

SPOTLIGHT ON SINGAPORE

A TRIBUTE TO THE MEN AND WOMEN WHO WERE THERE

by

Denis Russell-Roberts

Rivalling only Dunkirk as a major defeat, the sinking of the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse*, followed by the total loss of our impregnable Gibraltar of the East in the capture of Singapore, has been analysed and re-analysed by people who know — after the event. It is very easy to blacken the names of generals, find scapegoats in the joint chiefs of staff, and to call in question the whole concept of British strategy, which did indeed make Singapore impregnable from the sea, but left it wide open at the back to little yellow men dropping from the trees.

This book is not like that. It is the personal story of a serving officer, intelligent and articulate as well as brave, who, with his wife and year-old daughter, found himself caught in the neap-tide of catastrophe, and has recorded everything, not with hindsight, but as it happened.

What happened does not make for pretty reading. The rout of an army, the collapse of a system, the death of his wife at the hands of the Japanese, and his own experiences in the fighting and as a prisoner himself — these things would be sombre indeed except that this is a story of high courage, of individual acts of heroism which illumine the whole dark episode with flashes of simple splendour.

Lieut-Colonel Russell-Roberts calls his book "a tribute." And so it is. It is a tribute to the men and women who were there, whose staunchness, gallantry, and, above all, human kindness in the face of disaster not only make compelling reading, but, as with Dunkirk, could change defeat into victory — of the spirit.

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Denis Russell-Roberts

TIMES PRESS

ANTHONY GIBBS AND PHILLIPS LTD.

71-811

First published in Great Britain by
Times Press and Anthony Gibbs & Phillips

MCMLXV

© Denis Russell-Roberts 1965

Printed by Times Press Ltd.,
Douglas, Isle of Man

M
940.5425
RUS

112117

11 JUL 1979
Perpustakaan Negara
Malaysia

*To
our daughter
Lynette*



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AUTHOR'S NOTE

It is true to say that Jackie Smyth has been urging me to write this book since the end of 1945. There are reasons why I have not done so until so many years later, but these are now unimportant. Now that the book is finished, this is my opportunity to say how grateful I am to him for being the driving force behind my efforts and for giving me at all times his friendly advice and encouragement.

I wish to acknowledge the vast debt I owe to Captain A. C. Carston who alone made it possible for me to write the story of the last voyage of the *Mata Hari*. It took me a very long time to find him in New Zealand, but having found him, my task became lighter every day. While we were in earnest consultation by air mail he became dangerously ill and I have to thank his daughter, Mrs Holden, for carrying on with our massive correspondence. Captain Carston has now made a brave recovery from his illness and there are, I know, many of those who travelled with him along that 'bloody road to Banka' who will want to join with me in wishing him many years of happiness to come.*

I have received an enormous number of letters from many of those who knew Ruth in those prison camps in Palembang and Muntok. To every one of these I want to say "thank you," not only for helping me to build up that grim story, but for their kind and generous tributes. One of the most touching letters I received came from Miss Angela Kong Kam Kiew in Kuala Lumpur. To Mrs Hinch with whom I spent many hours of research in her home in Ealing I am especially grateful.

I am grateful too to the General Manager of Canadian Pacific Steamships Ltd for the details of the story of the *Duchess of Bedford*.

In connection with my inquiries into the passage of those two letters which passed between us, I have been immensely touched by the many letters I have received from people in Indonesia,

* Since these words were written the sad news has been received of Captain Carston's death in New Zealand.

who each expressed their willingness to help. Among these I would like to make special mention of Mrs Julia Roos, Messrs F. C. Fox, Lie Kian Fa, E. E. de Vries, and J. Lion. In the case of Julia Roos, no less than fifteen letters came from her, and one of these was thirty pages in length. The story of her incredible escapades outside the wire at Muntok came to me from other sources than her own. In London, Mr J. V. Kaunung of the Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia, was tireless in his efforts to put me in touch with various sources of information. I thank them all.

There is one Japanese serviceman to whom I would have liked to pay tribute. This is a sergeant pilot of the Japanese Air Force who was in charge of my party on the aerodrome at Changi in the autumn of 1944. It was through this man's humanity and courage that the one letter I was able to send to Ruth during those years in separate prison camps reached her in January, 1945. Ten months' exhaustive inquiry through the Japanese Defence Department in Tokyo has led to the conclusion that he was killed in battle at some date in 1945. I salute his memory.

All the maps and sketch maps in this book are the work of Mr E. M. Abel to whom I am indebted for his friendly co-operation as well as the perfection of his work.

I also want to express my thanks to Mr J. F. Golding, Photographic Librarian at the Imperial War Museum, for the great trouble he took to make available for me various albums of photographs from which many of the illustrations in this book were selected.

It would be difficult indeed to pay sufficient tribute to Mrs C. Stuart of 23 Oatlands Drive, Slough, who, in the building up of this book, must have typed more than 350,000 words. She worked at all hours of the day and night, and often during weekends too, in order to keep pace with my requests. I acknowledge not only the excellence of her work but the warm-hearted understanding which went with it.

In October 1954 I married Vivien Harbord. It was a marriage which not only brought me two charming stepsons but great happiness and contentment too. While I have been writing this book I have been conscious of the great stress and strain which Vivien has had to bear. She has borne those trials nobly and

patiently, she has helped me where she could and has encouraged me all the way through. I acknowledge these things with immeasurable gratitude.

DENIS RUSSELL-ROBERTS
Farnham Cottage
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FOREWORD

by

Brigadier The Rt. Hon. Sir John Smyth, Bt., V.C., M.C., M.P.

Many books have been written since the war on the tragedy of the Malayan campaign and of the tortures and sufferings of our prisoners and internees in the Japanese prison camps, and as I myself was fighting in that part of the world and knew intimately so many of those who took part in the Malayan campaign, from General Percival downwards, I think I have read almost every book that has been written on the subject. But Denis Russell-Roberts' story is not just the tragedy of Malaya and Singapore and of the prison camps, it is the very poignant story of himself and his wife, Ruth, both of whom I knew extremely well.

The book gives an excellent picture of the light and shade of the life and love of a young married couple in the Services just before and immediately after the outbreak of the Second World War. Ruth Russell-Roberts was a most remarkable girl from many points of view. Beautiful to look at, first class at almost every game, she was brim full of vitality. She was also intelligent and immensely sympathetic, with the result that she achieved the almost impossible feat for a beautiful woman of being as popular with her own sex as she was with men. Her very deafness somehow gave her an inner repose which added to her attraction.

There were, of course, many other human tragedies resulting from the Malayan disaster to British arms, and with many of them I have been acquainted, but I don't think any of them ended as bitterly as this one — when after all the sufferings they had both endured in separate prison camps, and without any means of communicating with one another, save for one miraculous letter each — Ruth should have died when they were on the point of being re-united.

The author writes of all these things as he experienced them and I found his description of his part in the short Malayan campaign of intense interest. Much has been written of the

humiliations of our Far Eastern defeats but I think we should also remember with pride the triumphs of the human spirit, when reviled, cut off from all communications with their fellow countrymen, and under appalling mental and physical hardships, so many British men and women behaved so gallantly, and even came back with an added strength of spirit and a sense of comradeship which I think has never really been understood except by those who were there.

Denis Russell-Roberts has also performed a valuable service in describing the re-union between the British officers of Indian Army units and the Indian ranks, after their grim years of captivity in Japanese hands. The British officers had, of course, been incarcerated in separate P.O.W. camps and it is to the eternal credit, therefore, of so many of the Indian ranks that they remained loyal to Britain, despite all the blandishments and threats of their Japanese captors.

The defection of a comparatively small number of traitors did cast a slur on the Indian Army which I always felt was grossly unfair on the remainder. And I am sure that I am not alone in being grateful to the author for putting the record right.

With regard to the author's Epilogue. Having commanded a brigade at Dunkirk myself I can sympathise with the author's feelings that we had the luck, which the Army in Malaya had not, of being taken home when we were beaten, by the British Navy and the "little ships," and being given a second chance. Later, as commander of the 17th Indian Division in Burma in 1942, also fighting to resist a Japanese invasion, I can testify as to how completely unfitted some of General Percival's troops were for the grim ordeal which confronted them — because two of my brigades were sent to him as reinforcements. They were the 45th and 44th Brigades. They, together with the best of my 17th Division, had only been in existence for six months before I took command of them in India just after the invasion of Malaya had started. They were trained, clothed and equipped for operations in the desert. And it was for Baghdad that the whole Division was bound. But before they left I got the Director of Military Training to come down from Delhi and have a look at them. He entirely agreed with me that they were unfit for any form of military operations — let alone jungle warfare against the most highly trained jungle fighters in the world — and the Division was to undergo six weeks intensive training in.

Baghdad. And it was for that destination I saw off the two leading brigades, thick battledress, wheeled transport and all. But they were diverted at sea and sent to Malaya. The 45th Brigade had to be flung straight in to the desperate engagement on the Muar River. It was cut to pieces and its commander, Brigadier Duncan, was killed, gallantly leading a bayonet charge. The 44th Brigade went into the bag on Singapore Island.

After the war, as a Member of Parliament, I was very proud to be asked to take up the claim for compensation of the Far Eastern Prisoners of War—as a result of which nearly £5 million was obtained from the Japanese. I am also proud of having been made an “honorary F.E.P.O.W.” (and how near I was in Burma to being a real one!), and an honorary Vice-President of the Far Eastern Prisoners of War Federation.

