvous the various detachments were to proceed at maximum speed direct to their objectives. The seven transports carrying the 143rd Regiment were to move separately to their destinations in the Isthmus of Kra, under the escort of a destroyer and a sloop. The convoy carrying the 5th Division was then to divide into two parts: sixteen transports going to the Singora-Patani area and three to Kota Bharu, each supported by a light cruiser and several destroyers. Three seaplane carriers were to accompany the convoys and provide anti-submarine patrols for the Singora and Patani anchorages. The remainder of the 5th Division, with the necessary base and line of communications troops, was to follow in two convoys, timed to arrive at Singora on the 16th and 27th December respectively.

The operation was to be covered by the 3rd Air Division (Lieut.-General Sugawara) of the Japanese Army Air Force, which was to complete its concentration on airfields in southern Indo-China by the 5th December. This air division, assisted where necessary by detachments from the 11th Air Fleet, was to cover the move of the convoys into the Gulf of Siam and attack the airfields in the Kota Bharu, Alor Star, and



Sungei Patani areas with a view to gaining air superiority in northern Malaya. It was also intended that it would occupy and operate from the airfields in southern Siam and in northern Malaya when these had been captured. They were also to attack the British lines of communication and bomb Singapore and other strategic targets.

General Yamashita was aboard the *Ryujo Maru* together with his Chief of Staff, Colonel Tsuji, who had spent six months preparing the detailed plans for the invasion of Malaya that had received the approval of the Imperial General Staff and Emperor Hirohito himself. Whilst planning this invasion Colonel Tsuji had even flown low over Kota Bharu during a reconnaissance flight from Saigon on 22nd October 1941. Now as his ship headed out to sea he felt as he later wrote "The die is cast. Everything humanly possible has been done to ensure success. Officers and men alike believe that Japan's fate is that of East Asia and that they are at the starting point that will determine the destiny of the nation for the next century".

The convoy continued sailing due south on 4th and 5th December when it was joined by several transports that had sailed from Saigon. On 6th December it altered course to the west passing round Cape Cambodia, the southernmost point of Indo-China, on the morning of the 7th. It then changed course again, this time to the north-west and keeping close to the coast proceeded to the pre-arranged rendezvous that was 200 miles north of Kota Bharu and 300 miles south east of Bangkok. It arrived there at mid-day on the 7th. This was a most astute move for not only did it ensure that the convoy was well protected against air attack by fighter aircraft from five airfields in southern Indo-China but it also created the impression that the convoy was heading for Bangkok although at the same time it remained only about 200 miles from Kota Bharu, Singora and Patani.

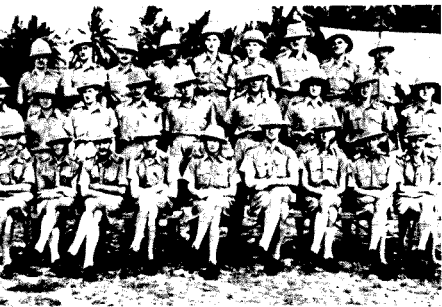
At 10.30 a.m. on 6th December three Lockheed Hudson bombers from No. 1 Squadron of the Royal Australian Air Force managed to take off from the water-soaked runway at Kota Bharu. Each air craft was given a different sector to search. At 12.15 p.m. Flight-Lieutenant Ramshaw, Captain of the Hudson searching No. 1 Sector and his observer Flying-Officer D.A. Dowie, sighted three Japanese vessels that he believed to be a transport, a minelayer and a minesweeper, 185 miles from Kota Bharu, on a bearing of 52 degrees and a course of 340 degrees. This

was the first sighting of the Japanese invasion fleet. A quarter of an hour later Ramshaw recorded a second sighting, this time a force of one battleship, 5 cruisers, 7 destroyers and 22 transports, 265 miles from Kota Bharu, steering due west. As Ramshaw and his crew were checking this formidable force they saw a single float biplane catapulted from one of the warships so the pilot prudently took cover in the clouds and signalled his news to base. The Japanese now realised that their convoy had been sighted and were deeply troubled as they feared the secrecy of their plans had been lost.

At 12.45 p.m., just a quarter of an hour after Ramshaw's second sighting, Flight Lieutenant Emerton, the captain of the Hudson searching Sector No. 3, reported sighting a large force on a bearing of 72 degrees 360 miles from Kota Bharu and on the same course as that reported by Ramshaw who, meanwhile, had sought permission to remain and shadow the Japanese force until relieved. Unfortunately this request was refused and he was ordered to continue his patrol with the result that all contact with the convoys was lost during the next vital 27 hours.

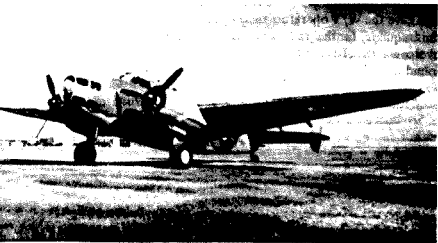
When they returned to their base the crews of both Hudsons were closely interrogated by intelligence officers who assumed that, despite discrepancies in the positions given and the fact that neither Hudson crew had sighted the other, that they had in fact both reported the same force. In Singapore the staff of the Combined Operations Room did not agree. Their interpretation which was correct and was accepted by the Commander-in-Chief Far East, Air Chief Marshall Brooke-Popham, was that there were two large forces, one slightly ahead of the other, steaming to a destination that could, as yet, only be guessed at. Emerton's sighting was taken to have been 2 cruisers, 10 destroyers and 21 transports. Since the first and smaller force (reported by Ramshaw) had rounded Cape Cambodia and was heading north-west into the Gulf of Siam, it seemed that the other force might be following it.

The news of the sighting of the Japanese forces was soon flashed to England and the American ambassador Winant sent a triple priority and most urgent message to the President of the United States. The message advised that two convoys were seen off Cape Cambodia 14 hours sailing distance from the Kra Isthmus at 3 a.m. London time, the convoys consisting of 25 transports, 6 cruisers and 10 destroyers in one and 10 transports 2 cruisers and 10 destroyers in the other convoy. The Winant



*No. 1 Squadron officers at Kota Bharu November 1941.*

*Back: Fowler, Diamond, White, O'Brien, Siggins, Sutherland, Yelland, Jenkins,  
etc. Middle: Bothroyd, Emerton, Colquhoun, L. A. Douglas, Buchanan, Verco, Smith,  
Pannifex. Sitting: Ramshaw, Morehouse, Guthrie, Bradley, Wg Cdr Davis (CO)  
on, J. K. Douglas, Leighton-Jones, D. Hughes.*



*Lockheed Hudson Reconnaissance Bomber of No. 1 Squadron R.A.A.F. Two 14-cylinder  
Pratt & Whitney radial engines of 1050 h.p. each. Maximum speed: 246 m.p.h. Range:  
1,000 miles. Carried crew of four and four 250 lb. bombs.*

message was noted by the Secretary of State on 6th December and sent to Hawaii where it was received at 3.00 p.m. (Hawaiian time) on 6th December; which was more than 16 hours before the ultimate attack by the Japanese on Pearl Harbour. Later, at a Congressional Committee of Investigation, Admiral Kimmel, in charge of the Navy at Pearl Harbour, said that he needed only a few hours to get his forces to instant readiness to repel an attack. Lieutenant General Short stated that four hours warning was all that was needed. It seems that because Kimmel had the opinion that the danger of a Japanese aerial strike on Pearl Harbour was very slight, Winant's message was assessed as not affecting the Hawaiian Islands.

The receipt of this information should have alerted the American authorities to the probability that Japan was about to start a war with Britain and Siam. It seemed that this was the only information that the Americans received about the movements of the Japanese Southern Fleet after the convoys had left Samah in the south of Hainan.

It has, of course, to be borne in mind that U.S.A. was hoping that the Japanese attack, the imminence of which they should have been becoming increasingly aware, would be directed solely against the countries of south-east Asia. Most Americans did not envisage that the Japanese would be so bold as to attack these countries and U.S.A. simultaneously. The Japanese on the other hand fully realised that U.S.A. was unlikely to stand by passively for long and allow them to gain complete control of the Pacific and the Far East so they opted to strike an unexpected and crippling blow against U.S.A. by a surprise attack on its Pacific fleet based on Hawaii.

On 6th December the north-east monsoon had been blowing hard and rain was pouring down in torrents when at 4.20 p.m. another Hudson took off from the water logged and only partially serviceable Kota Bharu airfield with orders to find and shadow the Japanese convoys. The Hudson flew to the extreme limit of its range but it could not locate them so it returned and made a difficult night landing at 10.30 p.m. The failure to locate the convoys was causing General Headquarters grave concern so the first degree of readiness was ordered throughout the command. At 6.30 p.m. a Catalina flying boat of No. 205 Squadron of the Royal Air Force was dispatched from Seletar on Singapore Island to make a night search.

Meanwhile Air Headquarters had been receiving reports of Japanese reconnaissance aircraft over Malaya at various points. General Headquarters ordered that no offensive action should be taken by British fighters, but anti-aircraft batteries were ordered to open fire on any unidentified aircraft. Seven Vickers Vildebeeste Torpedo bombers of No. 36 Squadron R.A.F. were hurriedly armed with torpedoes and sent to Kota Bharu whence, to avoid congestion on the airfield, they were diverted to the adjacent airfield at Gong Kedak and held in readiness for a possible strike.

Scrutiny of all reports received strengthened the belief at G.H.Q. that the Japanese force had in fact turned north-westward into the Gulf of Siam and was thus no longer in the prescribed reconnaissance area, although it was appreciated that the inability of the Hudsons and Catalinas to find any ships might well have been due to the extremely poor visibility.

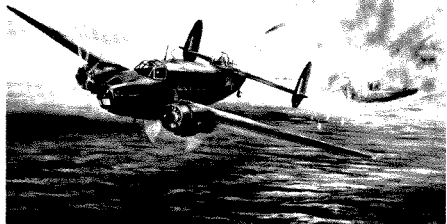
Air Headquarters then became concerned about the absence of any reports from the searching Catalina and a second Catalina from the same squadron was sent out, the captain being instructed to search to the west of Cape Cambodia if, on reaching that position, he had not made contact with Japanese ships. The first Catalina to go out eventually returned having seen no sign of the convoys but what happened to the second Catalina is best told by the Japanese.

The Takeda Force that was the first Fighter Unit to cover the convoy sailing across the Gulf of Siam was flying at an altitude of 3000 ft. when it sighted 25 miles north-west of the island, Hon Panjang, a large sea plane which was believed to be an American PBY or a British Short Sunderland flying-boat (it was in fact the missing Catalina). It suddenly dived at the Japanese formation firing rapidly causing Sergeant Sato's fighter that was directly in front to take evasive action. Seeing this, First-Lieutenant Tsubotoni fired his first shot that set the wing of the Catalina on fire. Then Warrant Officer Hirano, Corporal Fujimoto and Corporal Yoshida attacked the Catalina with their fighters from the rear while Sergeant Sato fired at it ferociously from the side. The flying-boat exploded and eventually sank to the bottom of the Gulf of Siam.

These were the first shots fired in the Pacific War, so this was a most historic encounter. Furthermore the pilot of this Catalina of the No. 205 Squadron R.A.A.F. from Seletar air base in Singapore, Flight Lieutenant



*Catalina of No. 205 Squadron R.A.F. It is a twin engined maritime patrol flying boat made by Consolidated. Its two 1200 h.p. Pratt and Whitney 14 cylinder radial engines give it a maximum speed of 196 m.p.h. and a range of 3,100 miles at 100 m.p.h. It carries four 500 lb. bombs.*



*Hudson Bomber flown by Fl. Lt. O. N. Diamond DFC after bombing and setting on fire the Awagisan Maru off Kota Bharu on 8th December 1941.*

Robert West R.A.F. and his observer, Sergeant Colin Treloar R.A.A.F., were the first casualties of the Pacific War – one British and the other an Australian.

This incident caused Yamashita's Chief-of-Staff, General Suzuki to exclaim:

"If this enemy seaplane has observed our convoy and reported it by wireless, our Malaya landing operation might be a dismal failure," although as has already been mentioned Japanese ships in convoy had in fact been sighted earlier. Fears that the expedition would be frustrated, or at least encounter serious opposition by British sea and air forces, persisted as the Japanese reached their rendezvous.

As dawn broke on the 7th three Hudsons took off from Kota Bharu with orders to regain contact with the convoys and to keep them in view. By this time all the air forces had been put on "No. 1 degree of readiness" meaning that they were to be prepared for immediate operations against the enemy.

The Hudsons failed to repeat their successes of the previous day. Two of them had to return because of bad weather and the third ranged over the Gulf of Siam but saw nothing because of low clouds, rain and poor visibility.

Later in the day the single Beaufort photographic reconnaissance aircraft which had been sent to Kota Bharu took off to make a search, but it returned in two and a half hours, its crew defeated by the heavy monsoon weather. Fresh news came when a report was received at 3.45 p.m. from a Hudson of No. 8 Squadron that it had intercepted a Japanese merchant ship steaming south with "a large number of men in khaki on deck." Two Hudsons from No. 1 Squadron were immediately sent out to search the position at which this vessel was sighted. Flight-Lieutenant Douglas, the pilot of one of these aircraft, reported four large vessels steaming almost due south in a position at the southern base of the Kra Isthmus, about 60 miles north of Patani. Night had fallen by the time Douglas made this sighting and he was unable to describe the force with certainty. He thought it comprised a cruiser and three transports. The second Hudson, piloted by Flight-Lieutenant Lockwood, also signalled at 5.50 p.m. that the crew had sighted a cruiser and a motor-ship 112 miles from Kota Bharu on a bearing of 9 degrees and a course of 270 degrees.

The cruiser opened fire on the Hudson which successfully took evasive action.

The Japanese convoy had throughout the afternoon of the 7th sailed south-west from the rendezvous and then split into two, one convoy making for Singora and Patani and the other for Kota Bharu. Until dusk their fighter planes had been able to give them continuous protection that had intensified as they neared the coast when the convoys were in grave risk of detection and attack by aircraft. Several of the pilots of these fighter planes perished in the sea when in the darkness they failed to locate their aerodrome on Phuquok Island. Fortunately for the Japanese the weather worsened after night-fall on the 7th when the convoys would be without fighter cover until the moon rose at 2 a.m. Fog and dense low cloud hung low over the coast of Kelantan and southern Siam screening the approach of the convoys as they proceeded safely at full speed through the night on the last leg of their long voyage from Hainan. As the 2 convoys neared the coast of Siam and Malaya the Japanese flag-ship, the 12,000 ton cruiser Chokai, that mounted ten 8-inch guns, signalled: "The main business from now is to proceed to Kota Bharu to cover the landing of the Takumi Detachment. Pray for the success of disembarkation - Vice Admiral Ozawa". He had fulfilled his undertaking to protect the convoy to Kota Bharu.

## THE ARRIVAL OF THE JAPANESE SHIPS OFF THE COAST OF KELANTAN

The Takumi Detachment under the command of Major General Takumi comprised the 56th Infantry Regiment, one battery of mountain guns, two quick-firing guns, one battery of anti-aircraft guns, one company of engineers, one section of signallers, one section of medical and sanitation personnel, and one field hospital. There was a total of 5,300 men. It proceeded to Kota Bharu in three large transports, the Awagisan Maru, the Ayatoyama Maru and the Sakura Maru, escorted by



a light cruiser and a squadron of destroyers. The Awagisan Maru was a ship of 9794 tons, the Ayatasan Maru was 9800 tons and the Sakura Maru was 7100 tons. All three were built in 1939. They cast anchor one and a half miles out from Kuala Pa' Amat and the Sabak beach at 10.20 p.m. on 7th December, 1941.