I feel quite sure that this book will not only be of interest to the general public as a very human story, but will be particularly valued by all those who had the misfortune to have been prisoners of war of the Japanese.

JACKIE SMYTH.

House of Commons.
S.W.I.



PART I

Chapter 1

PIPING DAYS OF PEACE

SHE had travelled up from Bombay by the Frontier Mail. It is a long and tiring journey of nearly two days and the dust even in October lies thick on everything. Yet she stepped onto the platform at Rawalpindi Station looking trim and fresh. She was wearing a simple cotton dress — it was Navy blue, I remember as if it were yesterday — and there were gold streaks of sun-bleach in her dark brown hair. She was beautiful; she was tall and slim, and all of her seemed to glow with a rich, sunburnt vitality.

And then I lost her in the crowd. Everyone seemed to be talking and shouting at the same time. Red shirted porters were struggling with luggage, hawkers were singing about chocolates and cigarettes in high falsetto voices, spitting betel nut between times, and outside tonga wallahs and taxi drivers were competing for fares.

It was October 1932 and I was there with Greville Howard. We had come to greet a mutual friend on her way through to Peshawar, and as we stood and talked on that crowded platform I searched in vain for another glimpse of that girl in blue. Then the train pulled out and we left to make our way back to the barracks at West Ridge.

It was not long before we met. An after-dinner party at the Club found us standing at opposite ends of the room. Seeing my unconcealed glances of admiration, our hostess led me across the floor and introduced us. Her name was Ruth McKechney.

"I saw you on the station when you arrived by the Frontier Mail" I said, a little nervously. "Have you come to spend the winter out here?"

"Yes, I've come out with my eldest sister and her husband," she answered. "I shall be staying with them in Jheel Road for the winter. I might even stay longer and go up to Kashmir in

the summer, that is if they are kind enough to have me for so long."

"Jheel Road," I repeated, "that sounds as though your brother-in-law is a big shot in the Indian Civil Service. All the best houses are in Jheel Road."

"Well, he's Sessions Judge here, he is in the Indian Civil Service, his name is Middleton." She spoke softly and clearly, yet she appeared to be a little bit shy, which fact in itself drew an immediate response from me, for I had hardly expected such striking good looks to be accompanied by anything other than obvious self assurance.

"I suppose your sister and brother-in-law have been on long leave in England?" I ventured.

"Yes," she replied, "they've been on eight months leave and now they've brought me out with them."

She was wearing a simple, cool-looking dress and I noticed a bracelet of lucky charms on her wrist. She was exquisitely made up, and her hair was beautifully groomed. The sun tan she had acquired during the sea voyage to Bombay made her look a picture of fitness and well-being. Her eyes were brown and they were the most honest eyes I had ever seen.

"I want to do some riding," she said, and her mouth broke into a sensitive smile.

"Well, I guess you've come to the right place," I told her, relieved that I had now been given an opportunity to talk freely and easily.

"Everyone rides here. There are any number of people who will lend you a horse or a polo pony. The P.A.V.O. Cavalry run a riding school for wives and daughters. They are all first class horsemen in the P.A.V.O."

"What on earth does P.A.V.O. mean?" she asked me.

"Prince Albert Victor's Own" I told her, "they are the best polo playing regiment in India. Their regimental team have a handicap of twenty-six."

"Good heavens, how marvellous, my sister told me that the polo in India was just about the best in the world. And tennis — what about tennis?"

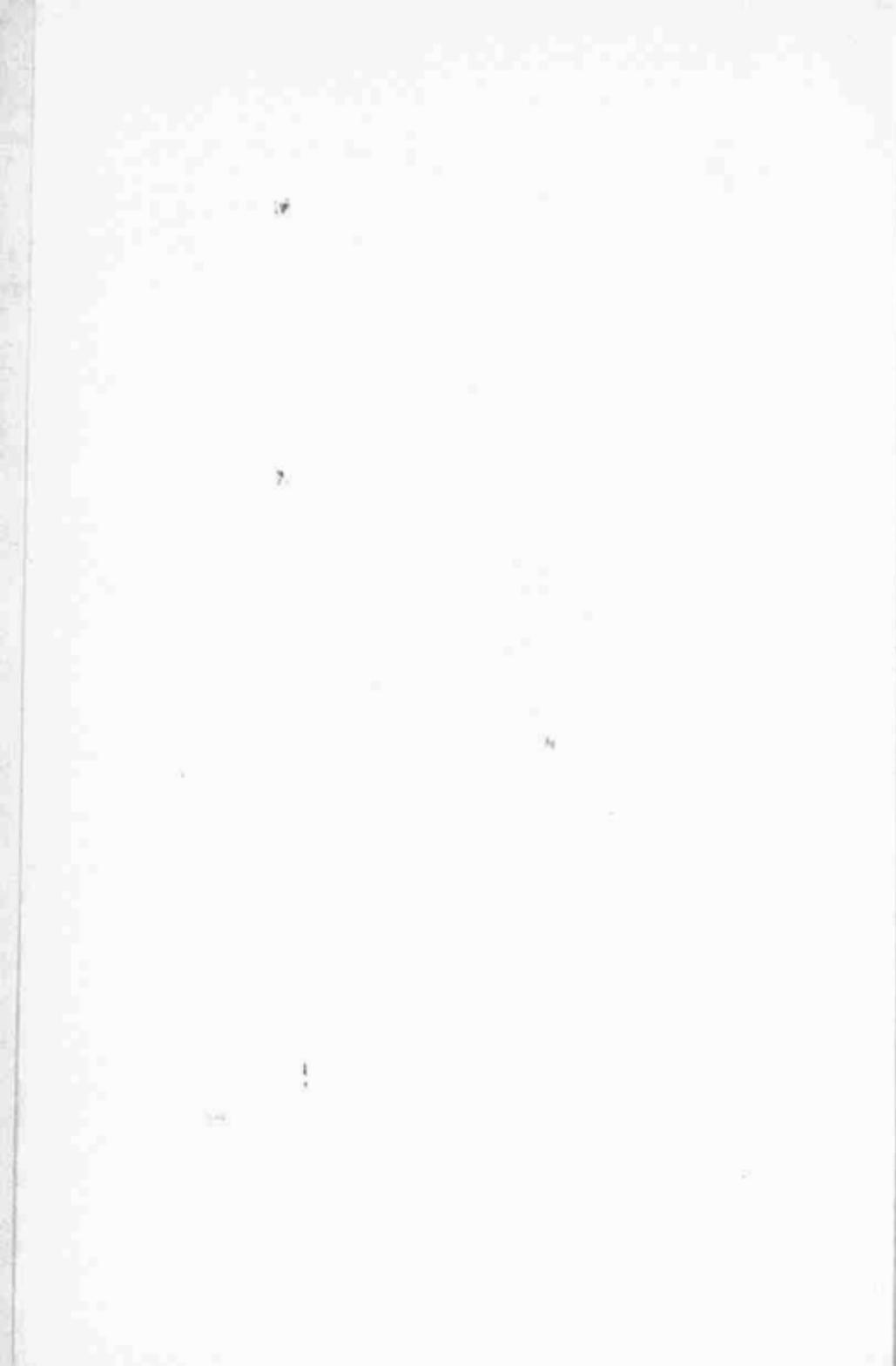
"Oh yes — you'll get all the tennis you want."

"And skiing too? At Christmas my sister and brother-in-law are taking me to Gulmarg in Kashmir for the skiing."

"So you ski too?"



"Her name was Ruth McKechney"



"Oh, I love it, I've been to Switzerland every winter for the last five years. I'm told the ski-ing in Kashmir is absolutely thrilling."

"I believe that's true," I said, "but I am not a winter sports fan myself. Tennis is my line. Perhaps"—I took a deep breath and plunged—"perhaps I could organise a mixed double or something?"

A sudden look of anxiety clouded her face and for a moment I wondered how I'd upset her. Then I saw she had turned her head, she was straining to hear me. I repeated my offer.

"I'd love that" she said.

We were now joined by Greville Howard and Ivor Reeves. Like me they had wandered from the far side of the room, anxious to meet the newly arrived Ruth McKechney.

"Let me introduce two of my brother officers in the K.S.L.I." I said, and she smiled broadly at each in turn.

"K.S.L.I." she repeated, "Everything seems to have initials in the Army. I met someone today who told me he was a DAAG or something. What does K.S.L.I. stand for?"

"King's Shropshire Light Infantry," we all three answered in unison.

"There are quite a few of us here tonight," said Ivor.

"You'll meet us all before the end of the winter" from Greville, "there's never a dull minute out here; you'll enjoy it."

"I'm sure I shall" she answered, wrinkling her nose in a child-like way. "You must meet my sister and her husband sometime. They are over there talking to the General but when they are free I'll take you across and introduce you."

"We'd love to meet them" I said, "the trouble is we've got to leave almost at once, but will you be coming to watch the polo tomorrow afternoon?"

"You must come to the polo," Greville interjected before she could reply, "we'll look forward to seeing you on the ground. It's quite a social gathering."

"I'll try to be there tomorrow" she said, before being led away and introduced to an attractive married couple in the Border Regiment. As she left us she turned her head and smiled.