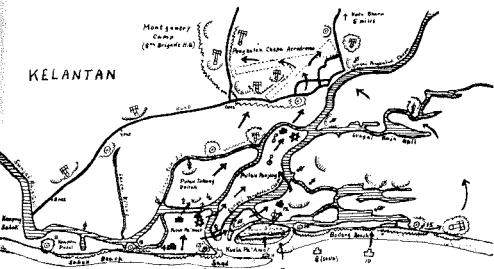
Colonel Tsuji, the Japanese Chief of Staff now continues the story:

"The bloody and glorious landing operation of the Japanese Army's landing at Kota Bharu will go down in history as the most magnificent of landing operations. The enemy position in front of the Kota Bharu landing area was solidly built. The British, obviously anticipated Kota Bharu as the landing point of the Japanese Army from before the outbreak of hostilities."

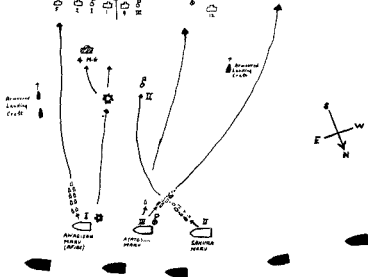
"Before dawn on the 8th December the Japanese Army resolved to make a great sacrifice and undertook the landing at Kota Bharu against the enemy. In order to ensure the safe landing of our main forces at Singora one of our forces was sent to Kota Bharu to divert the enemy concentration. This plan was a magnificent success. Our main forces accomplished a bloodless landing at Singora without the loss of a single man. But the landing at Kota Bharu became a bloody battle. The Kota Bharu landing operation being a decoy was one of sacrifice."

"The question was, would it be possible to launch the boats in such heavy seas, and even if it were, could the troops laden with their equipment climb down the rope ladders from the ships' decks and transfer into the boats? The officers and men of our engineer detachments, standing at the rail, watched the seas dashing against the side of the ship and said with scolding voices, "It's useless, isn't it? What fools to think of disembarkation in such heavy seas!" This was really the sincere opinion of the men responsible for handling the boats. The waves were at least 10 feet high - possibly higher. In peacetime manoeuvres men would not have been exposed to the danger of transshipment in such circumstances. It seemed as if the boats would be swamped as they lay alongside. Moreover in such a heavy sea it was not easy to get into the boats, encumbered as the men were with equipment. The problem was to let go the rope ladder at the right time. If a man let go just as the boat commenced to fall from the top of a wave he landed in the boat safely and fairly comfortably, but if he let go the ladder as the boat was rising there was danger he would break his leg."

# KELANTAN



SOUTH CHINA SEA



- JAPANESE**
- WARSHIPS
  - TRANSPORTS
  - LINES OF ADVANCE
  - Brigade H.Q.
  - Regimental H.Q.
  - I, II, III Infantry Regiments
  - 1, 2, 3 Infantry Companies
  - Battalion H.Q.
  - Company

- DEFENDING FORCES**
- ARTILLERY
  - ANTI-AIRCRAFT GUNS
  - PILL BOXES
  - INFANTRY POSITIONS
  - BARBED WIRE
  - MACHINE GUNS

Map of Japanese landing at Kota Bharu 8th December 1941

At 11.45 p.m. on 7th December the beach defence troops on the Sabak and Badang beaches reported ships anchoring about one and a half miles from the coast. The point of anchorage was almost exactly opposite the Kota Bharu aerodrome and there is no doubt that the Japanese ships were guided in by a light prominently displayed behind the beaches. Shortly afterwards the beach defence artillery, consisting of the 21st Indian Mountain Battery and one 18-pounder manned by the 3/17th Dogras opened fire. The Japanese replied with naval gunfire.

The Japanese account continues: "The signallers had made provision for all eventualities and the wireless section had linked together a number of life-belts to act as floats for their heavy equipment, which had been wrapped and sealed in strong oiled paper packages so that salt water could not damage it. Heavy and light machine-guns were transshipped by being passed down from hand to hand".

"The men who had got into the boats first became uncomfortable as they tossed and pitched and many were very seasick, but eventually all the boats were filled with their quotas of troops and with some difficulty formed in line ready to move off towards the shore".

"The boats were so tightly packed with men and equipment that it was impossible to move in them. All were drenched from head to foot with spray, and looked like drowned rats. In the heavy seas the boats frequently lost sight of each other as they rose on the crests or sank in the troughs of the waves. The sound of the boats' engines was drowned by the noise of the surf crashing on the shore. The line formation of the boats broke up as they surged forward on the crests of the breakers. As the boats approached the beach the seas threw them up on the sand or against each other. Everywhere soldiers could be seen holding up their weapons as they plunged into the sea."

## THE AIR ATTACKS ON THE JAPANESE SHIPPING OFF KOTA BHARU

Like most of the other members of No. 1 Squadron of the Royal Australian Air force stationed on the Kota Bharu aerodrome, Leading Aircraftman John Day woke to the sound of gun-fire, threw off his mosquito net and jumped out of bed. John called out, "It's on!" The flight sergeant told him to go down to the armoury and collect rifles and then assist with the bombing up of the Hudsons.

Wing Commander Davis, the commander of the 1st Squadron R.A.A.F. who was at that time relieving the Station Commander, Wing Commander Noble, in the airfield operations room, also heard the sound of the gunfire coming from the sea front. Shortly afterwards he received a telephone call from the headquarters of the 8th Indian Brigade commanded by Brigadier B.W. Key, reporting that enemy warships were shelling the beach defences and that transports could be seen lying off shore, apparently preparing to land troops. Immediately Davis called Singapore on the telephone and informed the Far East Combined Operations Room. He then summoned Wing Commander Noble who at once granted his request for authority to call out the station and to return to his own squadron. Brigadier Key, now sought air support for his forces in repelling an enemy landing, but Noble was bound by an order from Air Headquarters Far East forbidding any offensive action so long as the Japanese were not in territorial waters and therefore they just had to sit and wait. Had it not been for this order the R.A.F. and the R.A.A.F. would have been able to bomb the Japanese six hours earlier.

Moreover if they had been allowed to take off and attack the Japanese convoy they may have been able to delay the invasion and this might have given a chance of success to operation Matador, the long-planned strike into south Siam. Yet all they could do when they knew the convoy was heading for Kota Bharu, Singora and Patani was to remain grounded and endure, their frustration.

In Singapore the Commander-in-Chief Far East, Air Chief-Marshal Brooke-Popham, received the news of the Japanese landing in his office

at the naval base. After a hurried conference with Air Vice-Marshal Pulford, who commanded the British and Australian Air Forces, he ordered an immediate offensive against the Japanese ships with all No. 1 Squadron's available Hudson bombers. It was thus that the Royal Australian Airforce and appropriately its No. 1 Squadron, received orders to strike the first blows against the Japanese from the air. Six aircraft were standing by, bombed-up and ready for operational orders. The remaining four serviceable Hudsons were hurriedly made ready. Meanwhile Air Headquarters had also ordered the Vickers Vildebeeste torpedo bombers of No. 36 Squadron R.A.F. at Gong Kedak to be ready to launch a torpedo attack at first light and orders had been issued to No. 8 Squadron R.A.A.F. and No. 60 (Blenheim) Squadron R.A.F. at Kuantan, No. 27 (Night Fighter) Squadron at Sungei Patani, No. 34 (Blenheim) Squadron at Tengah and No. 62 (Blenheim) Squadron at Alor Star, to take off, also at first light, to attack enemy shipping in the Kota Bharu area. The six Vildebeestes of No. 100 Squadron R.A.F. which had remained at Seletar were ordered to Kuantan to stand by for orders. The single Beaufort photographic-reconnaissance aircraft, now based at Kota Bharu, was ordered to make a sortie over the Lakon Roads, to the north of Singora, to determine whether or not the Japanese had landed in Siam.

The first Hudson took off at 2.08 a.m. in clearing weather with a rising moon. It was followed at intervals of two or three minutes by six more. Because of the nearness of the enemy ships to the coast and the low cloud base out to sea the pilots were ordered to make independent low-level attacks on any transports they could find and to report promptly what enemy forces they had sighted. Each aircraft carried four 250-lb bombs fused for eleven seconds delay which would allow the bomber to be well clear of the target before the bomb exploded. The pilot of the first Hudson, Flight-Lieutenant Lockwood, on making his approach at 2,000 feet, sighted the three transports and dived to 50 feet to release two bombs but no hits were observed. He took evasive action as his attack drew heavy fire from the ships and then flew in again releasing his remaining two bombs. Flight-Lieutenant Ramshaw, who followed Lockwood in to the attack, confirmed that Lockwood's second salvo had scored direct hits on the vessel amidships.

From the first seven sorties, one Hudson, piloted by Flight-Lieutenant Jones, did not return. He lost his life together with his observer

Flying Officer David Hughes and his two gunners Sergeant Maurie Waters and Sergeant Noel Thompson. Several other aircraft returned holed by the anti-aircraft fire which was both heavy and accurate. Interrogation of the crews of the six aircraft that returned gave an estimate of the Japanese task force as 6 warships – probably 3 cruisers, 3 destroyers, 3 transports, and a vessel described as “a large flat ship” which one airman thought might be a small aircraft carrier since no superstructure could be detected. It proved to be a landing-craft carrier.

In ten more sorties the Hudsons continued their bombing and machine-gunning attacks on the transports and on the barges which were moving to-and-fro between them and the shore. Flight Lieutenant Smith and his crew scored a direct hit with two bombs in the centre of a group of about ten landing-craft close to the beach and saw a number of them overturn.

Flight Lieutenant John Ramshaw who took off at 3.20 a.m. in poor visibility decided to attack a cruiser by flying in at low level, dropping the bombs and then pulling away. This type of mast-head attack was a sort of Kamikaze approach and it was most dangerous. The theory was that the aircraft came down very close to the water, about ten feet, and approached the ship at top speed and dropped the bombs from that height. They didn't have time to point downwards but skipped in to hit the side of the ship. Ramshaw was extremely gallant and a most intrepid pilot. The Hudson flew in, dropped its bombs and drew heavy anti aircraft fire from the cruiser. It was hit by an explosion which could have been caused by the bombs being on instantaneous fusing instead of 11 seconds delay or the aircraft could have been hit by the heavy anti-aircraft fire from the cruiser. The Hudson crashed into the sea beyond the cruiser and John Ramshaw and Flying Officer Don Dowie were thrown out through the perplex roof. Sergeants Coldrey and Garry White in the body of the aircraft had no chance.

Dowie was knocked unconscious and, as was revealed later, he sustained a fractured spine, an injury that worried him in later life. When he recovered, probably an hour later, he called out and Ramshaw answered and they talked for a few minutes but after awhile Ramshaw said that he didn't think he could survive. Dowie was supported by his life jacket which he had half inflated before the crash and it saved his life. He floated and, realising that he was in the path of the barges heading for the

shore, he expected a bullet at any time. Dowie had no movement in his arms and legs. But he wanted to put more air in his life jacket which he was able to do because the toggle to inflate it was just near his mouth. His head was moving with the waves and going back and forwards and he was able to grab the toggle in his teeth and unscrew the knurled top. He felt the air rush into his mouth but with perseverance he was able to blow more air into the life jacket although it hurt his lungs because of the pains in his chest. By constant persistence he was able to screw on the top.

The tide caused him to drift in a northerly direction and a Malayan perahu floated out from the fast flowing river. By this time a couple of hours had passed since the crash and some movement had returned to Dowie's legs and arms. He was able to throw an arm over the edge of the perahu and hold on. Dowie doesn't remember getting into the perahu but he drifted until picked up the following night by a Japanese warship and became a prisoner of war of the Japanese Navy.

The senior officer on board the warship told Dowie that the cruiser that had been attacked, had received a hit on the steering mechanism and had to retire. So apparently Ramshaw's Hudson had scored a direct hit with at least one of its bombs. Dowie was later transferred as prisoner of war to the Japanese Army and put in the Saigon jail. He spent the rest of the war as a prisoner of war.

About 3.30 a.m. a Hudson piloted by Flight-Lieutenant O'Brien, made a reconnaissance flight about 30 miles out to sea from Kota Bharu and sighted a cruiser and three destroyers steaming at high speed in a north-westerly direction. O'Brien then returned towards Kota Bharu to attack the transports. He wrote afterwards:

"Seeing a ship underneath me about 10 miles from the coast I decided to attack. It was a nice moonlight night I came in at sea level for a mast-height attack. When within half a mile of this ship it put up such a concentrated anti-aircraft barrage that I realised it was a cruiser and veered off around its bows taking violent avoiding action while my rear gunner machine-gunned its decks as we passed. Realising the mistake I had made in attempting to attack a cruiser from low level, I returned towards the transports near the beach and carried out a mast-height attack on a large transport which was stationed about four miles from the beach apparently unloading troops, as it was surrounded by barges. I encountered considerable anti-aircraft fire during my bombing run, but



*Air Vice-Marshal C. W. H. Pulford*



*Wing Commander R. H. Davis OBE  
C.O. No. 1 Squadron R.A.A.F.*



*Flying Officer D. Dowie  
No. 1 Squadron R.A.A.F.*



*Flight Lieutenant O. N. Diamond DFC  
No. 1 Squadron R.A.A.F.*



took violent avoiding action and dropped my stick of four 250 pounders across its bows, scoring a direct hit. It is possible that my other bombs did considerable damage to the landing-craft which were clustered round the sides of the transports, but it was too dark to see clearly. There was considerable activity of landing-craft between the transports and the beach. There was no scarcity of targets, which we machine-gunned as opportunity offered while returning to the aerodrome."

Overall operational control was very difficult because of the absence of adequate communication channels between Air Headquarters Far East in Singapore and Kota Bharu. Telephonic communications were chaotic. During a telephone conversation between the Air Officer Commanding RAF in Singapore and the Station Commander at Kota Bharu, Wing Commander Noble, the switchboard operator interrupted at three minutes by asking, "Do you want an extension?" At six minutes the operator interrupted with, "Six minutes. Do you want another extension?" After nine minutes the operator said, "Sorry Sir, I will have to cut you off." Objecting, the AOC said, "Please leave me through, I am fighting a war." The supervisor at the telephone exchange came on the line to explain, "I'm sorry Sir. I understand your position. But there is the C-in-C, there is the GOC, there is the NOC and yourself, Sir. They are all wanting to talk to Kota Bharu, and there is only one line!"

May be it was because of the bad telephone communications, but Wing Commander Davis, the CO of No. 1 Squadron received no direction or instruction from Air Headquarters Far East during the operations on 8th December. Moreover Wing Commander Noble in the Operations Room at Kota Bharu had no cause to talk to Davis throughout the night's operations. Davis was left to his own resources and those of No. 1 Squadron RAAF to conduct the war operations as he personally directed.

Flight-Lieutenant Diamond took off again for his second sortie at 3.32 a.m. and encountered small arms fire at the western boundary of the aerodrome. Under heavy anti aircraft fire from a cruiser about a mile from the three transports, Diamond made a run and heavily machine gunned the bridge and decks of a transport with his front and rear guns. He climbed up into low cloud and then dived to carry out a second attack with two bombs. Climbing away he turned to release his remaining bombs over the target and scored a direct hit just forward of the bridge to start a large fire through the ship. Diamond's approach run was at very slow

speed with flaps up, almost on the stall. He reckoned that the aircraft would be harder to hit with anti aircraft fire because the Japanese could not figure out the speed of the aircraft. As it happened, there was a lot of flak in front of the aircraft and some behind it and Diamond thought he obtained more accuracy in his bombing. It seemed to work as it had with the slow Swordfish aircraft which bombed the German warship *Scharnhorst*. However, approaching the ship of about 10,000 tons from the rear and going over the ship Diamond had difficulty in controlling the aircraft as it was hit by the explosion. he saw a huge ball of flame rise under the aircraft; evidently the bombs had been fused a little fine and they didn't give the aircraft sufficient time to fly clear of the ship. Diamond had the control stick fully back and as the aircraft passed the ship the explosion must have tipped the tail up. It was just as though a great hand was pushing the Hudson along and pushing it down to the water. As the aircraft flew on the effects of the explosion became less pronounced and it started to climb. Then Diamond realised that the aircraft had been hit by enemy fire or shrapnel which penetrated the starboard oil tank. The oil pressure dropped suddenly and Diamond just had enough time to feather the airscrew before the engine stopped. Landing in the darkness with no lights showing on the aerodrome was a tricky business, but Diamond made a perfect landing on one engine. An inspection of the aircraft showed that it was severely damaged by gun fire which had penetrated the wings, fuselage and tailplane and the crew recovered a piece of shrapnel from the oil tank.

Another Hudson piloted by Flight-Lieutenant Douglas that took off at 4 a.m. was also severely damaged by anti-aircraft fire but got back to the base.

About 4.30 a.m. those on the airfield at Kota Bharu heard a particularly loud explosion out to sea – a blast too heavy even for a broadside from a cruiser. This explosion may well have resulted from a torpedo dropped by one of the *Vildebeeste* torpedo bombers which Air Vice-Marshal Pulford had also ordered to attack the Japanese ships. There were also submarines of the Netherlands Navy based on Singapore operating off the coast between Kota Bharu and Pattani under the strategic control of the British Naval Commander, Admiral Layton. These submarines claimed to have torpedoed six Japanese transports but by 21st December three of these Dutch submarines had also been sunk.

At 5 a.m., Davis ordered a break in the attack so that his Hudsons might refuel, re-arm and be checked for serviceability. Further interrogation of the aircrews indicated that one of the enemy ships had blown up and sunk and that at least 24 landing-craft had been either destroyed or overturned. Several air-crews reported that enemy warships had signalled to them giving the letter "K" which was the correct letter of the day – the recognition signal arranged between the Royal Navy and the R.A.F. and R.A.A.F. as a secret signal for the security of naval vessels against attack by friendly aircraft. This, and the detection of lights on the shore believed to have been placed as a guide to the landing point for the enemy convoy, suggested that Japanese agents had been at work effectively before the attack.

## THE JAPANESE LANDING ON THE BEACHES OF KOTA BHARU

Another Japanese continues the story: "The Awagisan Maru that had been set on fire had received 10 direct hits. It became enveloped in flames and smoke from the bursting bombs and shells from the shore batteries. This prevented it from discharging its cargo of tanks and guns. Captain Mimosu commanding the Regimental Artillery Company ordered his men to jump into the sea holding their rifles. They were kept afloat by their life jackets. Some managed with difficulty to climb into the landing craft and naval vessels that came to their aid whilst others swam towards the shore. The officers and men of the 21st Independent Anti-Aircraft Artillery Unit stayed aboard the ship and although scorched by the flames they manned their guns and shot down several planes. When finally the fire burnt through the decks they too had to abandon ship and jump into the sea. These soldiers landed as day broke and later managed to join the main forces".

"Groups of enemy fighter planes attacked our landing-craft and poured a hail of bullets into them as they drifted on the surface of the sea, but nevertheless by degrees most of our men got ashore and formed a line on the beach. As dawn broke it became impossible to move under the

heavy enemy fire at point-plank range. Officers and men instinctively dug into the sand and hid their heads in the hollows. Then they burrowed until their shoulders, and eventually their whole bodies, were under cover. Then using their steel helmets to dig their way and with their swords dragging on the sand beside them they crawled forward up the beaches and eventually they reached the wire entanglements. Those with wire-cutters got to work, but they had scarcely commenced when there was a thunderous report and clouds of dust flew up completely obscuring the view for a time. They had reached the mine-field. Moving over corpses the wire-cutters kept at their work. Behind them followed other men, piling up the sand ahead of them with their steel helmets and creeping forward like moles. The enemy soldiers manning the pillboxes fought desperately. Suddenly one of our men rushed forward and threw his body in front of a loophole in a pillbox through which a machine gun was firing. Instantly a group of our men sprang to their feet, rushed at the pillbox and lobbed a hand-grenade inside. Bayonets flashed and amid the sound of war-cries and calls of distress the enemy's front line was captured."

Japanese losses must have been very heavy indeed. Nothing daunted, they came on. The barges were run up on the shore. Men leapt from them and ran up the beach. Less than half would reach the fringe of trees, but these would ensconce themselves as best they could. More and more came on.

## BRITAIN'S RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE DEFENCE OF KELANTAN

It was 4.30 a.m. on December 8th in Kota Bharu when Winston Churchill at 9 p.m. on December 7th listened to the BBC News at Chequers the Prime Minister's country house outside London and learnt of the attack by the Japanese on the Americans at Pearl Harbour. He immediately telephoned President Roosevelt in Washington not knowing that the Japanese had landed in Kota Bharu 4 hours earlier. This was due to an incredible breakdown in communications with Singapore. It was not

until later that Churchill heard of the landing of the Japanese at Kota Bharu which had occurred almost one and a half hours before the attack on Pearl Harbour.

Britain had had the responsibility of protecting Kota Bharu the capital town of Kelantan, ever since 1909 when Siam had relinquished its suzerainty over Kelantan and three other Malay States. Britain was also responsible for the protection of the whole of the Malay Peninsula with its nine Malay States each with its Malay Ruler and the Straits Settlements of Singapore, Penang, and Malacca that were British Colonies with a Governor residing in Singapore.

In 1941 the Governor was Sir Shenton Thomas who was also the High Commissioner for Malaya. The Commander-in-Chief of the land and air forces in the Far East was Air Chief Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, under whom was Lieutenant-General A.E. Percival, the General Officer Commanding Malaya. Percival was responsible for defending the Malay peninsula and the naval base in Singapore, both extremely difficult tasks in the absence of a fleet. This forced him to rely principally on the air force. Thus the security of the airfields, particularly those in Kelantan and Kedah had become of paramount importance as he assumed, quite correctly as events would prove, that the capture of these airfields would be the first objective of the Japanese and that they would therefore land at Kota Bharu, Pattani and Singora (Songkhla). General Percival was handicapped by having to disperse his meagre forces to defend a number of widely separated areas. On the other hand the Japanese having the initiative would be able to concentrate their forces at whatever places they selected.

General Percival gave the task of defending northern Malaya to Lieutenant-General Sir Lewis Heath who commanded the 3rd Indian Corps. Heath was also entrusted with operation "Matador", a plan to advance into Siam from the west coast as soon as it became certain that the Japanese were going to land in southern Siam.

Heath, who had in his corps the 9th and 11th Indian Divisions and the 28th Indian Brigade, was compelled to disperse this comparatively small force over a very wide area and to commit his troops to areas unsuited, both strategically and tactically, to a defensive battle. Had it not been for the presence of the airfields in Kelantan he could have ignored the risk of a Japanese landing on the north-east coast of Malaya as it was



*Lieut.-General Sir Lewis Heath  
Commander 3rd Indian Corps.*



*Lt. Gen. A. E. Percival, British General  
Officer Commanding Malaya: 1941-1942*



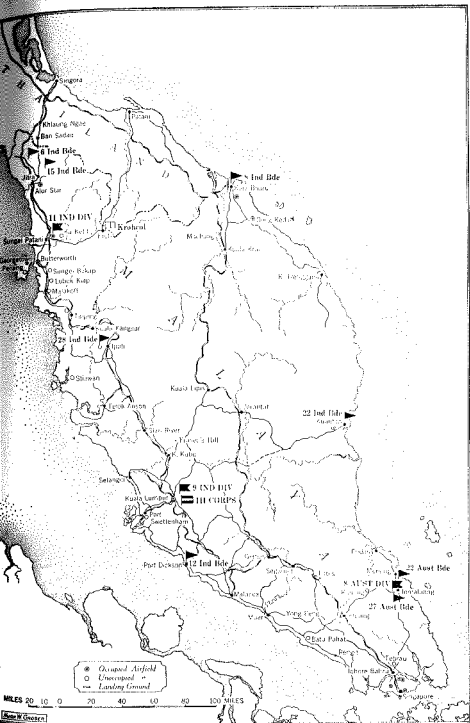
*Major General B. S. Key,  
C.B., D.S.O., M.C.,  
Commander 8th Indian Brigade*

separated from the rest of Malaya by a vast area of jungle through which there were no roads. The only means of communication that Kelantan had with other parts of the country was a narrow single railway line through the jungle with numerous bridges over wide rivers that could easily have been blown-up putting the line out of action for many months. However, these northern airfields could have provided the Japanese with ready-made bases for their air forces to use when supporting the invasion of Malaya so these airfields had to be defended at all costs. Heath therefore had to split up his 9th Indian Division into isolated detachments for the defence of this large area. The 8th Indian Brigade reinforced by a battalion from the 22nd Indian Brigade was located in Kelantan and the rest of 22nd Brigade was deployed for the protection of the airfield at Kuantan.

## THE FORCES OF THE 8TH INDIAN INFANTRY BRIGADE DEFENDING KELANTAN

The forces in Kelantan were all under the command of Brigadier Berthold Wells Key who had arrived in Singapore with his 8th Indian Infantry Brigade in October 1940. In November 1940 he and his brigade were sent to Kota Bharu where they were ordered to prepare defensive positions to protect the airfields as well as oppose any landings the Japanese may make on the beaches of Kelantan. The 400 miles of beautiful sandy beaches stretching down the whole of the east coast of Malaya were all eminently suitable for Japanese landings except perhaps during the north-east monsoon from November to February when there were often heavy seas in which landing craft would find it difficult to land.

However, Key realised that the initial objective of the Japanese would be the capture of the three Kelantan airfields. One was at Pengkalan Chepa 5 miles north east of Kota Bharu, another at Gong Kedak 30 miles down the coast and the third at Labok near Machang.



Location of forces, Malaya, 8th December 1941



about 25 miles south of Kota Bharu on the road to Kuala Krai. All were east of the Kelantan river, the only major river in south east Asia that flows from south to north. Key therefore decided to keep his forces east of the Kelantan river with the exception of a few small mobile detachments whose task it was to watch the Siamese frontier until the Japanese advanced in force when they would destroy the railway bridge over the Golok River and fall back across the Kelantan River.

Key had less than 4,000 men in his brigade and a high proportion of them were young and inexperienced. In 1984 Major-General Key, then aged 88 recounted to his Malaysian friend and biographer, Mr. Chye Kooi Loong:

"Not many are aware of the "milking" of the experienced officers and NCOs in the Indian Regiments with the massive expansion of the Indian Army in 1940. A grave consequence of this was the detrimental effect that it had on the Indian Regiments that came to Malaya. Every Indian regiment lost some 40% of their fine officers and NCO specialists who were taken to form the basis of new regiments. The Indian regiments were brought up to strength with inexperienced officers who, though excellent material, had not even mastered spoken Hindi. The men were raw recruits of about 18 years of age who had fired some 50 rounds on the rifle range. They became the riflemen in the infantry platoons to meet the battle-trained war veterans from Japan!"

Of the fighting in Kelantan Key gave this account.

"We were aware of the possibility of Japanese landings anywhere on the 35 miles of coast facing the South China Sea. I saw the biggest threat as being most likely to come from the beaches of Sabak and Badang, near the Pengkalan Chepa airfield and my 8th Indian Brigade HQ at Camp Montgomery just south of this airfield (now the golf course of the Royal Kelantan Club)".

His headquarters were therefore close to Kota Bharu enabling him to maintain contact with the Ruler of Kelantan Sultan Ismail, and his British Adviser, Mr. Kidd.

On December 7th Key's 8th Indian Brigade was deployed as follows:-

**A. COMMAND****Kota Bharu Town**

Headquarters 8th Indian Infantry Brigade  
19th Indian Field Company Royal Bombay Sappers and  
Miners  
15th Indian Field Ambulance.  
The Kelantan Volunteers.

**B. BEACH DEFENCES****1. Right Sector**

A frontage of approximately eighteen miles from Sungei Besut to Kuala Kemasin.

2/10th Baluch with its headquarters and a reserve rifle company at Pasir Puteh. Under Command: Gong Kedah airfield with Royal Air Force and Royal Australian Air Force ground staff; two companies Mysore Infantry and one machine-gun platoon of the 4th Pahang Volunteers. Also, on the outbreak of war, 272nd Anti-Tank Battery, situated at Gong Kedah, came under command.

The Sector was divided into three company areas:

- i Semerak Beach  
From Sungei Besut to Sungai Semerak.  
Approximately 5,500 yards.
- ii Melawi Beach  
From Kuala Rekam to approximately 2,000 yards south of Bachok village. Approximately 6,000 yards.
- iii Bachok Beach  
From approximately 2,000 yards south of Bachok village to Kuala Kemasin. Approximately 9,000 yards.

The gap between the Sungai Semerak and Kuala Rekam, approximately 15,000 yards, was not held. However, dummy defences were constructed comprising dummy pillboxes and one belt of wire. It was felt that 18 miles was too great a frontage for one battalion to hold every point. It was therefore decided

that the Telong Forest Reserve, a wooded, swampy area which presented a considerable obstacle to any hostile force attempting to penetrate inland, should be left unguarded.

## 2. Central Sector

Frontage of approximately ten miles from Kuala Kemasin to the Kelantan river.

3/17th Dogras with its headquarters and a reserve rifle company at the 3 1/2 M.S. Camp (3 1/2 miles from Kota Bharu). Under command: one machine-gun platoon 4th Pahang Volunteers. In support: 21st Indian Mountain Battery, the guns being located on the Kota Bharu airfield.

This sector was divided into three company areas:

- i Kemasin Beach: From Kuala Kemasin to Sungai Pengkalan Datu.
- ii Sabak Beach: From Sungai Pengkalan Datu to Kuala Pa'Amat.
- iii Badang Beach: From Kuala Pa'Amat to the Kelantan river.

## 3. Left Sector

(The area west of the Kelantan river)

- i. Gual Periok  
One company less two platoons 2/12th Frontier Force Regiment patrolling the railway to the Siamese frontier.
- ii. Tumpat  
One platoon 2/12th Frontier Force Regiment on beach defence.
- iii. Kampong Lubok Kawah.  
One platoon 2/12th Frontier Force Regiment patrolling tracks leading from the Siamese frontier.
- iv. Repek  
Base for patrols from 1/13th Frontier Force Rifles



**C. AIRFIELD DEFENCE**

**Kota Bharu airfield**

1st Hyderabad Infantry

9th Battery H.K.S.R.A. (Hong Kong and Singapore Royal Artillery)

**Gong Kedah Airfield**

Two companies 1st Mysore Infantry

One platoon 1st Hyderabad Infantry – manning two naval anti-aircraft guns.

**Machang Airfield**

1st Mysore Infantry – less two companies.

**D. LINE OF COMMUNICATION DEFENCE**

**Kuala Kral**

One company (less two platoons) the Malay Regiment.  
Detachment Hyderabad Infantry.

**Dabong**

4th Pahang Volunteers (less two platoons) on the railway between Dabong and Kuala Lipis.