Sixteen chukkers had been arranged for the polo next day and a colourful gathering came down to watch. I was very much a beginner and I only had one pony, a chestnut gelding of seven years of age which I was paying for on the never-never system,

and this meant only two chukkers. The young officer in the P.A.V.O. Cavalry who made out the chukkers list had put me down for one of the very early chukkers and then not again until chukker number fifteen. This gave me a long respite among the spectators in which to grow nervous and restless, and to feel more over-awed by the gladiators than ever. On the other hand it gave me an opportunity to slip away from the players' enclosure and to join Ruth among the rows of spectators when she arrived with the Middletons.

She introduced me formally and I followed them into the stand. Such was her interest in the polo that we talked only between chukkers. Towards the end of chukker number fourteen I crept away to find my pony, Ginger, and somewhat nervously prepared to ride onto the ground.

"You play Number 1" a major of the 15/19 Hussars from Risalpur shouted at me "and mind you mark their back like a hawk. Ride him off the ball." Excellent advice this undoubtedly was, but I wondered if he realised that the opposing back happened to be the great Tony Sanger, handicap 8, and shortly to play as Number 3 for England in the Westchester Cup against America.

It was a fast and furious chukker but I saw very little of Tony Sanger which brought shouts of abuse about my head from the other three playing behind me. Then I returned to the stands conscious of beads of perspiration dripping from my brow.

When it was time for the Middletons to leave I took Ruth aside to invite her to a little dinner party at Sams on Saturday night. "We'll all go on to the Club dance afterwards," I added. She thought for a moment before replying, then I saw the same enchanting smile break across her face as those brown honest eyes met mine.

"I'd love to dine on Saturday," she said, "will you telephone me at Jheel Road? I must go now."

And so it all began. We were lucky, for we had everything that life could offer. The winter season provided an exciting and colourful programme. Regimental soldiering blended agreeably with the social life of the station. A hot sun fell upon us day after day. We were young and romance came easily.

I was lucky too to belong to a remarkably happy regiment. Nor is it an idle boast to say that in those early years of the nineteen thirties the 1st Battalion K.S.L.I. was the best British

regiment in India. In the military sphere we were an efficient, well-trained and well-led unit. The men were hard and fit, and we had among the officers as many future generals as any other regiment in the British Army. Certainly we won far more than our fair share of sporting trophies, not only in the Punjab, but throughout India. The All-India Football and Boxing cups were shortly to find their way into the Officers' Mess. And in Lieutenant-Colonel H. A. R. Aubrey we had not only an outstandingly good Commanding Officer whom we all respected and liked, but an intensely human man.

The stage was therefore set, the curtain had been raised, and it was now for us to play our parts.

So we rode together in Topee Park, we played tennis and squash, we raced, we dined and danced. The Middletons' house became synonymous with hospitality, and life was very, very good.

She rode most days before breakfast with the P.A.V.O. riding school, and like most of us in the K.S.L.I. she never missed a race meeting. At one of these we had arranged with the stewards of the Rawalpindi Racecourse to hold our own regimental race, a polo scurry of five furlongs on a left-handed course, and towards the end of the season she rode herself in the Ladies' Race. But the big draw on these occasions was a three-mile steeplechase open to amateur as well as professional riders, and down from Risalpur to carry off the big money would come three young officers of the 15th/19th Hussars. These three — Anthony Taylor, Reggie Hodgkinson and Brocky Mitten — were all excellent horsemen, they were always well mounted, and one of the three would invariably win. In the K.S.L.I. a small racing syndicate, which included Geoffrey Musson and Bunny Careless as well as myself, was wont to depend upon these "Three Musketeers" to help us pay our Mess bills !

Slowly, over the weeks, I found out about her, about her love of music and the three worthwhile years she'd spent at the Royal College, about the parents to whom she was so devoted, about her home in England. She told me of her interest in motor car racing and how she had driven on the racing track at Brooklands. She spoke too of the three happy years she had just spent as a mannequin in the already famous house of Norman Hartnell. When she talked about those ski-ing holidays in Switzerland her eyes grew bright and her face became alive with the memory. I

could sense her love of the wide open spaces, the pure cold air, the challenge of heights and speed. Only very much later did she tell me of her deafness, something which had occurred at birth, yet something of which she was for ever conscious. Perhaps, I thought, it was this which accounted for a certain humility in her character.

Towards the end of the winter season my senior officers began to express anxiety lest my thoughts should turn to matrimony. In those days it was considered both irregular and foolhardy for any officer to marry before he had reached the age of thirty, nor did he become entitled to the priceless reward of marriage allowance before that age. I was only twenty-three.

So my Commanding Officer deemed it wise that I should be temporarily removed from Rawalpindi to cool off somewhere in the desert. He sent me to a transit camp at a place called Bharakao, and here I lived with fifty British soldiers of my regiment in a tented camp in one of the most barren, dried-up outposts in the whole of the British Empire. Apart from the fact that the tents in the daytime were like Turkish baths, I had little of which to complain. Even my loneliness was alleviated by a good K.S.L.I. friend in Mike Eagar, who drove out after dark on certain occasions bringing with him, suitably disguised as Indian bearers, the two prettiest girls in the station — Ruth McKechney and Nancy Parish. He would warn me by telephone of these intended visits and I would then arrange as lavish a meal as my rations would permit. Then, having smuggled Ruth and Nancy past the guard and into my dimly-lit tent, we would proceed to live a page or two from the *Arabian Nights* with food and drink and music. Thanks to Mike, the cooling off treatment never had a chance.

Furthermore, I was allowed to spend two months' leave in Kashmir. June and July found us living in houseboats on the Nassim lake at Srinagar, separated by fifty feet of water. As a chaperone the loveable Sally Chatty played a noble part, while in Geoffrey Knowles of the P.A.V.O. I also had a delightful companion. We formed a very happy foursome.

Kashmir as a holiday resort between the two world wars must surely have been one of the most exciting in the whole wide world. The snowcapped Himalayas looked down upon the beautiful lakes of Srinagar, cradled as they were in the greenness and freshness of an unbelievable landscape. In the centre of

each lake two large bathing boats floated at anchor. On these the social world gathered like locusts every morning after breakfast, being paddled out in shikaras from houseboats nestling in the shade of trees along the bank. The roof of these bathing boats was given up to sun bathing while down below was a bar. After a surfeit of diving, swimming, water ski-ing and sun bathing, it was customary to be invited to a neighbouring houseboat for drinks before the usual two o'clock lunch, and on occasions to act as hosts ourselves. The afternoons were normally spent restfully beneath the awning on our own houseboats, and then the orgy of bathing would start all over again. In the evenings we took ourselves into Srinagar for a dance at the famous Nedou's Hotel or at the Club, returning in the early hours of the morning. This, of course, was the occasion when romance stepped in with both feet, for the normal method of travel was through four miles of long winding waterways in a sleek shikara, which was nothing more or less than a floating, well-upholstered divan. It was even equipped with curtains which could be drawn on the way home should the travellers find the beauty of the moonlit landscape too distracting. Behind the back curtain sat three boatmen whose job in life was to paddle the craft through the water in silence. However, on the way back we soon discovered what hidden talent lay beneath the outward appearance of these poorly clad individuals. One of the boatmen would suddenly produce a ukelele from apparently nowhere and proceed to play with infinite skill the notes of a popular Kashmiri song. Soon the other two would begin to sing softly and melodiously in unison. These were the moments when the mundane trials and tribulations of life faded conveniently away into the dim distance. Instead one drifted into a dreamy world of make-believe. Small wonder Kashmir was so popular among the young.

Sometime in July we all four trekked high into the mountains. Our entire equipment was loaded onto a team of twenty-five Kashmiri ponies and on the backs of a dozen coolies. Forty miles up the valley we pitched camp at Sonamarg and there we remained for three days, climbing right up into the snow to a height of 12,500 feet. It was on the last night at Sonamarg after an excellent four course dinner that Ruth and I went for a leisurely stroll. We could see the river one hundred feet below, and beyond lay the moonlit maize and rice fields of the valley.

Behind us the hills rose up to a great height, gradually losing themselves in the snow-capped mountains. The air was cool and fresh. As we walked hand in hand we knew it was only a question of time before we would be married.

During the following cold weather we became illicitly engaged. The unofficial announcement produced rapturous messages of congratulations and good wishes from our contemporaries, but from my senior officers I was forced to observe expressions of disapproval and concern. What turned the scales in our favour was the arrival in the K.S.L.I. Officers' Mess one day of a wedding present from none other than the wife of the Commander-in-Chief, Lady Cassels herself. It was a handsome round copper tray, at least a foot in diameter, and with it came a card on which she had written the warmest-hearted wishes to us both. It was a gesture which had obviously sprung from the heart, and was typical of one whom I have always remembered with affection as the charming lady of Flagstaff House, Rawalpindi, someone who liked the young because she was young at heart herself.

That tray accompanied us wherever we went during the next seven years, and I became so attached to it that I took it to Singapore with me in 1939. This was sad indeed, because had I left it in India, it would be with me today. Instead it was seized by the Japanese after the surrender of Singapore and sent to Tokyo to be broken down in the furnaces and converted for the usage of war.

I had now qualified for eight months' leave in England, and some time in February 1934 Ruth and I left by train for Bombay. We sailed for home in the *Rawalpindi*, the same gallant ship which in 1941 went down in the Indian Ocean fighting to the last while protecting the merchant ships she was escorting.

Chapter 2

DELHI TO SINGAPORE

WE MARRIED on the moon and sixpence. I had a subaltern's pay and a kind-hearted aunt. Together we had faith and little else. But the warmth of both our families and a large circle of friends sustained us. Above all it was dear Aunt Ethie's soft heart and great generosity which turned the scales in our favour. We also had luck.

So we were married at Holy Trinity, Brompton, on the 25th May, 1934. About three hundred people came to the church, amongst them many of my brother officers and their wives. My own brother made an admirable best man.

Thanks to the kindness of Mrs Beauchamp Tufnell, who lent us her house close by, our well-wishers were able to quench their thirst after the ceremony. We then left in a second-hand baby Austin for a honeymoon in Cornwall. One of my closest friends in the K.S.L.I., Jimmy James, had persuaded his mother and father to lend us their lovely home at Morwenstowe, near Bude. Their kindness and generosity knew no bounds; we found ourselves waited on hand and foot by a staff of three. Romance again came easily.

A last-minute dash to Epsom on Derby day, plus a reasonable bet on the Maharajah of Rajpipla's *Windsor Lad*, brought us back to London to celebrate at the Savoy that night. We then returned to Aunt Ethie's flat in Gledhow Gardens as our *pied-à-terre* . That wonderful old lady had not only given us her flat, she had thrown in Dorothy too, an attractive little maid who could also cook.

Week-ends in the country and many pleasant hours spent at the Hurlingham Club, gave us a host of happy memories with which to return to India.

The regiment had by this time moved to Delhi and what a fabulous station this proved to be. Here the Viceroy lived in regal splendour surrounded by his mounted bodyguard and a company of the K.S.L.I. in Escort Lines. With hunting, pig-

sticking and polo allied to a rare measure of high life in this capital of India, there could be few dull moments for those who were there. We left in the autumn of 1935 for Kamptee in the Central Provinces, somewhat exhausted but conscious of a time well spent. As a regiment we had surely left our mark in the field of endeavour, and for ourselves it had been a period in our lives rich in experience and never to be forgotten.

In Kamptee we found ourselves divorced from the civilized world but there was rich compensation to be had in the way of tiger shooting and lesser class polo.

In 1939 the K.S.L.I. returned to England, but Ruth and I stayed on in India. Loyalty and nostalgia conflicted with a genuine love of the country and the life which India gave to us. We owed much to Jackie Smyth, who at that time was commanding the illustrious 3/11 Sikh Regiment. Through his efforts my transfer to his own regiment went through without a hitch.

But Fate plays funny tricks. Within four months of my transfer I had landed in Singapore as one of three Staff Captains in a highly secret Force under the code name of Emu, and Ruth had flown back to England. The outbreak of World War II found us six thousand miles apart.

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Force Emu had been sent to Singapore to reinforce the present garrison in Malaya against a possible threat from the Japanese. When, however, the infamous Russo-German treaty was signed in the last days of August 1939, the whole picture in the Far East changed overnight. The Japs became dismayed; their real enemy, Russia, appeared more formidable than ever.

And what a change this meant for everyone in Singapore and Malaya. Instead of finding ourselves on a semi-war footing with all the restrictions which that imposed, we were able to carry on with normal peace time living and training. The threat of war in the Far East had receded into the dim distance.

Singapore undoubtedly had its attractions. Chinese servants were plentiful, inexpensive and efficient; they were also likeable. Drink and cigarettes for the Services could be bought cheaply. Every kind of sport flourished. The sun shone. When a large part of the world was floundering in the grip of war this



We were married at Holy Trinity, Brompton, on the 25th May 1934



was surely a little spot of paradise. Those in Singapore could scarcely be blamed for enjoying it.

The staff offices of Force Emu were accommodated in wooden huts in the beautiful grounds of Tyersal Park, about three miles from the centre of the town. It was here that I came to work every day among tropical shrubs and plants, small lakes and green lawns. After the arid brown soil of India this was quite a little oasis.

I was living at the Goodwood Park Hotel and just across the road stood the famous Tanglin Club with its swimming pool, tennis courts and everything else. Life was certainly a bed of roses. All I found lacking was Ruth.

It was at this time too, that I first became eligible to draw marriage allowance. Added to my Indian Army pay and a handsome Colonial allowance this gave me a feeling of security for the first time in my life. I wanted to share this sudden change of luck. Somehow I had to get Ruth out from England.

In fact she did it all herself. All the strings I pulled came to nothing and even she failed to seduce the War Office and the Colonial Office. Yet somehow, in the early hours of a wintry morning she climbed aboard a very special aircraft which had been reserved for a party of Dominion ministers who were returning to India, Australia and New Zealand following a Commonwealth Conference in London. At Cairo officialdom refused to allow her to proceed further east and a lively argument only turned in her favour when Mr Richard Casey* intervened. Just before Christmas that V.I.P. plane touched down at the Kallang Civil Airport and we were together again.

In those early days of 1940 Ruth filled her time by learning to fly and after three weeks she obtained her pilot's licence. Thereafter, while playing tennis myself in the evenings I would find my concentration riveted upward in the skies as she flew solo over the Island.

In May we went to Indo-China for a fortnight's leave. From Saigon we travelled by train to the hill station of Dalat and there in the principal hotel we found ourselves in a bridal suite which might have been furnished for Louis XIV himself. But the news of Hitler's triumphant march through the low Countries produced such unparalleled gloom among the French

* Now Lord Casey of Berwick, late Foreign Minister of Australia.

people in Dalat that we returned to Singapore at the end of the first week. As we stepped onto dry land once again we were told of the surrender of the Belgians.

Not long after our return from Indo-China Ruth knew she was going to have a baby. We were both delighted and quickly enlisted the interest and care of the gynæcologist with a big name. Lucky that such a man should have been Philip Bloom, a close friend of us both.

At six o'clock in the evening of the 6th January 1941 the telephone rang in my office. I knew it would be Philip Bloom's voice I should hear. Sure enough it was; he simply said "You have a daughter, everything's fine, come on up."

The christening took place at the Tanglin Garrison Church early in March and the Senior Chaplain took the service. We christened the baby Lynette.

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In the meantime Hitler's Germany had attacked Russia and the Russians were in full retreat. The Japs, quick to take advantage of this turn-about, had signed a Tripartite Pact with Germany and Italy, by which they agreed to enter the war on the side of the Axis if the Americans should come in with us. Banking on the impotence of Vichy France they had marched into the northern part of French Indo-China before the end of 1940. By the autumn of 1941 they had occupied the whole of that French colony and were knocking on the door of the frontier with Siam. Their warships too had been seen in the Gulf of Siam. There should have been no doubt in anyone's mind that the Japs now meant business.

At the beginning of 1941 I had taken charge of HQ 2nd Echelon at Malaya Command. But then things began to move fast. In May I handed over my staff appointment and travelled north to Ipoh to join the 5/11 Sikh Regiment which had recently arrived from India. Soon after this Ruth went to work at RAF HQ, leaving Lynette in the daily care of her amah. Early in June the regiment travelled back to Singapore by train and we then embarked in a coastal steamer for Kuantan, a small sea port on the east coast of the State of Pahang. We lived in a camp which was so well concealed among the density of a rubber plantation that nothing could be seen from aircraft above, and so



The author with Ruth and Lynette in Singapore, September 1941



comfortless that a tree sprouted through both the floor and roof of my bedroom. We awakened to a dawn without a sunrise and at dusk we sipped our drinks in the same depressing atmosphere. We longed to see the horizon.

As a regiment we were lucky in our CO for he was to prove himself an intrepid commander with shrewd tactical sense. Lieut-Colonel John Parkin had already won a D.S.O. on the north west frontier of India. No more than five feet three inches in height, a bachelor with white hair, he inspired complete confidence. We were lucky too, in our tall and handsome Adjutant, Captain Harbakhsh Singh, a most able officer who was surely destined for the highest places.

Ruth in the meantime had been transferred to the same HQ 2nd Echelon which I had left earlier in the year, and here she worked as a sergeant clerk in the casualties section.

Ten days leave in September brought me down to Singapore to see something of Ruth and Lynette. Shortly after my return to the regiment the north-east Monsoon fell upon us with a vengeance and we soon found ourselves engulfed in mud. With these ever increasing floods of rain came ominous signs of war. Reconnaissance planes on the 6th December reported two large Japanese convoys in the South China Sea heading for the Gulf of Siam. The next day an RAF Catalina, ordered to shadow these convoys, was shot down in the sea. This brings me to the night of December the 7th, 1941.

Chapter 3

WAR COMES TO MALAYA

In the darkness of that fateful Sunday night Japanese assault troops were fighting their way ashore at Kota Bahru, only a hundred and fifty miles north of Kuantan. Other enemy troopships were making their way across the China Sea heading for Singora in Thailand.

Dawn on the 8th ushered in the blackest Monday of all time. My radio told me that Singapore had been bombed during the hours of darkness. The announcer went on to say that some of the Jap bombs had contained gas. Only ten days earlier Ruth had written to inform me that though she herself had been issued with a gas mask, such things for babies simply weren't available.

Signals came crowding in. Those Japanese assault troops at Kota Bahru had fought their way ashore, the Dogra battalion on the beaches had been practically wiped out. More Japanese troopships had been spotted in the China Sea, our northern airfields had been raked with fire. Then came the shattering news that Pearl Harbour had been treacherously attacked from the air and the American Pacific Fleet destroyed. Even Manila in the Philippines had been savagely bombed. Only one scrap of comfort — a denial that Jap bombs on Singapore had contained gas.