**Kuala Sell**

One platoon Perak Volunteers (Malaya Frontier Patrol) watching the approach to Dabong by the Sungai Pergau.

**E. BRIGADE RESERVE**

**2/12th Frontier Force Regiment** (less one company) at Pulai Chongdong

**1/13th Frontier Force Rifles** at Peringat with patrols west of the river based on Repek.

**73rd Field Battery** (5th Field Regiment) at Pulai Chongdong.

**272nd Anti-Tank Battery** (80th anti-Tank Regiment) at Gong Kedah.

**F. AIR SUPPORT**

**Kota Bharu Airfield**

One squadron of eleven Lockheed Hudsons and three Brewster Buffaloes.

**Gong Kedah**

One squadron of nine Vildebeeste Torpedo Bombers.

**G. ANCILLARY AND ADMINISTRATION UNITS****Based on Kuala Krai.**

The 2/10th Baluch and the 3/17th Dogras each had two reconditioned 18-pounder guns manned by the battalion personnel. The total defences available for each beach were:-

| <b>Troops</b>         | <b>Arms</b>   | <b>Extra Armament</b>        |
|-----------------------|---------------|------------------------------|
| One Rifle company     | 9 Bren guns   | 2 18-pdr. guns               |
|                       | 3 2" mortars  | 1 Northover anti-tank gun    |
|                       | 2 A/Tk rifles | 1 or 2 Lyon lights           |
|                       | 2 Tommy guns  | 275 A/Tk mines               |
| One Sec of 3 Bren Gun | 3 Bren guns   | 250 shrapnel mines           |
| Carriers              | 1 A/Tk rifle  | 96 No. 36 hand grenades      |
| One Sec. 3" mortars   | 2-3" mortars  | 2 Vickers heavy machine-guns |
| Four signallers       |               | Molotov Cocktails            |
|                       |               | Veray pistols.               |

As can be seen, the beach defences covered a very wide stretch of the coast, and the estuaries of the Kelantan and several smaller rivers had to be watched. Of all the rivers in the area, only the mouth of the Kelantan river was protected by a boom. Many tracks from Siam west of the river also had to be patrolled. The protection of such a large area by one brigade involved wide dispersal. The force was quite inadequate to provide for any defence in depth.

On the Badang and Sabak beaches, the defence consisted of concrete pillboxes covering a continuous belt of barbed wire entanglement of forward double apron barbed wire fence, backed by a triple Dannert barbed wire fence, further reinforced at the rear by a double apron barbed wire fence. In all about 100 miles of Dannert steel barbed wire and 200 miles of barbed wire were used in this beach position. The concrete pillboxes were supported by reserve posts at the rear and the posts were all wired up except there were concealed gates for Bren gun carrier movements. Between the pillboxes were well made and sand bagged firing trenches. The pillboxes and trenches were all camouflaged from the air and the sea.

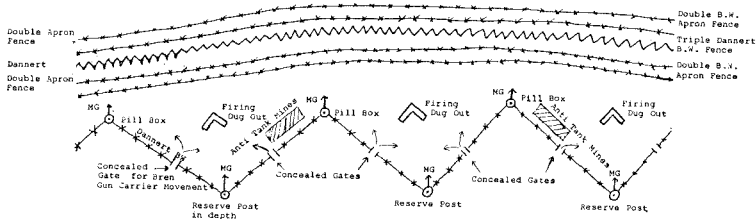
According to Captain R.B. Monteath, Quartermaster of the 3/17th Dogra Regt.:

"On December 1st, we were ordered to complete the beach defences by laying anti personnel and anti tank mines and closing all gaps in the

3/17TH DOGRA REGIMENT BEACH DEPENCES  
 KOTA BHARU, MALAYA, MONTGOMERY CAMP  
 NOVEMBER - DECEMBER 1941

SOUTH CHINA SEA

SHRAPNEL AND ANTI - PERSONNEL MINES



Copy to 8th Ind. Inf. Sde Hqs 1941  
 Copy to A, B, C, D. Coys Dogra Regt. 1941

C.O. Lt. Col. G.A. Preston  
 2/IC Major G.B.M. North  
 Adjutant: Major A. Ward  
 Bn. Int. Off: Jemadar Atma Singh

Sketch Map extracted from Major-General B.W. Keys private papers, shown to K.L. Chye during visit to Gen. Key's house in June 1984, "Waini", Sandwich, Kent.  
 Map drawn by K.L. Chye including information from Dogra Regt. Archives in England (1984).

wire. It took three whole days to lay the 4,000 mines and the dangerous task was completed without any mishap. The pillboxes, reserve posts, defence trenches, observation posts and communication posts were stocked with water, food rations, ammunition and medical kits".

The concrete pillboxes were built about 1000 yards apart, each holding one rifle section with 2 to 3 Bren guns, 15,000 rounds of rifle ammunition, 2 days rations and water, 100 hand grenades, Verey lights and first aid kits. One anti-personnel mine was attached to the three rows of barbed wire fences on the beach, at an interval of 10 yards. Thousands of anti personnel mines were laid. The Company positions, firing trenches and pillboxes and reserve posts were connected to Company headquarters by field telephone. Those to Sector Headquarters covering Right, Centre and Left were linked by telephone and wireless transmitters.

Considering the distances and depths involved, it was at once obvious that all beaches were grossly under-manned and under-gunned, and that unless brigade reserves and artillery support could reach the penetrated areas quickly, a break-through could be achieved at any point.

Nevertheless the Japanese regarded these beach defences as most formidable obstacles that would have to be overcome before they could achieve their objective of capturing the Pengkalan Chepa airfield.

## THE JAPANESE ORDER OF BATTLE

**T**akumi Detachment was made up of the following:-

- 23rd Infantry Brigade GOC : Major-General Hiroshi Takumi.
- 23rd Infantry HQ Staff were all aboard the ill-fated "Awagisan Maru", which was sunk by the Hudson bombers of the 1st Squadron of R.A.A.F. based at Pengkalan Chepa during the Japanese landing operation.
- 56th Infantry Regiment was commanded by Colonel Yoshio Nasu who landed with the second wave of troops.

The first wave was lead by Lieutenant-Colonel Nakamura CO of the 3rd Battalion. He was killed.



The second wave was led by Major Kasui with Major-General Takumi. Kasui was killed in the landing, while leading the 1st Battalion.

The third wave was the 2nd Infantry Battalion led by Colonel G. Matsuoka.

The following troops landed in the assault :

- One Company 18th Division Mountain Artillery of four 75 mm mountain guns
- One Company 12th Engineering Regiment.
- One independent Field Anti-aircraft battery.
- 12th Transport Regiment.
- Two independent Anti Tank Companies.
- One battery of heavy mortars.
- 22nd Recce Regiment.
- One airfield company and one independent wireless company.
- One field medical company.

The total strength of the Takumi Force that landed at Kota Bharu on the 8th December 1941 was 5,590. Its casualties were estimated at 2,500 including 500 dead.

The Japanese Naval Force was made up of the 3rd Destroyer Flotilla under the command of Rear Admiral Hashimoto on board the cruiser Sendai and four destroyers, two mine sweepers and one submarine chaser. The three military transports were the Awagisan Maru, the Ayatosan Maru and the Sakura Maru.

The Awagisan Maru became a blazing inferno after receiving more than ten direct hits. It was subsequently sunk by a Dutch submarine. The Ayatosan Maru was also set on fire after six direct hits but the fire was brought under control. The Sakura Maru was damaged by two direct hits.

## THE BATTLE ON THE BEACHES

The Japanese came ashore from the three transport ships in three waves at about 2 hour intervals using 12 large armoured landing craft similar to those they had used in their landings on the coast of China. The first



*Kuala Pa' Mat where the Japanese made their first landing.*



*One of the Pill Boxes defending Kota Bharu Aerodrome*

boat to land was one carrying the 11th Company of the 56th Regiment under Company Commander Wadar that landed on an islet in the mouth of the Sungei Pengkalan Chepa (Kuala Pa' Amat). This was at 1225 a.m. on December 8th 1941, a truly historic moment as this was the first attack on the territory of any of the nations that were aligned against Japan in the Pacific War. As has already been mentioned the Japanese replied with naval gun fire on the beaches when the 18-pounder gun of the 3/17th Dogras opened fire when the Japanese ships were sighted just before midnight on 7th December, so perhaps that is the time that ought to be compared with the time of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour.

The landing craft had been able to enter Kuala Pa' Amat as small arms fire had been found to be ineffective against the armour plating of the landing craft. But as soon as the troops disembarked they were immediately subjected to heavy machine-gun and rifle fire from the 3/17th Dogras manning pillboxes Nos. 12 and 13 on either side of the river mouth. The garrisons of these two pillboxes inflicted very heavy casualties on the invaders before being wiped out almost to a man. In fact in the report submitted to the Commander-in-Chief of the Japanese South Pacific Fleet and to the C-in-C 25th Army Division at 645 p.m. that day it was reported that the fighting strength of the 11th Company was only 20%. Contributing to this heavy loss was the sinking of one of the two landing craft carrying the men of this company before it reached the shore. Some of the men managed to swim ashore and catch up with the forces but others were carried away by the swift current and drowned.

Lieutenant-Colonel Matsuoka landed with his 3rd Battalion on the right flank of the Sabak beach. He ordered the commander of his 9th Company to attack the pillboxes on the left. The defence was light in this area and considerable progress was made. Four of Matsuoka's landing craft had been sunk and five could not effect landings. It had only been possible to contact three of them by 3 a.m. At 3.30 a.m. Matsuoka with a squad of his men from three of the landing craft crossed the Pengkalan Chepa river and advanced in the direction of the airfield. The 9th Company had been ordered to follow the 11th Company but its whereabouts were unknown due to it having been almost wiped out.

On the left flank the 1st Battalion under Major Kazui was pinned down by barbed wire and pillbox fire. The area that was encircled by barbed wire fencing was about 50 yards from the water's edge. In the faint

moonlight the Japanese could make out coconut trees in the background where trenches and pillboxes could also be seen here and there. There was intensive fire from rifles and machine-guns mixed with artillery shelling forcing the Japanese soldiers to take cover in the sand and preventing them from even being able to raise their heads. From these positions they gradually inched their way towards the barbed wire fencing and with suicidal efforts they managed to break through either by cutting the wire or burrowing under it. Almost all the men of the 1st Company who were still alive were injured. During the height of this desperate battle the second wave of forces landed and made an advance to the first line of the defending troops. The pillbox in this area was attacked and captured. They then crossed through the second line of barbed wire fencing but at this stage the Battalion Commander, Lieutenant Iwamoto, who was leading the troops in front was killed. The Adjutant, Lieutenant Ikeshima, then took over the command of the battalion and at about 7 a.m. crossed a creek and advanced through the second line of defence.

By this time the 3rd Battalion and the Regimental Commander, Colonel Nasu, had landed on an islet at Kuala Pa'Amat and were confronted with barbed wire fencing about 5 yards in front. Nasu ordered the 12th Company which had landed together with him to destroy the barbed wire fencing but as the Company Commander, Lieutenant Namanima, was advancing a few steps a land mine blew up and at the same time bursts of concentrated machine-gun fire were directed at them so no progress could be made with the destruction of the barbed wire fencing. Meanwhile Battalion HQ was also subjected to concentrated fire that killed or wounded several of the NCO's and soldiers. It was then discovered that the regimental headquarters was on an islet in the middle of the mouth of a river. Due to the ebbing tide the flow of the current was swift. The landing craft were set adrift and the river crossing became difficult. However, the sapper squad manned two landing craft and by plying them to and fro it was possible for Battalion HQ., the 12th Company and the Machine-gun squad to cross over to the North bank opposite the islet. Nasu, crossed at 4 a.m. at which time the defenders were not to be seen. Having met the third Battalion Commander, Lt. Col. Matsuoka who had crossed with only a few men, Nasu ordered the 12th Company and the Machine-gun squad to advance. Meanwhile the Detached Force Commander, Major-General Takumi, landed in the

second landing force with the 3rd Company whose commander, Lieutenant Kunitake, had been killed when a plane machine-gunned the deck of the transport ship on which he was standing. He was replaced by a Platoon Commander who was also killed in action immediately after landing. The 2nd Battalion landed simultaneously with the Second Landing Force and reached a position behind the 1st Battalion that had advanced past the wire entanglements but was meeting with stubborn attacks from the remaining pillboxes which did not seem to weaken. After the landing of the 2nd Battalion the killed and wounded had increased and the battalion Commander was wounded in the confused fighting so it became difficult to control the forces. Major-General Takumi upon landing temporarily took command of two companies and ordered their advance.

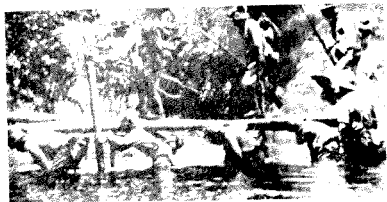
Around this time the 3rd Battalion crossed the second creek and after forcing the enemy to retreat succeeded in crossing the third creek again using landing craft. No enemy resistance was encountered so the 3rd Battalion advanced and after crossing paddy fields it succeeded in reaching the jetty in the last creek at about 9 a.m.

Following the forces that advanced to the jetty were the 12th Company, the main force of the Machine-Gun Company, Battalion H.Q. and others. Nasu had great anxiety about the situation of his troops but after dawn the enemy resistance was weak. Although it was the original plan to occupy the airfield by dawn, this was not successful. Furthermore the full control of the forces was difficult. It was also necessary to reconnoitre the land features leading to the airfield. It was therefore decided to postpone the attack until after night-fall to enable sufficient preparations to be made. Colonel Nasu knew that at this time a crucial battle was being fought on the right bank of the Pengkalan Chepa river and that there were heavy casualties. He also knew that Major General Takumi had advanced to the confluence of four rivers about half a mile from the airfield. Col. Nasu therefore went there and reported to Major General Takumi on the progress of the battle and the decisions he had made.

Meanwhile the situation had become clearer and by about 11 a.m., when Regimental HQ had received reports from the various units, it was discovered that the fighting strength of the regiment had been reduced by a half. The 12th Company that had landed with the Second Landing Force



*Japanese landing equipment*



*Japanese crossing a river on a log bridge*



*Japanese troops entering Kota Bharu town on 9 December 1941.*

and advanced with Regimental HQ then separated from the main force and proceeded about 1000 yards north west of the Pengkalan Chepa river. The men of this company reached the beach where they were furiously attacked from pillboxes which they immediately counterattacked and occupied. Later a piece of artillery that had been abandoned by the enemy was found and an order was given to the men of the regimental artillery who had jumped from the burning transport and swum to the beach to operate it and attack the retreating Indian troops.

Major Kazui, the commander of the 1st Battalion who had been severely wounded was carried forward in a stretcher. Major Nakamura who was in command of the 2nd Battalion also continued advancing with the forces lying in a stretcher. It was already day light by the time the second line of defence had been overcome. The advance then continued across a creek and by about 9 a.m. they were close to the airfield. However, the various units were in a completely confused state as each separately carried out attacks on the enemy in front.

The Badang and Sabak beaches, where the Japanese had landed, were the northernmost of those manned by the 3/17th Dogras and were about a mile and a half north-east of the Kota Bharu aerodrome. In rear of them was a maze of creeks, lagoons and swampy islands in which it was difficult to move reserves, while the beaches themselves were often no more than narrow spits of land. The Japanese no doubt knew this well for their soldiers were specially equipped for operations in this type of country.