Not only a black Monday but a miserable Monday too. The classic rain of the monsoon came down in buckets and we were soon drenched to the skin. By five o'clock that evening I was the last to leave our peace-time Camp and shortly afterwards reached battalion HQ among the rubber trees just over six miles from Kuantan, and only a mile from one of the vital aerodromes in the Malay peninsula.

So vital, in fact, did higher command regard this aerodrome that the role of the 22 Indian Infantry Brigade and attached troops had all along been made clear and definite. It was the defence of the aerodrome to the last round and the last man, with no question of withdrawal. The whole war plan, troop dispositions, quantities and location of ammunition and supplies,

and training, had been directed to this end. It was the sole reason that we were here at all. As a defensive position the Kuantan area was thoroughly unsound, and, had the question of ground defence been considered at the time when the location of the aerodrome was under discussion, it is hard to imagine that the decision would ever have been taken to site it in this area. Furthermore, it was quite obvious that the force made available for the defence of Kuantan — only two battalions — was inadequate for the purpose should we ever be seriously attacked.

The 2/18 Royal Garhwal Rifles had to defend eleven miles of beach frontage extending from the mouth of the Kuantan river in the south to the mouth of the Balok river in the north. This was the minimum frontage which it was essential to hold, and to prepare for defence with concrete pill boxes, wire, and anti-personnel and anti-tank mines. The Garhwalis had three companies up and one in reserve, one or two machine guns being specially allotted for use in pill boxes. They were also given two ancient 18-pounder guns for beach defence purposes. The task was of course, far beyond the capacity of a single battalion if the Japs were to launch a serious attack from the sea.

We ourselves, 5/11 Sikhs, had two and a half companies committed to river defences on the rivers Kuantan and Soi, including the ferry crossing and the road approach from Pekan. We also had one company for local ground and ack ack defence of the aerodrome, and a maximum at any time of two platoons in reserve.

But there were no troops available to deal with a Japanese landing in the Pahang river mouth near Pekan, twenty-two miles to the south. Nor were there troops available to deal with an attack from the west either by a Japanese parachute force dropped near Gambang, or by Japanese infantry making their way in river craft up the Pahang river and debouching on the main road to Jeruntut from Pulau Manis or Lubok Paku. No reserve at all, in fact, remained in the hands of the Brigade Commander. No wonder Brigadier Painter wore a worried look. The outlook for us all could scarcely be described as anything but cheerless.

As for artillery support the sole extent of this important arm in such a vast area had, up to the outbreak of war, consisted of a section of two 3.7" howitzers! However, these were soon to be joined by a battery of eight 4.5" howitzers and a little later by a

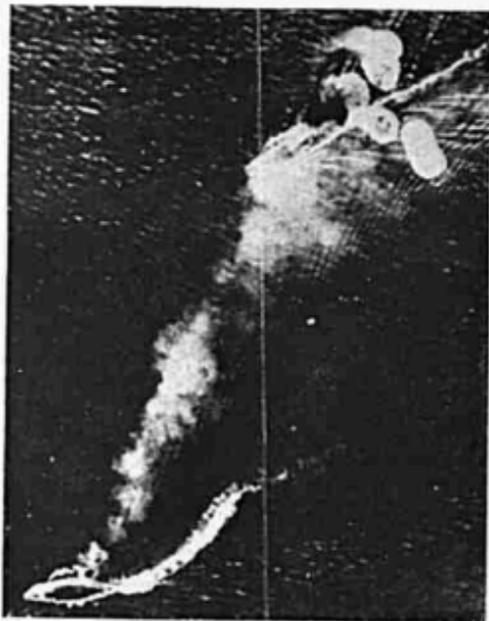
further battery of eight 25-pounders. Thereafter we had no cause to grumble on this score.

At the aerodrome itself there were twenty-six aircraft, which included ten new Hudsons piloted by the Royal Australian Air Force, eight old Blenheims which had just arrived from Burma on an operational flight, two Swordfish and six Wildebeestes. There was also a ground staff but only just! It had arrived by ship from Singapore on December 4th. But be it noted that we had not one single fighter and not one single ack ack gun.

At daylight the Australian Squadron of Hudsons took off to bomb Japanese transports off the coast of Kota Bahru. They were to receive a rude shock. Japanese fighters, producing the first surprise of the war in their masterly handling and in their superior armament, quickly shot down five Hudsons and severely wounded three members of the crews of the remainder. Pilots who returned looked badly shaken.

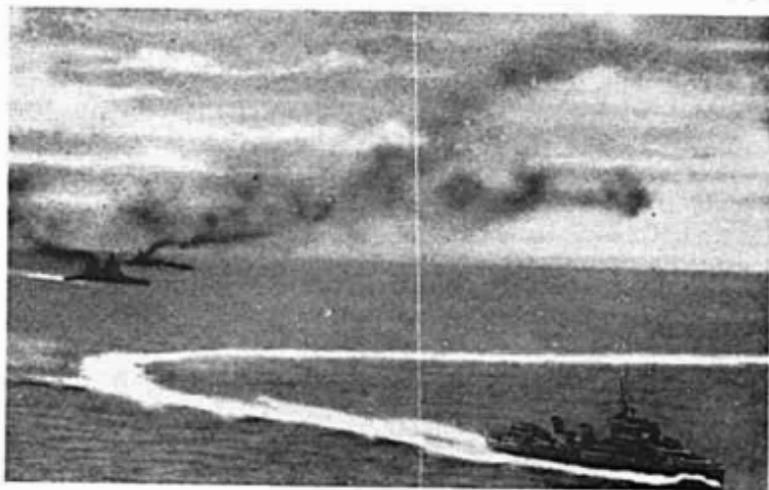
On the morning of the 9th the Brigade Commander visited the aerodrome with his Brigade Major to discuss the Kota Bahru situation with returned pilots. While there the Japs came over in two separate flights, each twenty-seven strong, which bombed and machine gunned buildings and aircraft on the ground, causing considerable damage. This attack lasted for one and a half hours during which time our Sikh company employed on local defence of the aerodrome remained in action with ack ack machine guns and Bren guns. These young troops stood up to their first ordeal very well and showed an admirably aggressive spirit. By the early afternoon the RAF Station Commander had received orders to destroy the greater portion of the aerodrome, leaving only a runway denied to the Japs by obstructions but clearable for our own use if required. Meanwhile all aircraft which remained undamaged flew to Singapore. The two Wildebeestes subsequently flew back to salvage some of the twenty torpedoes which had been left behind. After that we never saw another British aircraft in the next seven weeks. So much for that damned aerodrome we were required to defend to the last round and the last man, and which had cost the British tax-payer a pretty penny to build!

We spent two nights in that restricted area and then John Parkin moved us all further into the rubber and away from the battalion's seventy-odd transport vehicles. A few days later we were deprived of our tentage, and as it was far too wet and



H.M.S. "Repulse" hit by Japanese bombs, 10th
December 1941

(Copyright Imperial War Museum)



It was off the coast near Kuantan that H.M. ships "Prince of Wales"
(upper) and "Repulse" were hit by Japanese torpedoes. British destroyer
in foreground

(Copyright Imperial War Museum)



muddy to bivouac, we set to building attap huts. In one of these huts, armed with a flit gun to fight the vast army of mosquitoes, I was to live for the remaining weeks of the year. My orderly, Sepoy Mehar Khan, helped to make life bearable. This faithful Punjabi Mussulman carried too much weight for campaigning. His appearance reminded me of that great American actor, Wallace Beery, and because of this I always called him Wallace.

On the night of the 9th a signal from the beach defences told of a Japanese force attempting to land at Kuantan. We could hear the distant crack of machine gun fire from the pill-boxes on the beach, and soon all the guns in the forward area opened up with a lively concentration which went on for the best part of two hours. At 2 a.m. everything closed down as suddenly as it had broken out.

Next morning daylight showed a few wooden logs floating in the surf and little else. Something had gone wrong.

This false report of a Japanese landing at Kuantan spelt disaster which was to shake the world. For it drew the newly-arrived battleships *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* to intercept. The next morning they were themselves intercepted off Kuantan by shore-based bombers and torpedo-carrying aircraft. Shortly after mid-day on the 10th they were both at the bottom of the China Sea, and with their sinking Japanese command of the seas went unchallenged.

Nor was it any better in the air. The Japs had already destroyed more than half our aircraft on the airfields of northern Malaya. Even at this early stage the Royal Air Force had practically ceased to exist as an effective Service. Although we didn't realise it at the time, the Army in Malaya was to fight this war virtually alone.

Subsequent inquiry indicated that Japanese craft had in fact been off the beaches that night of the 9th and that a landing, probably on a small scale, had been attempted. This was borne out a few days later by patrols locating several boats riddled with splinter holes and containing Japanese equipment at various points close together on the beaches south of Kuantan. An attempted invasion was also confirmed by a Japanese prisoner of war who was later brought down from Dungun in the State of Trengganu, and who stated that attempted landings had been made at various places along the coast with the object of probing our defences and finding weak spots. It seems probable that the

Japs had been feeling our defences systematically from north to south.

This first three weeks of war in the East passed slowly, dimly and anxiously for us in Pahang, for we were fighting only a war of nerves. Japanese aircraft came over daily, sometimes three or four times a day, but though they dropped many hundreds of bombs the damage they did was of little account. They tried hard to hit the large tanks of the Asiatic Petroleum Company containing thousands of gallons of aviation spirit for the use of our aircraft on the aerodrome. Although they were unopposed in the skies they failed to register one direct hit on this all too conspicuous target. This dismal failure of Japanese bombers left us the job of destroying the tanks ourselves at the beginning of January before we withdrew in order to prevent them falling into the hands of their victorious soldiers. Our sappers drained it off by a pipe line into the river Belat and set it alight. It then blazed for forty-eight hours presenting one of the brightest and warmest incidents of that otherwise irksome period.

Meanwhile on the west coast 11 Indian Division had been decisively defeated with heavy losses at Jitra. The Island of Penang had fallen amid indescribable confusion. And because of relentless pressure on their front and a series of landings on the coastline behind them, this shattered Division was being forced to continue an exhausting retreat. Our forces too, at Kota Bahru were shortly to be withdrawn from Kelantan.

It was a gloomy tale of disaster relieved solely by news of the 2nd Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. They had been brought up from Port Dickson to stop the Japs advancing down the mountain road from Grik to Kuala Kangsar.

No battalion in Malaya had trained harder in jungle fighting than the Argylls. They had come to Singapore as part of Force Emu in August 1939, and in Ian Stewart they had a first class C.O. who saw at once how any war with Japan would develop. So he made it his business to see that every sub-unit in his regiment could live in the jungles of Malaya and move long distances with only a map, a compass and their wits to aid them. Two years of this type of training had made the Argylls the finest jungle fighters we had; unfortunately they were just about the only well trained jungle fighters among the allied forces in Malaya.

On the Grik road the Argylls fought like tigers. We listened on

the radio to the story of their counter attacks with the bayonet. But they fought a losing battle because the Perak river, which ran closely parallel to the road, enabled the Japs to embark on rafts and slip round behind them. Only a further hurried withdrawal by the whole Division to a new position at Kampar saved them from disaster.

Just before Christmas a letter from Ruth told me that she was arranging to send Lynette home to her sister in England in the care of her friend, Ann James. They were booked to leave Singapore in a convoy sometime in January, but she made it clear that she herself was determined to stay until she was ordered to go. It was something to feel that Lynette was getting out of it, but I knew it would take a lot to persuade Ruth to give up her job with Malaya Command. The Governor, Sir Shenton Thomas, in his broadcast after the fall of Penang had declared that we would stick by the peoples of the country for which we had accepted responsibility, and that in future no preference would be shewn to Europeans in matters of evacuation. Lady Shenton Thomas had announced her intention to stay with the women of the country. It was a convincing argument on moral grounds. The host of women and girls still working in the offices of military formations in Singapore no doubt saw clearly where their duty lay, and Ruth was one of these.

Immediately north of the defences at Kuantan lay the State of Trengganu, one hundred and sixty miles in length and covering a large area of mostly undeveloped country. Only one metalled road, linked with the Kelantan road system, ran from the northern boundary to the capital at Kuala Trengganu, two rivers being ferried on the way. From the capital a series of earth and gravel tracks with numerous ferries continued down to the Pahang border. These were generally motorable. Between the boundary and the defended lines of the 22nd Indian Infantry Brigade the track was poor and at one place it was necessary to use the beach at low tide. There were no other exits from the State except two difficult foot tracks through the forest which covered the western half of Trengganu. There were no railways.

Nor were there any defences in this State and no military garrison of any sort except the Local Defence Volunteers. These consisted of five British and one Eurasian officers and about a hundred other ranks of whom ninety were Malays.

In the first two days of war ninety-two Japanese civilians were

arrested and brought to the capital. These comprised the skeleton staff which had remained on the iron mines after the freezing of Japanese assets had stopped the export of ore. The following day both the State police and the Local Defence Volunteers had been disbanded though it was not clear who gave this order. Worse still, someone had ordered the ninety-two Japanese internees to be released and — incredible though it may seem — they were given arms for their own protection !

Meanwhile, the British Advisor ordered all officers except the Medical Officer to leave the State. The Sultan himself left with the British Adviser, the latter's wife and a large party of followers on a suggestion by the Sultan that they should go into hiding. The next day the Medical Officer joined them with the news that the party's whereabouts was already known to Japanese agents. Whereupon the Sultan refused to leave the State and set off with his staff to return to his capital. The three Europeans left to trek through the jungle aiming to make contact with us at Kuantan. Two other European women set out independently to make their way through to Kuantan but were stopped at the ferry at Kerteh because of that false report of an attempted landing on the beach at Kuantan. The British Advisor's party got through but history of these events is silent on the fate of those two women.

For several days the population was in a highly nervous state and a prey to wild rumours. Police stations, shops and European residences were looted. An air-raid on the capital resulted in extraordinary scenes of mass panic. However, by the middle of the month a Committee of the State Council had begun to function and some members of the police were recalled to duty !

One European had remained in the State, Mr J. Reid, Manager of a sawmill at Chukai. This man went to Kuantan to report the presence of a number of armed Japanese in his district. It was decided to send a patrol of one British officer, Lieut Comyn, and eleven soldiers of the 2/18 Royal Garhwal Rifles to arrest them. This patrol timed its arrival to coincide with dusk and having posted sentries on three telephone linesman's posts, managed to reach undetected the Japanese Company's office over which there appeared to be people living. The back door being unlocked three of the patrol rushed up the steep narrow staircase and found eleven Japanese sitting round a table listening to the Tokyo radio. A pile of arms lay on the floor. The Japs

surrendered and the patrol returned to Kuantan that night. One of the prisoners attempted to escape and was shot.

These prisoners were mostly civilian mining employees but one was found to be carrying a soldier's paybook. A note book was also found in the party's baggage which had entries indicating that the Japanese planned to use various inland paths leading through the State of Trengganu in attacking Kuantan from the north.

Thus, as early as the middle of December, the position was that between Japanese-occupied Kelantan and our defences north of Kuantan there lay a stretch of territory 160 miles long in which the administration had broken down, the police had been disbanded, but in which there were at large a number of armed Japanese intimately acquainted with the country. Furthermore, roads, bridges, ferries and telephones were intact.

And to the south of us lay one hundred miles of jungle stretching down to the northern boundary of Johore. Not one single road led southward beyond the town of Pekan.

Thus, only one escape route from the State of Pahang lay open to our troops at Kuantan. This was along the lateral roadway which ran westward for one hundred miles through the centre of Pahang to Jeruntut, bounded throughout its length by dense jungle and occasional belts of rubber. From Jeruntut the road continued westward across the central mountain range of Malaya, to join the main North-South highway of the west coast at Kuala Kuba. Geography and nature had certainly combined to confuse and confound the issue. For the Japs only had to strike in from the main highway on the west coast as far as Raub and our escape route from Pahang would be closed.

Nor was this all. The fate of our forces in the forward area, on the coastline and round the port of Kuantan, depended almost entirely on the working of the Kuantan ferry, a rather dubious affair worked by an unreliable gang of Tamil coolies. If the latter were to be bombed and put out of action, then all the guns and ammunition, transport vehicles and stores on the eastern side of the river were doomed, and most of the troops as well.

The same danger faced us at the other end of that escape route where at Jeruntut the fast flowing river Pahang presented a formidable obstacle to cross. This again depended upon a ferry as vulnerable to Japanese aircraft as that at Kuantan. So the cage had a trap at either end.

Meanwhile, on the 23rd December the 2/12 Frontier Force Regiment rejoined the Brigade after fighting grim and costly battles around Kota Bahru, where they had lost approximately one company in casualties. This gave Painter a Brigade reserve for the first time. One company was placed under command of the Garhwalis north of Kuantan and the rest of the battalion was despatched to Gambang to deal with a reported threat of Japs moving up from Pulau Manis.

On the same day one troop of armoured cars of the Federated Malay States Volunteer Force Armoured Car Squadron arrived from another part of Malaya. This troop, ably commanded by Lieut Tovey did excellent reconnaissance work along all motorable tracks west of the river line. After Christmas they crossed the river and patrolled well into the State of Trengganu.

At this point higher command, at both Corps and Division level, began to take more than normal interest in the fate of the 22nd Indian Brigade at Kuantan. First a telephone call on the newly completed telephone from Kuala Lumpur informed Brigadier Painter two days after Christmas that "higher authority" had ordered that, in view of the importance of keeping the Brigade and its equipment intact, the beach defences were to be treated as an outpost line only, and all guns and vehicles were to be withdrawn behind the river. Next day Major-General Barstow, Commander 9 Indian Division, arrived himself by car. Painter protested against the previous day's order. He pointed out that his orders were to defend the aerodrome to the last, that all plans and work for the past six months had been directed to this end, that the enemy was drawing near to Kuantan by land from the north and might also attack by sea at any time, that the present beach defences were unsuitable purely as an outpost line to the river position and that to withdraw all guns behind the river would deprive the left flank of all artillery support. While his role remained as at present defined he considered that a last minute change of the nature envisaged might well prove disastrous. Barstow agreed and gave authority to Painter to adhere to his existing plan.

On the evening of the 29th December Barstow telephoned that the decision which he had given to adhere to the existing plan had been overruled by General Percival as G.O.C. and that fresh orders were on the way. These proved to be to the effect that it was of the utmost importance to keep the Brigade with its *valu-*

able equipment intact for fighting elsewhere in Malaya, and that in consequence the main responsibility of the Brigade Commander was *not* to jeopardise his force. This was of more importance than holding the aerodrome *for a few extra days*. The orders to withdraw all guns and vehicles behind the river, and to hold the beaches as an outpost position only, were to stand.