After making their first narrow breach in the beach defences the Japanese began to widen it by fanning out along and in rear of the beaches. Some of them also got ashore on some islands in an estuary where, for the time being, they remained. Key, the Brigade Commander, decided that he must counter-attack the lost beach posts. The commander of the 3/17th Dogras was in no position to do so since he had already committed his reserve company in rear of the beaches to protect the aerodrome, so Key ordered up the 2nd Frontier Force Regiment, less one company, and a field battery from his reserves, keeping in hand the 1st Frontier Force Rifles in case the enemy should make another landing further south after dawn. The lost beaches were to be counter-attacked from both sides, but before these attacks could be put in dawn broke to show nine enemy ships steaming away leaving a number of motor

landing-craft behind them. This gave a feeling of greater optimism but this was later somewhat dispelled when our air reconnaissance located twenty enemy ships discharging into landing-craft under cover of the Perhentian Islands which are situated not far from the Kelantan coast.

Fierce fighting developed on the beaches, and losses on both sides were heavy. On the Sabak beach, in addition to No. 13 pillbox which was in Japanese hands, No. 12 pillbox had also been isolated. The situation had been restored by the company of the 2/12th Frontier Force which had been originally sent to this beach. This company then continued down the beach to No. 13 pillbox but was held up nearly two hundred and fifty yards short of its objective.

On the Badang beach, No. 15 pillbox which had been temporarily lost had been retaken by the reserve company of the 3rd Dogras which then moved down the beach towards No. 14 pillbox, that had been captured by the Japanese half an hour after initial landing. The company of the 2/12th Frontier Force also moved across country to co-ordinate its attack on No. 14 pillbox with the company of the 3/17th Dogras but this attack also failed. The Dogras stuck gamely to their task but the gap made by the Japanese at Kuala Pa'Amat remained open. A Japanese counter-attack regained No. 15 pillbox, and the company of the 2/12th Frontier Force was held up by swampy ground and the company commander was killed.

Brigadier Key realised the importance of closing the gap at the Kuala Pa'Amat before dusk when the Japanese were likely to commence landing fresh troops with a view to infiltrating into the airfield during the night. He therefore gave orders at 1030 a.m. on 8th December to the 2/12th Frontier Force Regiment to counter attack from the south and to the 1/13th Frontier Force Rifles to attack from the north. The 2/12th Frontier Force Regiment (less three companies – two already committed and one west of the Kelantan river) was to cross the Sungei Pengkalan Chepa from the direction of the airfield, clear up Pulau Panjang from the south and prevent hostile infiltration from that direction towards the airfield. The 1/13th Frontier Force Rifles (less one company sent to Pasir Mas and one company retained in the brigade reserve) was to counter-attack on the Badang beach, restore the situation there and drive south to Kuala Pa'Amat in order to link up with 2/12th Frontier Force Regiment.



The attacks went in during the afternoon but did not succeed in closing the gap. The elements were against them. Heavy and drenching rain which had fallen in the morning had made the tracks almost impassable for wheeled transport and had turned the water-ways into raging torrents. Several men were swept away and drowned. By dusk both attacks had been held up, but the Japanese, as they later admitted had suffered heavier casualties on this day than they suffered on any other day in their Malayan campaign.

At dusk both the battalions were at a standstill, the 2/12th Frontier Force Regiment were on the mainland south of Pulau Panjang and the 1/13th Frontier Force Rifles were at a point four hundred yards from No. 14 pillbox but separated from it by a deep creek.

## THE AIR ATTACK ON THE JAPANESE CONTINUES

Flying started again for the Kota Bharu aerodrome at 6 a.m. on 8th December when Flight-Lieutenant O'Brien took off on a reconnaissance flight. On his return he reported that one large transport was burning about three miles off shore, and that about 30 miles north-north-west from Kota Bharu there were two cruisers, four destroyers and two transports, including the vessel later known to have been a landing-craft carrier, and a small escort vessel. They were moving at high speed on the same course as those he had sighted on his earlier reconnaissance. This was taken as clear evidence that the enemy's sea force was now retiring. Nine Japanese bombers were sighted over this formation – the first enemy aircraft reported since the combat began. On returning to Kota Bharu the Hudson crew sighted a large number of small power-driven boats off shore and attacked them with machine-gun fire sinking about six.

Taking off at 6.45 a.m. Flight Lieutenant White had as his crew Pilot Officer Christensen and Sergeants Guthrie and Manners. They attacked motor torpedo boats heading out to sea by diving from 1,500 feet and opening up with the front guns when the boats were in range. White

released four bombs on one boat and scored a direct hit amidships. He then strafed barges with Christensen and Guthrie operating the side guns and Manners operating the rear turret guns. Whilst engaged on this attack three Mitsubishi bombers weaved overhead at 500 feet before breaking off and heading towards Gong Kedah.

By this time the Japanese had succeeded in capturing pillboxes nos. 12 and 13 that were the two strong points in the Dogras' defences and brigade headquarters was calling for further air support for attacks on small pockets of enemy troops who had begun to penetrate inland. A report was received that Japanese landing craft were being towed up the Kelantan River towards Kota Bharu Town that is 5 miles from the river mouth. Two R.A.F. Buffalo fighters took off from the Kota Bharu airfield to attack these boats. One of these aircraft was damaged by fire from the ground.

At 7.10 a.m. on 8th December Flight-Lieutenant Lockwood made a reconnaissance out to sea and discovered that all the Japanese ships had now retired except the transport which was on fire. Many light craft were close inshore and concentrations of Japanese troops together with horses were seen near Kuala Pa'Amat at the mouth of the Pengkalan Chepa River. These were bombed and machine-gunned by Flight-Lieutenant Lockwood's aircraft and another piloted by Flight-Lieutenant Smith and many Japanese were killed.

Earlier, in heavy rain, Vildebeestes from Kota Bharu and Kuantan had gone out to make torpedo attacks on the enemy ships reported by O'Brien. Their principal target was a cruiser which engaged in skilful evasion tactics and escaped; the aged torpedo-bombers returned to their bases without scoring any known hits. About his time, the crews of No. 1 Squadron saw Hudsons flown by their fellow Australians of No. 8 R.A.A.F. Squadron coming in to the attack.

At dawn on 8th December Squadron Leader Henderson, when acting as commander of No. 8 Squadron R.A.A.F. at Kuantan, had led off three flights of Hudsons which with eight Blenheims of No. 60 Squadron R.A.F. took off in heavy fog and flew direct to the scene of the Japanese landing. Approaching at 500 feet Henderson's flight found only the one transport ship that was on fire, but sighted many small power-driven boats and several armoured patrol boats. One of these Hudsons made a bombing attack on the single Japanese ship but, since it was now virtually

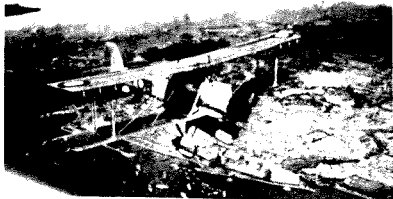
derelict, the bombs were wasted. The small boats were then attacked with bombs and gunfire.

Another of No. 8 Squadron's flights – the only one to do so – intercepted a broadcast message from the Kota Bharu operations room to divert all available aircraft to the much-more-important target – the Japanese main sea-going force now steaming away from the coast. A heavy rain storm prevented the pilots from finding these ships and the Hudsons returned to continue the attack on small boats still afloat close to the shore.

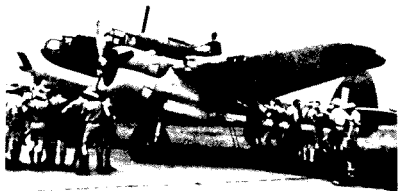
One pilot, Flight Lieutenant Spurgeon, made another bombing run over the burning transport and in doing so his aircraft was so severely damaged, either by an explosion in the ship or by the blast from the aircraft's own bombs, that he was forced to make a crash landing at Kota Bharu.

The leader of another of No. 8 Squadron's flights, Flight Lieutenant Bell, estimated that there were between 50 and 60 small Japanese boats in the vicinity of the burning ship. Many of these were armoured power-driven boats, each with a machine-gun mounted on a turret and others were landing craft in which the troops were not at first visible because they were taking cover under the boats' gunwales. Bell and his crew attacked two of the power-driven boats with gunfire but, when their Hudson was damaged by fire from one of them, they too were forced to return to Kota Bharu and make a crash landing.

Flying Officer Don Stumm, flying one of the Hudsons of No. 8 Squadron R.A.A.F. decided to attack landing barges and said to his rear gunner Dusty Hensel, "Righto, Dusty, there is your chance. Have a go". Dusty looked down and thought, "I couldn't shoot them." He thought he couldn't shoot those blokes down there. He had shot many a rabbit before the war, but this was different. But things were getting desperate and flak was coming up and holes were popping in the wings. They were fair game. Don Stumm said, "Righto, Dusty, have a go now." Being human beings down there it was hard to accept, but under the circumstances you have no alternative. If you don't get them, they will get you! The aircraft was at 400 feet and Dusty strafed at point blank range the barges being towed in the river – enemy troops jumped out of the barges as the attack was pressed home. When the Hudsons returned to base at Kuantan it had 48 bullet holes in the aircraft.



*Seven Vickers Vildebeestes Torpedo Bombers of No. 36 Squadron R.A.F. flew from Singapore to Gong Kedak on 5th December 1941.*



*A Beaufort No. 36 Squadron R.A.F. landed at Kota Bharu on December 8th 1941 after sighting Japanese ships and being attacked by six Japanese Zero fighters from an aircraft carrier.*



*Eight Bristol Blenheim Fighter Bombers of No. 60 Squadron R.A.F. based at Kuantan flew to Kota Bharu at dawn on 8th December 1941 and attacked the Japanese.*

Out of the eight Blenheims of No. 60 squadron that had taken off for Kuantan for Kota Bharu at dawn on 8th December one had engine trouble and had to return to Kuantan. Of the seven that went on to attack the landing force, two were shot down by anti-aircraft fire, the pilot of one being Squadron Leader Westrop-Bennett R.A.F. and the pilot of the other being Flight-Lieutenant Bowden R.A.F.

Bowden's aircraft ditched in the sea and Bowden supported himself on the tail wheel which had apparently broken off. Squadron Leader Westrop-Bennett and all the other crew members of these two aircraft were either killed on impact or too badly injured to be rescued. Bowden was picked up by a Japanese destroyer and became a prisoner of war. Two other Blenheims out of the seven that took part in the raid on the Japanese shipping off Kota Bharu were too badly damaged ever to fly again.

The last operational flight that No. 1 Squadron made from Kota Bharu was the third sortie flown by Flight Lieutenant Diamond at 3.30 p.m. on 8th December. His mission was to locate and destroy the railway bridge across the Golok River that separates Siam from Malaya. There had been a report of Japanese penetration by rail and Diamond bombed the bridge and damaged the railway line. For carrying out two determined night attacks on the enemy force landing at Kota Bharu, being responsible for the destruction of a 10,000 tons transport ship and for damaging the railway line, Flight Lieutenant Diamond was later awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Flight Lieutenant P.D.F. Mitchell R.A.F. was one of the pilots who flew six new Beaufort aircraft from Australia to Singapore where they arrived at 2 p.m. on 5th December 1941 to join No. 100 Squadron R.A.F. Two days later on 7th December Mitchell carried out an unsuccessful shipping search. Next day, after the start of hostilities, the Beaufort found a force of enemy ships about 30 miles out from Singora and Pattani and, while taking photographs at 20,000 feet, the Beaufort was attacked by six Japanese Zero fighters from an aircraft carrier. After the first pass, the port engine was hit and the Beaufort rolled over on its back and started to spin. The aircraft pulled out at 10,000 feet and went into a cloud. Emerging from the cloud after about 10 minutes the pilot saw no signs of the Zeros and continued back to base. During the fight the Beaufort's rear gunner was injured but claims to have shot down a Zero. Not only was this the first wartime operational flight by an Australian-built aircraft, but it was also the first clash between an Australian-built aircraft and Japanese fighters.

When Mitchell reached Kota Bharu the aerodrome was being strafed by Japanese aircraft but he was able to land the Beaufort between raids. It had been so badly damaged by gunfire from the Japanese fighters that it had to be destroyed after landing. The photographs which had been taken by the Beaufort were immediately flown to Singapore by one of the R.A.F. Buffaloes. They confirmed the presence of the main enemy convoy off Singora and also showed that there were 60 Japanese aircraft, mainly fighters, on the Singora aerodrome.

Shortly before midday brigade headquarters reported that three enemy transports were disembarking troops at the mouth of the Kelantan River. Four Hudsons and three Vildebeestes were sent out to attack. Several armoured patrol boats were seen and attacked but there was no sign of any fresh Japanese landing. Two of the Hudsons were damaged by fire from the Japanese boats. Later it was learned that the call for an air attack had been prompted by wrong information.

## COMPARATIVE PERFORMANCE OF JAPANESE AND DEFENDING AIRCRAFT FIGHTERS

| Aircraft                             | Maximum Range  | Maximum Speed            | Gun Amount              | Bomb Load |
|--------------------------------------|--|--------------------------|-------------------------|-----------|
| Japanese Navy Fighter Mark II Crew 1 | 885 miles at 166 m.p.h. (1940 miles with drop tanks) | 335 m.p.h. at 18,500 ft. | 2 x 7.7 mm<br>2 x 20 mm | —         |
| Japanese Army 97 Crew 1              | 540 miles at 135 m.p.h.                              | 250 m.p.h. at 13,000 ft. | 2 x 7.7 mm              | —         |
| Buffalo Crew 1                       | 759 miles at 180 m.p.h.                              | 295 m.p.h. at 18,500 ft. | 4 x .50 in              | —         |

## COMPARATIVE PERFORMANCE OF JAPANESE AND DEFENDING AIRCRAFT BOMBERS

|                                    |   |                          |  |                                |
|------------------------------------|---|--------------------------|--|--------------------------------|
| Japanese Army 97 Mark III (Crew 7) | 1635 miles at 150 m.p.h.                                | 294 m.p.h. at 15,500 ft. | 5 x 7.7 mm<br>1 x 12.7 mm<br>1 x 20 mm | 2200 lbs                       |
| Japanese Navy I (Crew 7)           | 3075 miles at 145 m.p.h.                                | 283 m.p.h. at 13,800 ft  | 5 x 7.7 mm<br>2 x 20 mm                | 220 lbs                        |
| Lockheed Hudson Mark 2 (Crew 2)    | 1960 miles at 195 m.p.h.                                | 246 m.p.h. at 7,900 ft   | 4 brownings<br>3 x .303 in             | 4 x 250 lbs. bombs             |
| Vickers Vildebeeste (Crew 2 or 3)  | 970 miles at 95 m.p.h.                                  | 135 m.p.h. at 5,000 ft.  | 2 x .303 in                            | 1 torpedo or 1 x 500 lbs. bomb |
| Catalina flying boat (Crew 9)      | 1395 miles at 123 m.p.h. with bombs, 2950 miles without | 177 m.p.h. at 5,000 ft.  | 2 x .303 in<br>2 x .50 in              | 4 x 500 lbs. bombs             |
| Blenheim Mark IV                   | 1457 miles at 170 m.p.h.                                | 266 m.p.h. at 11,800 ft. | 5 x .303 in                            | 1457 lbs                       |

Relative strength of the Japanese and the British, Australian and New Zealand Airforces in Malaya on 7th December 1941.

### Japanese

|                       |       |
|-----------------------|-------|
| Fighter Planes        | - 100 |
| Bombers               | - 130 |
| Reconnaissance planes | - 100 |

**British, Australian and New Zealand Aircraft**

|                  |                           |
|------------------|---------------------------|
| Hudson bombers   | 24 (RAAF)                 |
| Buffalo fighters | 60 (32 RNZAF and 29 RAAF) |
| Blenheim bombers | 47 (RAF)                  |
| Catalinas        | 3 (RAF)                   |

Total 158 aircraft in service

15 blenheims, 52 Buffaloes, 7 Hudsons, 12 Vildebeestes and 2 Catalinas, a total of 88 aircraft, were held in reserve.

## ATTACKS BY THE JAPANESE AIR FORCE

At about 7.30 a.m. on 8th December the Japanese air forces began intensive attacks in order to eliminate, in the shortest possible time, all air opposition in northern Malaya. Operating at first from forward airfields specially prepared in southern Indo-China and Phuquok Island and, later in the day, from the airfields at Singora and Patani, they carried out a series of damaging raids against the British and Australian air forces. Their aim was to destroy aircraft on the ground and then put the airfields and buildings temporarily out of action so as to deny them to any aircraft which were already airborne or had escaped from the ground attacks. They used light bombs so as to avoid causing serious damage to the airfield surfaces which they hoped they would soon be using themselves. From the outset they met with success, for their initial attacks took place at the very moment when most of the bomber aircraft were refuelling after their early morning operations against the landings at Kota Bharu.

They were also notably successful in arriving over the airfields while defending craft were descending or taking off. This may perhaps have been due to the barber on the station at Kota Bharu who was in fact a major in the Japanese army. The airmen had their hair cut by him and would talk about everything that was going on and he was the one who was telling the Japanese what was happening to the aircraft and when they were landing and taking off.



The performance of the enemy aircraft, and the accuracy of the bombing, came "as an unpleasant surprise" to Malaya Command, despite Intelligence reports of the performance of the Zero fighters which had been sent to the Far Eastern Air Command and headquarters. It appeared that the fighters had been given increased range by auxiliary fuel tanks, torpedo-shaped and made of aluminum, which could be jettisoned when their contents had been used.

The eight strafing raids on Kota Bharu on 8th December were carried out by the 11th and 64th Air Regiments of the Japanese Army Air Force's 3rd Air Division. Both regiments were among the Japanese Army's best fighter units and the 64th was led by a famous officer in the Japanese Army Air Force, Lieutenant Colonel Tateo Kato, who later lost his life in the Bay of Bengal. The 3rd Air Division had a strength of about 152 fighters.

Japanese Navy Zeros and Army Type-97 fighters arrived over the Kota Bharu aerodrome in formations of from five to nine aircraft each, and, "peeling off" at between 5,000 and 7,000 feet, dived recklessly to fire their guns from almost tree-top level. The Japanese pilots left the defenders of the airfield in no doubt as to their skill in handling their aircraft. The Australian airmen had been led to believe that the Japanese pilots flew in obsolescent aircraft with only about half the performance of the British aircraft and that they were incapable of blind flying at night. It therefore came as a rude surprise when they discovered that the Japanese had aircraft with much better performance than they had ever imagined and that they did fly at night.

Though the Australian casualties were few the Japanese air attacks greatly hampered the work of the maintenance crews and the aircraft landing and taking off. In spite of this the surviving Hudsons continued their sorties.

The airfields at Gong Kedak and Machang were also attacked by Japanese aircraft during the day. At Machang one company of the Mysore Infantry was caught on the move and suffered thirty five casualties.

At the end of the first day the strength of the defending airforces had been reduced by 50% and thereafter the Japanese had total air supremacy for the rest of the Malayan campaign.

## CONFUSION ON THE GROUND AND THE NEED FOR INFORMATION

The situation on the ground had now become confused but it was clear to the defenders that though the enemy's landing operations had been very costly to them they had, in fact, succeeded. Brigadier Key's Indian troops, though fighting gallantly, were unable to contain the considerable Japanese force that had succeeded in crossing the beaches and penetrating into the maze of creeks, lagoons and swampy islands.

Lt.-General Percival, the G.O.C. Malaya, at his headquarters in Singapore had been kept informed of the fighting in Kelantan and in his own words: "One of the first decisions which the A.O.C., Air Vice-Marshal Pulford, and I had to take jointly was how best to use our air force. The Hudsons of No. 1 Squadron Royal Australian Air Force, based on the Kota Bharu aerodrome, were already attacking the Japanese ships and landing-craft off that coast, and the Vickers-Vildebeeste torpedo-bombers, operating from east coast aerodromes, had joined in the attack. One ship, which is believed to have carried tanks, was set on fire and sunk. This was claimed by both the air force and the gunners. Perhaps they both had a finger in the pie. There were other bomber aircraft on the Kedah and Province Wellesley aerodromes and we decided to send these across the mountains to attack the enemy shipping off Kota Bharu at dawn. When they got there they couldn't find the enemy ships - they had probably withdrawn by then - so went on to Pattani in South Siam

where they were met by enemy fighters. Some bombs were dropped on enemy ships but probably without result. On return to their aerodromes some of our aircraft were attacked by Japanese bombers and fighters and considerable losses were sustained. The rapidity with which the Japanese got their air attacks going against our aerodromes was quite remarkable. Practically all the aerodromes in Kelantan, Kedah, Province Wellesley, and Penang, were attacked on that day and in most cases the bombers were escorted by fighters. There is little doubt that these fighters were operating from the aerodromes in South Siam which had been got ready for their use and where stocks of fuel and other necessaries had already been accumulated. To allay suspicion the grass was allowed to grow on

the Patani aerodrome right up to the last minute, but reports received by us, unfortunately just too late, showed that it was all ready for the reception of the Japanese aircraft, with drums of petrol hidden under the trees, the day before the invasion took place.

These reports came from T.W.T. (Bill) Bangs, later known as Dato' Haji Mohamed Yusof Bangs, a rubber planter in Ulu Kelantan who had been a member of the Kelantan Volunteers but later was commissioned into the Pahang Volunteers. He was appointed leader of the Frontier Patrol on the Siamese border with a headquarters at Batu Melintang. In November 1941 Brigadier Key had asked him if he would be willing to go into Siam as far as Haad Yai, Singora (Songkhla), Pattani, Bandnara (Narathiwat) and other areas and find out what preparations had been made by the Siamese Government under its Prime Minister, Marshall Phibul Songkhram to resist a Japanese invasion. Bangs describes what followed:-

"I found that the majority of those "spies" who had been sent into Siam from the West Coast had usually described themselves as Newspaper correspondents and I felt that a Newspaper correspondent would be suspected and watched. I therefore, rather naively thought that I would enter Siam as a missionary of the Seventh Day Adventists and as it was (as I thought) extremely unlikely that any one would have heard of that vague sect. Fortunately, as it turned out, I had been to Tengku Seri Akar DiRaja - a son of the late Raja of Pattani - who owned Mengkebang Estate in Kuala Krai and had rubber estates in Pattani and I obtained a letter from him to visit and report on his estates."

"I left Rantau Panjang Railway Station on the Siam/Kelantan Border and alighted at Yala Station and went to the then only hotel and registered myself as a Minister of the Seventh Day Adventist Mission. Just before lunch a Batak from Sumatra introduced himself as the Seventh Day Adventist Minister in Yala and invited me to attend and take the service that evening in the Yala Mission Hall. This was obviously a great shock to me as I had not the faintest idea or knowledge of Seventh Day Adventists. However, I agreed to meet the Minister at 6.00 p.m. that evening."

"As soon as the Minister had left I attempted to hire a car to take me to Pattani where I would stay the night, but in those days no hired cars were available but after much difficulty and expense I managed to charter

a mosquito bus and left Yala for Pattani at 4.30 p.m. and decided not to return to Yala and the Seventh Day Adventists. I then decided that it would be much better for me to become a Visiting Agent for rubber estates, in which part I would know all the answers."

"Whilst travelling in Southern Siam, I had found that the small aircraft landing grounds, which the Siamese had built some years previously but had allowed to return to belukar (undergrowth), had all been cleaned up and were ready for use, and drums of aviation spirit had been dumped at the edge of each airfield for use of aircraft."

"One night I met two Malays who were agents of mine, and who had previously worked in the Japanese Iron Mine at Temangan in Kelantan. They informed me that the previous night one of the Japanese had informed them whilst under the influence of alcohol that the Japanese would land in Singora, Pattani and Kota Bharu on the night of the 7th/8th December. With this news and the information that I had obtained about the airfields and other matters I decided to return to Kelantan as soon as possible and I left Bandnara by a river launch at 8.00 a.m. on the 7th December."

"The launch took about 5 hours to reach Tabar near the mouth of the Sungei Golok, stopping at a vast number of landing stages to embark and disembark passengers and goods. On reaching Tabar I called at the Siamese Immigration/Customs Office but was informed that the Immigration Officer was away and I was detained in the Police Station as the Immigration Clerk pretended that my passport was not in order. I said that I would wait in a hotel but the police would not allow this. I then became very British and insisted on seeing Nai Amphoor (equivalent to a Malayan District Officer) who finally agreed I could stay in the hotel until the passport difficulties had been cleared up. It crossed my mind that in all probability the Temangan Japanese had advised the Siamese to hold me on some pretext or other and, if I did not want to be interned or treated as a spy, I should get out of the country as soon as possible."

"As I was allowed to proceed to the hotel by myself as soon as I came to some belukar and overgrown coconuts I ran quickly to the bank of the Sungei Golok, which was about half a mile away, expecting at any minute that Siamese Police would follow me. I reached the river where I found a Malay with a dugout and asked him to take me across the river to Pengkalan Kubor on the Kelantan side. This he agreed to do for \$1.00.

However, he was very slow in getting his boat ready and told me that there was no hurry as the local bus to Tumpat did not leave Pengkalan Chepa for another hour. To me there was every need to haste as I expected the Siamese Police would be coming to look for me but I could hardly explain this to the boatman who lived in Siamese Territory and would be unlikely to take me across if he knew I was wanted by the Siamese Police."

"I was eventually taken across the river and no Police came down to look for me. At Pengkalan Kubor I was fortunate enough to get an old "T" model Ford to take me to Tumpat. At that time there was no real road from Pengkalan Kubor to Tumpat but cars and mosquito buses ran through coconuts along the beach and over an irrigation bund and finally reached Tumpat."

"Seeing the enormous waves from the China Sea breaking on the beach during my journey from Pengkalan Kubor to Tumpat, I did not think that there could be any possibility of a landing that night, but if an attempt was made an enormous amount of Japanese would be drowned."

"From Tumpat I managed to get a hired car to Palekhang and crossed the ferry to Kota Bharu where I immediately went to report to Brigadier Key. I must admit that when I gave my views to Brigadier Key I told him that I considered that it was impossible for the Japanese to make a landing that night. It was only a few hours later when I heard the gun fire that I realised how wrong I had been."

Now that the Japanese had landed it was again one of the most urgent requirements to find out as soon as possible just what the enemy was doing. So air reconnaissances were sent to Singora and Patani at dawn. They reported that the enemy had landed at both those places and that the aerodromes were already in use.

## THE JAPANESE ATTACK AND CAPTURE THE KOTA BHARU AIRFIELD

At about 3 p.m. on the 8th. Colonel Nasu, the commander of the Japanese 56th Regiment, after the completion of the reconnoitring operations of enemy positions in the neighbourhood of the airfield, ordered his forces to commence its capture. Thus, the 2nd and 3rd Battalions at about 4.30 p.m. having crossed the river at the jetty secretly advanced and commenced their deployment. The Regimental HQ. followed. While both the Battalions were preparing to attack at about 9 p.m., suddenly fires started at the airfield which made the surroundings light up. At this moment the 6th and 7th Companies were preparing to attack the airfield on the left flank of the front line. At 9.30 p.m. they began their attack and in torrential rains they penetrated the east side of the airfield. The 3rd Battalion soon advanced and penetrated the west side of the airfield. The fires had been started by the defenders whilst retreating. Meantime, Major-General Takumi had commenced to advance at about 7 p.m. but was impeded by the slow moving groups of injured men that were being carried on stretchers or were hopping along on crutches. Moreover in the heavy rain and pitch darkness the forces had to move forward searching step by step and linked together by means of ropes.

Major-General Takumi had only just arrived at Regimental HQ., when suddenly the violent noise of rifle fire was heard and it was presently known that front line companies had penetrated the airfield. Its occupation was completed by midnight. There they captured planes, anti-aircraft guns, anti-tank guns, armoured cars, several thousand rounds of ammunition and about 60 torpedoes. They also took approximately a hundred prisoners.

No. 1 Squadron R.A.A.F. did not wait for the Japanese attack on the airfield at 9.30 p.m. on 8th December. About midday, while the Hudsons were still taking off to attack enemy landing craft, those on the airfield became aware of Japanese small arms fire coming, they suspected, from a "pocket" of snipers believed to have penetrated to a point close to the

airfield perimeter which made movement in the barracks and dispersal areas dangerous. By 4 p.m. this fire had increased and it was reported that Japanese ground troops had reached a point within 200 yards of the radio transmitting station. An hour later, in the eighth and final Japanese air attack of the day, two Hudsons were severely damaged on the ground. Aircrews and ground staff had now been toiling and fighting without a break for more than 14 hours. From a water-logged single runway aircraft had been taking off and landing almost continuously. But the Japanese had established constant fighter patrols over Kota Bharu making it most hazardous for the Hudsons without fighter support to leave the ground.

The anti-aircraft detachment of the Hong Kong and Singapore Royal Artillery defending the aerodrome was in action almost continuously throughout the day, and splendidly it acquitted itself, but the defence was too weak to beat off the attack. Some of our aircraft were destroyed while others remained earthbound.

## THE EVACUATION OF THE KOTA BHARU AIRFIELD

Such was the strain of battle that the No. 1 Hudson squadron now had only five airworthy aircraft. Though two others required only one wheel each to make them serviceable, they were in an exposed position and repeated attempts to replace the damaged wheels were prevented by enemy fighter attacks and by Japanese ground fire.

There was now considerable confusion at station headquarters where, in the temporary absence of Wing Commander Noble from the operations room, an order was received from Air Headquarters in Singapore that all serviceable aircraft were to be flown to Kuantan and that, after demolitions, the airfield was to be evacuated. This order was given in response to a report from Kota Bharu (sent apparently without the station commander's knowledge) that the airfield was being attacked. Noble returned to the operations room to find it deserted and the other station buildings blazing – the order from Singapore had been obeyed without his authority and all too precipitately. At his own headquarters

some distance away, Brigadier Key also received the report that the airfield was under attack. He immediately went to investigate and, with Noble, went forward to the perimeter where he questioned some of the Indian troops and was told that there was no sign of the enemy. In all the circumstances Noble saw no choice but to proceed with the evacuation, a course in which Key assented.

When Davis first heard of the evacuation order he questioned the authority for it but, as a precaution, instructed his aircrews and ground staff to prepare for a special movement, the order for which had been planned in detail some months earlier for the emergency. The crew of each aircraft received boxes of consumable stores and spares sufficient for independent operations for from four to six weeks, and then stood by for further orders. Meanwhile Davis was leading a party round the airfield to destroy aircraft that could not be flown off. They demolished two of their Hudsons and one from No. 8 Squadron which had made a crash landing earlier in the day. It was now considered unwise for members of the squadron to risk crossing to the barracks area to gather personal kit, but by now 700 pounds of equipment had been loaded into each of the five remaining serviceable Hudsons.

Immediately Davis had confirmed the evacuation order he instructed his crews to take off for Kuantan. Flight Lieutenant Douglas undertook the risky task of taking off an aircraft so damaged that the wing flaps would not remain in the "up" position and the undercarriage would not retract. He tied the flaps into position with wire and then, gathering nine airmen as he taxied down the runway, he took off and flew, with wheels down, all the way to Kuantan where he made a safe landing at nightfall.