So — with the Japs about to attack us from the north, and possibly from the sea as well, the role of the Brigade was completely changed, and a complete alteration of plan and dispositions rendered necessary.

Early on the morning of the 30th December Painter held a conference at the Rest House to issue orders for the revised plan. While the conference was in session reports were received that the Japs were advancing southwards in the Jabor valley and that fighting was in progress.

Confused fighting ensued throughout the day, artillery forward guns acting in close support of infantry. The Garhwalis, most northerly troops on the beaches moved westwards so as to strike at the Japs' left flank as they advanced. Japanese aircraft were active overhead all day, dive-bombing and machine-gunning along the length of the coast defences, and reporting our movements and bombing our troops. Later in the day they made a determined bid to destroy the ferry and succeeded in severing one of the shore to shore cables. While the troops repaired this cable, a party of sappers split the ferry into two against the threat of further damage. That night all the guns and vehicles were shipped across the river. At dawn on the 31st the Japs attacked the ferry and a furious battle raged all day. In the late evening all our forces still east of the river were brought across covered by a formidable artillery barrage. About five hundred men were missing, either killed, drowned or trapped. This figure included one complete company of the 2/12 F.F.R. as well as Garhwalis, sappers and others. Despite large numbers of Japanese dead in the streets of Kuantan, largely caused by artillery fire, there could be little doubt that we had suffered a reverse, and worse was yet to come.

It was now New Year's Eve. Among the rubber trees south of the river we were treated to an excellent dinner which Baja Brown, our 2nd in command, had laid on for us. At midnight I walked round the camp perimeter accompanied by a familiar army of mosquitoes. Down in Singapore Ruth, I knew, would be

seeing in the New Year at Raffles Hotel, dancing among a maze of streamers and balloons — and in fancy dress. It all seemed too unreal to contemplate.

The New Year brought fresh problems to the Kuantan zone. Under the original orders there would have been no cause for doubt as to the right thing to do, when the object was the defence of the aerodrome to the last, with no thought of withdrawal. But now the primary responsibility had been defined as the maintaining of the Brigade and its attached troops intact, the defence of the aerodrome being of secondary importance. As a result of the last two days' fighting two out of the three battalions had already suffered severely. Only the 5/11 Sikhs remained intact. Moreover our patrols had reported that the Kuantan river was at this time fordable anywhere above Batu Sarwar. Thus the Japs were in a position to ford the river unopposed clear of the left flank of our Sikh company on the river line, and to move directly on the aerodrome or cut the main road in rear of the Brigade. Whatever action the Brigadier might take to oppose such a crossing the Japs could circumvent by moving further upstream. It had already been proved that the nature of the country afforded no obstacle to Japanese infantry. This threat had been pointed out to Barstow at his visit on the 28th December, and a subsequent report had been made to him pointing out that owing to the state of the river the outflanking of the left of the river line defences was only a question of time. A further report was now sent to him stating that in view of the amended orders to maintain his force intact as his primary responsibility the Brigade Commander was considering starting a withdrawal that night towards Maran. This report elicited a reply in the strongest language deprecating such withdrawal, and stating that it was of the greatest importance to deny the aerodrome to the enemy for five days *while convoys of air and land reinforcements were arriving at Singapore.*

It is interesting to note here that this was the first mention made of the arrival of these reinforcements, and of the renewed importance of that blasted aerodrome; important at this stage of course to prevent the Japs from using it with their own aircraft to bomb the approaching ships bringing those reinforcements to Singapore.

The Brigade was therefore ordered to remain in defence of the aerodrome for five days *subject to the Brigade Commander's*

responsibility for not jeopardising his force. No ordinary problem this for our worried Brigadier, who signalled his reply in the following terms:—

“Can and will put up fight to defend aerodrome, but must point out that, owing to nature of country on left flank as already reported, such action must inevitably entail losses in personnel and equipment which I am ordered to avoid.”

The two tasks of holding the aerodrome for five days and of preserving the force intact and not jeopardising it were, of course, in direct contradiction of each other. What would be the Staff College solution to this problem, I wonder? What would the School of Infantry at Warminster suggest? It would be interesting to know.

Painter decided that his only way of achieving the dual object was to harass the Japs continuously with aggressive and imaginative artillery fire in the hope of delaying his staging an attack on the aerodrome. This task was carried out admirably under arrangements of Lieut-Colonel Jephson in his capacity as Painter's C.R.A. The latter changed his gun positions frequently and single guns were run up to forward areas for specific tasks and then withdrawn again. All likely areas were harassed constantly by day and night.

During the next two days strong Japanese patrols appeared along the upper reaches of the river. Although we had destroyed the ferry it was clear that the river was easily fordable, and the Japs were obviously preparing to attack the airfield from the north. More sinister were reports of a force moving westward with the object of blocking our escape route along the road to Jeruntut. The 2/12 F.F.R. were brought forward for the defence of the aerodrome.

On the 2nd January a message from 9 Division H.Q. warned that the order to deny the aerodrome for five days was likely to be amended and that orders for an earlier withdrawal were likely to be given. These subsequently materialised and the force was ordered to withdraw to the Maran area on the night of the 3rd/4th January. What had happened?

Events on the west coast had decided the issue. There the 11 Indian Division had been forced to withdraw from their position at Kampar. A glance at the map will show that a very real threat now existed that the Japs might reach that vital road junction at Kuala Kuba and from there arrive at Raub before we

could get there ourselves. If the 11 Indian Division failed to prevent this the fate of the Kuantan force was sealed. It could be a very near thing.

But first we had to get out of Pahang. One hundred miles of roadway and a fast flowing river lay behind us. A single hand-driven one way ferry at Jeruntut could decide the issue. We would have to move fast. And in front of us — Japs.

The order for a general retirement reached us early on the morning of the 3rd January. During daylight John Parkin thinned out on the river line and, anticipating an ambush on the road back, piqueted his route as in frontier warfare tactics. A portion of the artillery and the bulk of the Indian sapper company pulled out with us. An eerie experience that retirement along twelve miles of roadway with Japanese scouting parties watching our movement from the rubber and jungle on the northern side. We were lucky to get through to Gambang intact — lucky by about eighty minutes.

During the day motor transport for evacuating the remaining infantry was dribbled forward into the aerodrome area. Painter intended to leave the perimeter defences intact until as late as possible, then to embus and withdraw first the Garhwalis, next the remaining guns and Brigade H.Q., and finally the 2/12 F.F.R. which would act as rearguard.

While the Garhwalis were beginning to embus as darkness fell the Japs opened mortar fire on the north west side of the perimeter. Then, just as the last of the Garhwalis, together with Brigade H.Q., were leaving the camp area in motor transport, one solitary Japanese soldier could be seen running as fast as his legs would carry him, firing his rifle into the air as he ran. He was followed by dozens of other dark figures who in the fast failing light could not easily be discerned. Then suddenly from the western boundary came the dull crack of automatic fire, at first controlled but quickly rising to a crescendo of intensity as the Japs surged forward among the hutments of the camp. The noise became deafening, and the Japs, relying as was their custom on the moral effect of fire and noise, added to the confusion by setting off Chinese crackers and other types of fireworks with which they were equipped. The fighting among the hutments became confused and furious. Hand to hand struggles, bayonet duels, and the firing of pistols and Sten guns at point blank range in the grim darkness of the evening followed in the wake of the

enemy's advance. The camp was being attacked from the north as well as from the west, and at close quarters.

While this was going on the Brigade H.Q. staff, including the Brigadier himself, left with other troops in a fleet of station wagons and trucks, and as they passed through a culvert on the track leading to the main Kuantan-Jeruntut road, they came under heavy fire from a well concealed machine gun to the west of the track. The dull thud of impact with metal and the splintering of glass accompanied the crack of machine gun bullets as the convoy tore through the culvert. Meanwhile a section of guns of 63/81 Battery near the water tower had silenced the Japanese mortars. This section now came out of action, limbered up and prepared to drive off when it was found that the tractor's engine would not start. Five anxious minutes passed while the necessary adjustments were made. During that time the two tyres of a bicycle lying beside the guns were perforated with bullets. Then followed the last batch of heavy lorries and finally two armoured cars. The latter were fired upon by unseen snipers hidden in the roadside and the gunner in the leading car was wounded. Apparently the Japs had produced a small arms bullet of .256 calibre made of hard steel and encased in brass against which our armoured cars of this type were *not* impervious. This was quite an eye opener.

On the main road a collision by two carriers caused a traffic jam which sent scores of hearts to beat overtime. Somewhere to the south of the road a Japanese light machine gun was firing on the roadway. Havildar Mir Badshah had been severely injured in the collision of the carriers. Rather than accept the offer of his comrades to take their place in one of the returning vehicles he expressed his intention to engage the Jap machine gun with a Bren gun which had been salvaged from one of the damaged carriers. This he now did, saying that he wished to stay to the end and die at his post. This was his last wish. Thus he stayed and died, fighting his own heroic rearguard action in his own way and in his own time and in a position from which there was to be no withdrawal. Remember Mir Badshah.