The Hudson that Flight Lieutenant Diamond normally flew was one of those too badly damaged to fly again. Diamond therefore, had to go out by train and while he was waiting he suddenly realised that all he possessed were the clothes what he stood up in so he decided to go to his room to collect some of his belongings. When he got to the hut, which was among the coconut palms, he saw three or four Indian soldiers one of whom had an old wire coat hanger on his belt with numerous ears on it. It seemed that every time he killed a Japanese he would cut off an ear and wire it to his belt. He had lots of them. Diamond went quickly to his room but in the next room he saw Japanese and Indians fighting hand to hand.



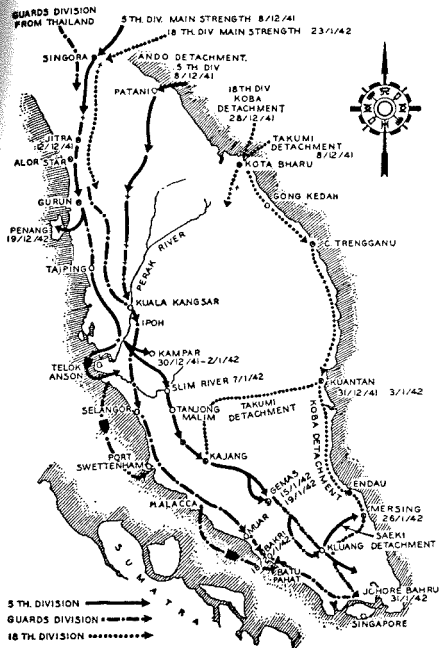
He quickly decided that this was no place for him. Diamond beat a hasty retreat to rejoin those waiting for the trucks to take them to the railway station at Kuala Krai.

The Hudson which Flight Lieutenant O'Brien had been flying during the night had been badly damaged and he was ordered to fly another Hudson to Kuantan. This aircraft had also been damaged by aircraft fire during the night's operations and when starting the engines for take-off O'Brien found that he was having difficulty with one of the motors. Someone yelled and looking out of the port window he noticed about 12 Japanese Zero fighters peeling off to strafe the aerodrome. He yelled to his crew and passengers to jump out and take cover, but before they could do that, the Zeros had made their first run. O'Brien and his crew and passengers were very lucky. The Zeros had filled the Hudsons either side of them full of holes but left O'Brien's aircraft unscathed. The men left the aircraft, took cover and watched as Zero strafed the aerodrome at will. The anti-aircraft defences at Kota Bharu, originally two 3.7 inch guns had already been put out of action. As soon as the Zeros ceased their attack the men got back in the Hudson which, fortunately, had not received any further damage and, having started the motors, O'Brien took off for Kuantan.

It proved to be a hair-raising take off, with one motor not giving full power and O'Brien having to weave in and out between crashed aircraft. They became airborne and, just above the tops of the trees, O'Brien heard his rear gunner fire a burst from his turret to knock a couple of Japanese snipers out of palm trees alongside the aerodrome.

Shortly afterwards O'Brien sighted six Zero fighters cruising around about 30 miles south of Kota Bharu, obviously waiting to intercept evacuating aircraft. All the RAAF Hudsons managed to give the Zeros the slip. O'Brien flew his aircraft along the beach at a height of about ten feet with the palm trees, 50 to 60 feet high, on the land side hiding the aircraft. He landed safely at Kuantan just before dark.

As the station was still occupied by ground units the order given by Air Headquarters Far East that the last Hudson to take off should bomb the airfield was out of the question. Moreover the aircraft were required to carry airmen and essential stores so they could not be weighted down with bombs. Davis, having watched his Hudsons take off, then set to work to supervise the evacuation of the remaining members of the squadron in the



The Malayan campaign of the 25th Army.

trucks that Noble had procured locally. Led by Noble himself, who had brought the situation on the station under control, the remaining air force personnel then drove through Kota Bharu town and on 44 miles to Kuala Krai, the nearest railway station in operation, where all entrained for Singapore.

## THE WITHDRAWAL OF THE 8TH INDIAN BRIGADE

Brigadier Key continues the account that he gave Mr. Chye Kooi Loong in 1984:

"The Japanese had Zero fighters and low-flying bombers strafing our airfield throughout the day, and they must have been flown from the newly-captured Siamese airfields of Singora and Pattani. In the late afternoon our planes were ordered to fly south for Singapore, and we were without any aerial support at all, and the Japs had the full command of the air."

"By evening of 8th December 1941, we had lost half of our air strength and by 8 p.m. our air arm had ceased to function on the Kelantan front. The Japs were around the fringes of Pengkalan Chepa, and I ordered the 73rd Field Battery at Montgomery Camp to fire directly on the air field to destroy oil tanks and stores. There was not much time for us and we wanted to deny the enemy the use of our large stocks of oil and stores."

"I remember very vividly it was a cold, dark night, and I would like to bring out the story of the hero of Kota Bharu. With 12 Indians gunners Lieutenant John Close of the Royal Regiment of Artillery fired their battery of mountain guns until they were red hot. This gallant group formed the rearguard to cover our withdrawal from Montgomery Camp, the headquarters of my 8th Indian Brigade and the Pengkalan Chepa airfield. The Japanese were everywhere and most of his men got away in the dark, but Lieutenant Close was captured. For his brave action in Kota Bharu, he was awarded the M.C. (Military Cross) but unfortunately he died while working on the Death Railway of Siam. This hero now lies

buried in the Commonwealth War Cemetery at Kanchanaburi in South Thailand."

"We then withdrew in pouring rain to a line from Kubang Krian to Kampong Kedai Lalat and from Kedai Mulong to Peringat. The Japs attacked heavily with fresh troops, and some of my men on the right flank, the 2/12th Frontier Force Regiment under Lieutenant Colonel Cumming, who later won a V.C. (Victoria Cross the highest British award for valour) in Kuantan, were cut off and we were forced to drop back to Peringat-Kerteh and Melor line on the 9th December 1941."

At 7.00 p.m., more hostile ships were reported off the Sabak beach. The general situation may be summed up from the reports received at the brigade headquarters between 7.00 p.m. and 8.00 p.m. of that day. Increased Japanese activity was reported across the Sungei Pengkalan Chepa and to the north-east of the airfield. The headquarters company and the company of the 1/13th Frontier Force Rifles which had returned from Badang and the company which had returned from Pasir Mas were sent to reinforce the Hyderabad State Infantry in the airfield area. Moreover the 21st Indian Mountain Battery was ordered to rejoin the 73rd Field Battery in Montgomery Camp, south of the aerodrome.

On the Badang beach Japanese were infiltrating between the beach posts and it was doubtful if the company sited there could hold out until dawn. No reports were obtained from Sabak beach owing to the disruption of telephone lines. On the 2/10th Baluch front there was no activity except the bombing of Gong Kedah airfields.

In view of these reports and the abandonment of the Kota Bharu airfield Brigadier Key realised the futility of continuing fighting in the swamps especially as there was a likelihood that the Japanese might land strong reinforcements further down the coast and cut his lines of communication. He therefore telephoned his divisional headquarters at Raub where, fortunately, he found Heath in consultation with Barstow, the divisional commander. He was given permission to withdraw his troops from the beaches if he found it necessary to do so. He decided to await the latest reports from his forward troops and make his decision accordingly. These, when they arrived, were not encouraging. In the area of the Badang and Sabak beaches the situation was very confused and communications scarce. Visibility was almost nil. The Japanese were said to be infiltrating between and behind the forward troops. From farther

south came reports of smoke to seaward from behind the Perhentian Islands which might indicate a new landing in preparation. There were no longer any aircraft available to carry out reconnaissances or to make attacks if enemy ships were seen. In these circumstances Key decided to withdraw from the Sabak and Badang beaches and from the Kota Bharu aerodrome and to take up a position covering Kota Bharu town with his left on the Kelantan River. He therefore issued orders for a withdrawal to the general line Kedai Lalat – Sungei Raja Gali, a position covering Kota Bharu town, with the left based on the Kelantan river.

## THE NEW LINE OF DEFENCE COVERING KOTA BHARU TOWN

**On the right:** from Kedai Lalat to the cross-roads one mile east of the second mile-stone on the airfield to Kota Bharu road: Two companies of the 2/12th Frontier Force Regiment and two companies of the 3/17th Dogras (from Sabak beach and creek area).

**In the centre:** up to the Sungei Pengkalan Chepa: The 1st Hyderabad State Infantry, the 1/13th Frontier Force Rifles less one company, Headquarters Company of the 2/12th Frontier Force Regiment and the 3/17th Dogras.

**On the left:** up to and inclusive of the Sungei Raja Gali beach: one company of the 1/13th Frontier Force Rifles, one company of the 2/12th Frontier Force Regiment and one company of the 3/17th Dogras (all from Badang).

The withdrawal began at 9.00 p.m. The dark night, the swampy nature of the ground, heavy rain and hostile action, all these combined to make the operation extremely hazardous, difficult and confused. Also shortly after 9 p.m., the petrol dump at the Kota Bharu air-field was set on fire by 73rd Field Battery. This lit up the whole area, and the Japanese, who had by now penetrated the aerodrome, opened heavy fire. The commanding Officer and the adjutant of 1 Hyderabad State Infantry were killed and the battalion disintegrated. The companies of the 2/12th Frontier Force Regiment and the 1/13th Frontier Force Rifles had some

difficulty in extricating themselves, but eventually they fell back to their allotted positions near the two and a half milestone. Moreover, the bridge across the creek at Sabak had been destroyed, and the Japanese were infiltrating down both the banks. These factors made the task of withdrawal in this area a formidable one, the troops experiencing the greatest difficulty in crossing the creek. Consequently the withdrawal could not be completed until after dawn on the 9th. Even so, many men were swept away in the current and others lost touch with the main body.

On the Badang beach the company commander of the 3/17th Dogras was out of touch with the 1/13th Frontier Force Rifles which had penetrated to the creek south of No. 14 pillbox. He was also not in telephonic communication with his own company posts. However, this company of the 3/17th Dogras succeeded in withdrawing to the Sungei Raja Gali bridge by 5 a.m. on 9th December along with part of the company of the 2/12th Frontier Force Regiment originally sent as reinforcements. The company of the 1/13th Frontier Force Rifles and its commanding officer could not be located and were, therefore, unaware of the withdrawal.

On the Kemasin beach (south of Sabak beach) the company of the 3/17th Dogras which had not been attacked, withdrew during the night via Kedai Lalat and Peringat.

To meet this attack in Kelantan Lt.-General Percival decided to use one battalion of the Command Reserve. Accordingly at about 11.30 a.m. on the eighth, the 4/19th Hyderabad, which was then in the Negeri Sembilan area were placed under orders of the 3rd Indian Corps and immediately moved up by rail to Kelantan.

As the first day of war drew to a close Lt.-General Percival commented "We have not been surprised, but it cannot be said that things have gone in our favour. The Japanese have got a footing in Kelantan and have landed large forces unopposed at Singora and Pattani. Worse than that they have struck damaging blows at our air force which has suffered considerable losses. It is clear that the fight will be grim and arduous, but we are all determined to give of our best to the limit of our resources."

## THE SUCCESS OF THE JAPANESE TAKUMI DETACHMENT RECEIVES RECOGNITION

The first day of the war had been a truly memorable one for the Japanese Takumi Force. On the following day, 9th December, the Japanese Minister of War reported to the Emperor that the Commander-in-Chief of the South Area Armed Forces, Count Terauchi, had awarded the following citation to the Takumi Detached Corps and the Co-operating Force for capturing the Kota Bharu airfield, the important British air base, quickly, gallantly and independently in the opening battle of the Malaya Operation:

"Citation No: 1 December 9th, 1941:

Your forces, irrespective of very strong enemy sea and air resistance, successfully landed and penetrated the impregnable areas around Kota Bharu, without thought of losses and continued in the capturing of the important enemy airfield thus rendering viable the other landings throughout Malaya. Herewith, the presentation of this citation which is notified to all the Armed Forces.

Count Terauchi Guichi  
C-in-C South Pacific Area Armed Forces"

This citation was the first one proclaimed by the South Pacific Armed Forces. It was originally sent by cable and was followed by its presentation to Major-General Takumi by Chief-Adjutant, Colonel Kikuchi, who was flown to Kota Bharu airfield on the morning of December 13th.



*Field Marshall Count Terauchi,  
Commander-in-Chief of Japan's Southern  
Armies.*



*Lt. Gen. Tomoyuki Yamashita  
Commander-in-Chief Japanese 25th Army*



*Colonel Masanobu Tsuji  
Staff Officer In Charge Of Operations  
25th Japanese Army*



## THE JAPANESE LOSSES:

However, the success of the Japanese landing had not been without extremely heavy losses. According to the official report issued by the Japanese War Office the Japanese losses during the landing alone were as follows:

1. Losses of landing craft (Number in brackets indicates the number participating in the landing):  
Sunk -  
Large size 2(3)  
Medium size 6(24)  
Small size 7(21)  
Damaged - Armoured craft 1(1)  
Medium size 3(24)  
Small size 7(21)
2. Losses of the infantry regiment:  
Killed and wounded: Approximately 700  
But this does not include those drowned and missing who were counted as 1200 absentees.

These figures are slightly different from those given earlier under the heading "Japanese Order of Battle" the source for which was Tekizen Joriku's "Kota Bharu" (1968)

## THE EVACUATION OF CIVILIANS

The plans for the defence of Kelantan against enemy attack did not include any scheme for the evacuation of civilians. When the firing on the beaches commenced it was clearly heard in Kota Bharu town. Soon after it had begun the British Adviser to the Sultan, Mr. Kidd, had telephone messages sent to the European community in the town and places nearby to prepare for the evacuation of the women and children. At

4.30 a.m. on 8th December on the instructions of the military, he ordered all European women and children to leave immediately in their private cars, for Kuala Krai, a town on the railway line 44 miles south of Kota Bharu where the road ended. They all left before daylight. During the morning, the mail train from Tumpat, the railway terminus on the coast near the scene of the fighting, arrived at Kuala Krai, and was half full of Asians, mostly railway employees and their families. Some European women and children from the adjoining State of Trengganu also arrived in cars. The train left in the early afternoon, with about 90 Europeans and an unascertained number of Asians. Later the same evening it arrived at Kuala Lipis, the capital of Pahang, where billeting had been well-organized and there was the most generous private hospitality.

The European refugees were firmly under the impression, from well-meaning and encouraging assurances given to them informally before they left, that their departure was only a matter of a few days whilst the Japanese were being dealt with, so they only took suit-cases with them. The next morning, the 9th December, the refugees continued their journey in buses that were provided by a Transport Officer for the Asians and any others who did not have private cars. Many of the Europeans went to Fraser's Hill whilst others went to friends in various places including Kuala Lumpur.

In the meantime, on the 9th December, Kota Bharu had come under machine-gun fire from the Japanese, and on the advice of the local military authorities, Mr. Kidd instructed all male European civilians to leave the town and coastal area immediately. They all left the same day for Kuala Krai with the exception of one planter, who decided to remain on his estate. Three Malay officials were left behind to hand over to the Japanese and to take such charge as they could of the people. On the next day, the 10th, four British officials, including Mr. Kidd remained at Kuala Krai as a skeleton Government, and all the others took the train to Kuala Lipis. It is not known how long these four officials remained at Kuala Krai, but it is certain that they eventually reached safety with, or before, the British military forces.

Whilst it is unfortunate that the warning to leave Kota Bharu in the early hours of the 8th December should have been confined to European women and children, it will be understood that it would have been impossible to give a similar warning to the whole community. They knew

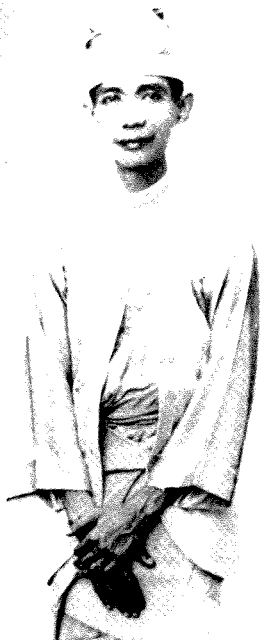
that a Japanese attack had begun, as they had all heard the sound of the firing and they were soon aware of the departure of the European women and children. At any time on the 8th or 9th, any one who chose to leave the town or coastal area for Kuala Krai and on by train to Pahang could have done so in exactly the same way as the Europeans. The population of Kota Bharu and the coastal area consisted almost entirely of Malays who had no thought of leaving their homes. The Ruler of Kelantan, Sultan Ismail, and his household left for Nilam Puri 8 miles south of Kota Bharu where he had a home.

## THE PRECARIOUS POSITION OF BRIGADIER KEY'S FORCES

During the dark and wet night of 8-9th December Brigadier Key's troops struggled to their new positions in front of Kota Bharu. When dawn came their total strength amounted to only about 700 men, whilst one of the commanders of the three infantry battalions had been wounded and the other two were missing together with a large number of their men.

The situation of the 8th Indian Infantry Brigade on the morning of 9th December was extremely precarious. On the right there was no news of the troops from Sabak. In the centre the Hyderabad State Infantry had faded away. On the left there was still no news of the company of the 1/13th Frontier Force Rifles. A thin line did exist, however, and was held on the right at the road junction immediately west of Kedai Lalat by a company of the 3/17th Dogras. Along the lateral road to the road junction at 2 1/2 mile-stone were elements of the 2/12th Frontier Force Regiment. At the Sungei Raja Gali bridge was the company of the 3/17th Dogras and part of the company of the 2/12th Frontier Force Regiment from Badang. Patrolling between the centre and the left was one section of carriers of the 3/17th Dogras.

By 7.30 a.m. the Japanese were advancing down the road from the aerodrome and also along the south bank of the Sungei Pengkalan Chepa. The centre of the brigade position came under considerable fire. The Japanese troops were also infiltrating between the road junction and the



*His Highness Sultan Ismail, the Ruler of Kelantan from 1920 to 1944*

right flank. It was evident that they were on the point of launching an attack astride the air-field road. Thereupon, Brigadier Key authorised a withdrawal to the general line from Kubang Krian to the northern exits from Kota Bharu. At the same time orders were issued to the troops west of the Kelantan river to complete demolitions and withdraw. The situation was fast growing desperate.

## THE JAPANESE MAKE FURTHER LANDINGS

The Japanese had made further landings on 8th December and during the morning of 9th December their ships were believed to be lying behind Perhentian Islands from where they were landing troops and stores by lighters. What had happened was that after the troops had disembarked the Ayatoyama Maru and the Sakura Maru headed northwards and anchored off Patani where it was intended that they would dispose of the dead and transfer the 260 injured aboard to the escort ship. But before this could be done they were ordered back to Kota Bharu with other Japanese ships at 6 p.m.

Thus the fleet of vessels arrived at the anchorage point off Kota Bharu at 1.30 a.m. on the 9th December. The landing craft were mostly damaged by the defenders' planes and the transport ships had to retreat temporarily to the north. Meanwhile everything possible was being done to control the landing craft that were drifting away. Finally over ten of them were brought under control.

Then fresh landing operations commenced at about 7.30 a.m. and were completed by about 1 p.m. on 9th December 1941. Immediately after this the naval vessels made straight for Camranh Bay whilst the two transport ships headed for Singora. The third transport ship, the Awagisan Maru after blazing for 4 days exploded suddenly on the 12th December and sank. It had been torpedoed by a Dutch submarine.

## THE JAPANESE CONTINUE THEIR ADVANCE AND BRIGADIER KEY'S FORCES WITHDRAW SOUTH OF KOTA BHARU

During the morning of 9th December the Japanese forces, now strongly reinforced by these fresh landings, were working their way round the flanks of Key's 8th Brigade which had retreated to a line north of Kota Bharu town after the aerodrome had been abandoned.

This line was untenable for defence, and a further withdrawal was ordered to the road junction immediately south of Kota Bharu.

The Japanese followed closely on the heels of the Indian troops into Kota Bharu. Many of the Japanese were lightly clad and equipped, and Key's troops experienced great difficulty in telling the difference between Japanese soldiers and Malay and Chinese villagers. The situation quickly became confused. In view of the rapid advance of the Japanese and as there was now no further point in covering Kota Bharu, Key decided to withdraw his battered force to a position four miles south of the town. He therefore ordered a further withdrawal down the Kuala Krai road at 10.30 a.m. This withdrawal was covered by the reserve company of the 2/10th Baluch brought up from Pasir Puteh, and a position just south of Kota was established by parts of the 1/13th Frontier Force Rifles and the 2/12th Frontier Force Regiment.

The company of the 3/17th Dogras and part of the company of the 2/12th Frontier Force Regiment, which had been at Badang, were sent to Pulau Chongdong to reorganise. The company of the 3/17th Dogras which had been at the road junction immediately west of Kedai Lalat and one company of the 1/13th Frontier Force Rifles adjacent to it, withdrew via Kubang Krian. The remaining troops from Sabak also arrived in Kubang Krian about this time. But the Japanese were still close on the heels of the withdrawing troops, and there followed a stiff confused fight at close quarters in Kubang Krian which the Japanese captured at about 11 a.m.. The Indian troops fell back to Peringat 5 miles further south where the

company of the 3/17th Dogras from Kemasin beach had arrived late in the morning.

Meanwhile, the 4/19th Hyderabad Regiment of the 12th Indian Infantry Brigade, Malaya Command Reserve, had arrived in Kuala Krai from Negeri Sembilan and had been ordered into a position immediately north of Ketereh 12 miles south of Kota Bharu.

At about 12 noon on the 9th December the Japanese were reported on the road running west from Kota through Salor to the Kelantan river immediately east of Pasir Mas. This necessitated a withdrawal to a position near the 6th mile-stone which was effected. During the afternoon the companies of the 2/10th Baluch were withdrawn from the Bachok and Melawi beaches, those from the former going to Peringat and those from the latter to Melor, south of Peringat. At the same time such troops of the 3/17th Dogras and the 2/12th Frontier Force Regiment as had been engaged during the morning near Kubang Krian were sent back to Pulau Chondong to rest and reorganise.

By dusk the 4/19th Hyderabads were in position north of Ketereh and orders were given to the troops at the 6th mile-stone to withdraw to Pulau Chondong. During the night of the 9/10th December some wild firing was indulged in by the 4/19th Hyderabads at what was probably a hostile patrol. At Peringat the companies of the 2/10th Baluch and the 3/17th Dogras maintained their position without any Japanese interference. Throughout the night, stragglers from the beaches and the Kota Bharu air-field and from the skirmishes round Kota Bharu and Kubang Krian, found their way back to their own unit lines and were sent to Pulau Chondong. The commanding officer and the company of the 1/13th Frontier Force Rifles arrived early in the morning of 10th December having worked their way round the outskirts of Kota Bharu after the Japanese had occupied it. Key's 8th Indian Brigade had therefore been able to pause for breath, take stock of itself and find the state of affairs much less unsatisfactory than it had thought.

## THE 8TH INDIAN BRIGADE CONSOLIDATES ITS POSITIONS IN THE MACHANG AREA

Many large parties previously missing had rejoined their units. They had been fed, had rested, and had fully recovered their spirits. Furthermore the brigade was now comparatively concentrated in favourable country instead of being spread out over great distances amongst streams and swamps with difficult communications.

On 10th December the various units were reorganized. More stragglers came in during the day and by nightfall the strength of each of the three battalions which had been heavily involved was up to 600 or more. The 8th Brigade casualties did not prove to be so heavy as were at first reported. News was received on this day of a further enemy landing at Besut, on the coast of Trengganu close to the Kelantan border. This exercised a direct threat to the large new aerodrome at Gong Kedah. There was no air reconnaissance so it was not possible to ascertain the strength of the landing, and the news was disturbing because it not only constituted a threat to the aerodromes at Gong Kedah and Machang (on the main Kota Bharu-Kuala Krai road) but also to the communications of the whole force. It was for this reason that Key decided on the morning of 11th December to abandon these two aerodromes and to concentrate his force south of Machang where it could protect its communications. The aerodromes were no longer required but it was unfortunate that the runways at Gong Kedah and Machang had to be left intact as demolition arrangements had not been completed.

The new position was astride the main road between Kota Bharu and Kuala Krai at the 26 1/2 mile-stone about 1 mile south of Machang, with the 2/12th Frontier Force Regiment on the right, the 2/10th Baluch on the left and the other two battalions of the 8th Brigade being echeloned back along the road. The Guillemard bridge over the Kelantan River, the longest railway bridge in Malaya and an engineering showpiece, was demolished.



## GENERAL PERCIVAL DECIDES TO ORDER THE WITHDRAWAL FROM KELANTAN

From the standpoint of the Japanese, Kelantan was as good as conquered by 12th December. The time had therefore come to review the whole question of policy with regard to Key's brigade. Its task, it will be recalled, had been to protect the three aerodromes in that State for the use of the British and Australian air forces and to deny them to the Japanese. These air forces no longer required them, and it was more than doubtful whether the brigade could prevent the Japanese using them. On the other hand, it was now clear that the enemy's main thrust was going to develop down the west coast and it seemed probable that all the forces that could be mustered would be required to stop that thrust. It was a problem in which both the Commander-in-Chief and the other services, as well as the civil administration, were interested. Lieutenant-General Heath came down to Singapore on 12th December for a conference on this subject. The alternatives were either to leave the brigade in Kelantan to do what it could there or else to withdraw it for employment elsewhere. The decision would be very much influenced by the precarious situation as regards its communications. There was no road south of Kuala Krai and Kuala Lipis – only a single line railway which twisted and turned through wild undeveloped country and crossed many rivers and ravines before it reached Kuala Lipis. It only required one of the bridges to be broken by enemy air action or by sabotage and the whole force would have been lost. And the Japanese held complete supremacy in the air. The situation was perilous in the extreme. There were other factors to be considered – the possible loss of material and equipment, the effect on morale of a withdrawal and the fact that the Japanese forces in Kelantan would be freed for operations elsewhere – but the overriding considerations were the vulnerability of the communications and the need to concentrate the forces to meet the threat to the west coast. The decision reached by General Percival was to withdraw the Kelantan force as soon as railway rolling stock could be made available. The decision was submitted that same afternoon to the Commander-in-Chief, Air Chief



*Guillemard Railway Bridge rebuilt after being blown up by the British in 1941*



*The Guillemard Bridge which was demolished by the British. The Japanese troops are seen here crossing the bridge in their advance to Kuala Krai.*

Marshal Brooke-Popham, and it was approved by him. Orders were issued immediately and the evacuation of surplus stores started at once. The operation had to be conducted with the utmost secrecy if it was to have any chance of success.

Meanwhile the fighting continued in Kelantan and the 12th and 13th December were field days for the Baluch Regiment, which with the 2/12th Frontier Force Regiment acted as the rearguard in contact with the Japanese patrols. The Baluch companies fought hard and inflicted severe losses on the Japanese while themselves suffering some losses. The ground was appallingly bad after the rains and with a waist-deep canal to cross besides, the Japanese were also using armour piercing ammunition in their rifles and light automatics, against which the thin walls of the Bren Gun Carriers afforded no protection. At the end of the day on 13th December, the Baluch withdrew to the 34 1/2 mile-stone and very soon after they were joined by the 2/12th Frontier Force Regiment on the right of the road, while the 3/17th Dogras and the 1/13th Frontier Force Rifles went in reserve behind the brigade headquarters, with enough artillery for the forward battalions. The Japanese were now evidently using fresh troops as a prisoner taken on this occasion stated that his unit had marched twenty-six miles from Kota Bharu and he gone straight into action for the first time. Machang airfield was occupied by the Japanese on 13th December.

During the next few days the withdrawal continued systematically, the enemy being made to fight for each position, with comparatively little loss to the defenders. By the sixteenth all surplus stores and equipment had been evacuated and the withdrawal of the troops by rail began. The 4/19th Hyderabad were the first to leave to rejoin their brigade which, had been moved up to the help of the 11th Indian Division. On the 19th December 1941 the railhead at Kuala Krai was evacuated and the Japanese captured Kuala Krai later the same day. The rearmost troops withdrew from Kuala Krai on foot as the large railway bridges south of that place had by then been destroyed. Practically all the stores and all the vehicles, except about eighty, for which no railway flats were available, were successfully evacuated. A rearguard under Lt.-Col. McKeller, known as Macforce, was left behind to watch the railway and prevent the repair of the bridges. It included troops of the Pahang Volunteers and of the Malay Regiment and carried out its duties most efficiently. On

completion of its withdrawal on 22nd December, the 8th Indian Brigade concentrated in the Kuala Lipis-Jerantut area, except for the 2/12th Frontier Force Regiment, which rejoined its own brigade at Kuantan.

So ended the battle of Kelantan. The defenders' casualties had been fairly heavy but not excessive. The Japanese, it was believed, had employed rather less than one division and was known to have suffered heavy losses. The operations were conducted with great skill by Brigadier Key and his subordinate commanders. In particular, the successful withdrawal of the whole force down a single line railway under the very nose of the Japanese air force, against which there was no opposition, was an altogether outstanding performance. It reflected the greatest possible credit not only on the commanders and their staffs, upon whom devolved the responsibility for planning and executing the operation, but also upon the staff of the Federated Malay States Railway.

## EPILOGUE

**B**rigadier Key gallantly continued to fight the Japanese and on 14th January 1942 he was promoted Major-General and given command of the 11th Indian Division. He became a prisoner of war on the fall of Singapore and was sent with Lieutenant-General Percival and 2 other senior officers to Taiwan and later to Mukden in Manchuria.

Colonel Harrison who served as a staff officer under Major-General Key tells this story:

"On the morning of 16th February 1942, after the fall of Singapore, Major-General Key and I visited the 2nd Imperial Guards Divisional Headquarters to obtain instructions on the surrender of Key's troops of the 11th Indian Division."

"General Key was received very courteously by Major-General K. Imai the chief of staff of the 2nd Imperial Guards Division. Their conversation was conducted in French:

After they had gone through the formal details, Major-General Imai wanted to impress Major-General Key. Imai called for a large map of the Pacific Basin and had it spread out on a large table.

Major-General Imai proudly said, "We Japanese have captured Malaya and Singapore", indicating each place on the map. "The Japanese forces will shortly have captured Sumatra, Java and the Philippines. We do not want Australia. I think it is time for your British Empire to compromise. What else can you British do?"

"What will we British do?", answered Major-General Key with his British bulldog stare at Imai. Key cupped his hand round Sumatra, Java and then the Philippines on the big map, swept it northwards and covered Japan with both his hands. Key remarked, "We will drive you back. We will eventually occupy your country. This is what we can do and we will do!"

Three and a half years later Japan surrendered and Major-General Key's prediction came true, but he was a brave prisoner of war to have expressed his convictions before the proud and arrogant 2nd Imperial Guards Division Chief of Staff.

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