Fighting on the aerodrome meanwhile continued to rage. It was now eight o'clock and the moon had risen. A swarm of Japanese had overrun a piquet of the 2/12 F.F.R. and were advancing on that regiment's H.Q. when the C.O., Lieut-Colonel Arthur Cumming, and his adjutant, Ian Grimwood, brought

down the leading group at ten yards range. Within seconds Cumming had received two bayonet wounds in the stomach, but though pouring with blood, managed to fight his way back to a redoubt where his battalion Havildar Major pulled him over the wall and into a trench. Ian Grimwood became separated in the darkness but succeeded in reaching a platoon of his men close by. Grimwood now set about directing the withdrawal of the leading companies.

At this point the Japs launched an attack against Cumming's battalion H.Q. With about forty men consisting of signallers, runners and intelligence staff, the C.O. and his Subedar-Major put up a spirited defence making the Japs pay heavily as they advanced. Cumming was then lifted into his carrier from where, firing a Sten gun, he slaughtered a horde of Japs in a grass covered hut in rear of his H.Q. Shortly after this he fainted from loss of blood and it was left to the driver of his carrier, Albel Chani, to drive him away from the battleground. When he regained consciousness he found other wounded men in the carrier with him. A fallen tree across a cutting on the main road gave warning of an ambush. Cumming told his driver to charge the obstacle because there was just room for the carrier to pass beneath the tree where it lay against the bank. Grenades, machine gun and rifle fire from the banks of the cutting accompanied their action and every one of those in the carrier was wounded afresh. Albel Chani himself was hit in both thighs by an armour-piercing bullet. But they got through and lived to tell the story.

Through Cumming's personal leadership and example the 2/12 F.F.R. rearguard action had repelled the Japanese attacks and had mopped up those of the Japs who had installed themselves in key positions within the perimeter. For his great gallantry on this occasion Lieut-Colonel Arthur Cumming was awarded the Victoria Cross.

In the closing stages of the battle a terrific slaughter of Japs took place in the hutments among the rubber. Here they had installed themselves in the brigade office, the officers' mess and the signal exchange. A shower of grenades caught them on the hop.

Subedar-Major Rai Singh now led back the two rearguard companies of the 2/12 F.F.R. At the eleventh milestone a well-conceived ambush on a gravel faced embankment took heavy

toll of that weary force. Two other ambushes on that fatal roadway caught them insufficiently prepared. Not one man found his way through to Gambang that night. Two days later forty men were picked up by a specially organised "survivors" patrol from 5/11 Sikhs.

The Japs did not follow up our withdrawal closely and at Maran we saw only one enemy patrol.

Next day came news of the safe arrival in Singapore of the first British reinforcement convoy. The ships had been unloaded without being bombed by near-based Japanese planes. So by refusing the Japs the use of the Kuantan airfield, if only until the 3rd January, at least something had been achieved.

We took three days to withdraw along those hundred miles of roadway to Jeruntut. On the second day Brigade called upon the services of our adjutant to reconnoitre a harbour further back. So Harbakhsh Singh went off on a motor cycle, crashed, and had to be evacuated with concussion. We could ill afford to lose an officer of the calibre of Harbakhsh Singh at a time like this. Harry Taylor took his place.

We spent the third and last day in a tapioca plantation and here there was no sign of the enemy. It was January 6th and Lynette's first birthday.

At dusk a M.T. company arrived to take us away on the last stage of the Kuantan story. As we swung on to the main road the evening sun was still playing upon the trees making the tops golden coloured against the dark foliage below. At sunset this golden effect first turned to russet brown and then to fiery red, and all the time the road ran on and on along its shadowed way, darkened by the height of the trees on either side.

We reached the ferry at Jeruntut at 10 o'clock that night, but it was after midnight before we began to cross. The river was in full spate, a rushing roaring torrent. The rain came down in buckets, drenching the men as they stood like cattle in the open lorries, only the forward portion containing the driver's seat being enclosed.

The convoy was to form up beyond Jeruntut and I was appointed to command it. My orders were to set off without delay to Bentong, one hundred miles to the south-west. I jumped into the leading lorry, closed the window and took off my equipment. It was nearly 2 a.m., pitch dark and still pouring.

Chapter 4

SWITCH TO THE WEST

THE RAIN had made the road perilously slippery. Under ideal conditions it was a dangerous road, winding its way through hilly country, sometimes rising several hundred feet and then descending again. On one side the ground fell away sharply, forming a sheer drop of fifty to a hundred feet. On the other side it rose at the same steep incline.

Our little Malay drivers refused to keep their distance between vehicles and they switched on the headlights whenever the spirit moved them. But what wonderful little men those Malay drivers were. They had been driving their heavy lorries by day and night for the past three weeks with barely any rest. They were so tired that at every halt they would flop over the steering wheel and drop instantly off to sleep. Little men with big hearts, character and guts.

We drove through Raub in the darkness while it was still raining. The troops were loaded like cattle and were shivering with cold from the wind and the rain. The men in the carriers on the other hand were slowly roasting in the heat from the engines. One carrier skidded on a bend and disappeared over the Khud, the commander being killed outright and the remainder of the crew being seriously injured.

We drove into Bentong in the wet early morning of January 7th and another world awaited us. Here lay a picturesque little place with attractive houses, bushes of bougainvillæa, green lawns and carefully clipped yew hedges. Later the sun came out in all its glory, shining on flower beds of cannas, zinnias, correopsis and cleome, all in bloom. We established battalion H.Q. in one of the decorative houses overlooking the town, and for the rest of that day the war seemed far away.

That day of rest gave us all an opportunity to contemplate, and we dwelt upon our remarkable escape from the Kuantan area. It seemed almost a miracle that we had ever got out of the State of Pahang. The Japs had only to destroy that very

Heath Robinson-ish ferry at Jeruntut and we would have been doomed. All our guns and transport would have been captured, and not one of us could have swum that fast flowing river. They could have done this so easily, for their bombers had been unopposed in the air.

Next day came rumours of another disaster on the western front, this time on the Slim River, where Jap tanks had broken through. We were ordered to move at once to join 11 Division in the vicinity of the Batu Caves. The same M.T. company with the young Malay drivers was to take us to a place called Rawang about twenty miles north of Kuala Lumpur. We started to load up about 5 p.m. just as the mutterings of thunder announced a further downpour, and half an hour later when we moved off we were all soaked to the skin.

John Parkin had gone on ahead and I met him at 2 a.m. in the middle of Rawang town. The battalion got in at daybreak, which meant that the men were all under cover among the rubber trees before the first wave of Jap aircraft came over. There seemed to be masses of troops and vehicles all over the area and the Japs knew we were there. For a whole hour we were treated to a magnificent but terrifying display of low level bombing which I personally watched from underneath the biggest lorry I could find. Considering the number of bombs they dropped casualties were remarkably light.

We managed to snatch some breakfast. De Souza, the Officers' Mess steward, knocked up some hot pork and beans but a low flying Japanese plane made such a noise that he jumped out of his skin and spilt it.

Almost at once all previous orders were cancelled. A sudden Japanese landing on the coast at Kuala Selangor had raised a fresh problem and we were now to be diverted once again to another brigade, the 15th Infantry Brigade.

We set off on foot about 10 a.m. to a road and river crossing six miles west of Rawang where we were to take up a position to prevent the Japs coming down the road from the west. In the early stages we were able to make use of the cover provided by trees and small copses, but later the column became more exposed and the enemy were presented with admirable targets on the open road from Rawang on which to vent their hate. In this way our leading section of carriers caught a packet just as they were topping a crest on the line of advance. One carrier

was completely overturned, another was blown off the road into a ditch and a third was smashed to smithereens.

An urgent message for the C.O. was handed to me by a lost looking orderly from Brigade H.Q. John Parkin at this moment was probably over a mile in front at the head of the column while I was bringing up the rear. I had to reach him quickly and as luck would have it an old friend of Force Emu days came past in his station waggon. I jumped on the running board and as we drove past the wrecked carriers I noticed that one of the dead Sikhs had had a leg blown off. A little later three more Jap machines were diving low over the roadway. Turning into a patch of rubber, we both threw ourselves under a lorry just as their bombs exploded, and there discovered three officers of the divisional staff. We must have stayed there ten minutes while bombs fell all over the place but happily not on top of us. Someone nipped out to get a loaf of bread and a pot of jam so that we could employ this wasted time as pleasantly as possible.

As we emerged from this uncomfortable position an enormous flag was brought to us by two sepoys. It sported the colours of red, yellow, green and black and had been found on the tree tops on the opposite side of the road. Apparently it had been placed there by a number of natives clothed in white whom I had noticed earlier in our advance. These fifth columnists had now disappeared into the thick undergrowth and there was no hope of catching them. This was an ugly reminder that the enemy might be anywhere and these individuals had probably been responsible for the accuracy of the bombing of our leading section of carriers. Even now the road was being used by parties of refugees in their conspicuous white clothing as they walked along wheeling barrows and hand-carts containing all their worldly possessions.

Of course this fifth column business was ridiculously simple for the Japs. They had the enormous advantage of similarity in appearance to the natives of Malaya. For years past they had planted their nationals all over the country as barbers, miners, masseurs and photographers. It seems pretty certain that many of them were working in Malaya for the Japanese General Staff, and their reports on our troop dispositions and movements must have been illuminating to Tokyo. Their fifth column organisa-

tion had been systematically planned and developed over a number of years. It was all very different with us.

When eventually I reached John Parkin he was lying on the ground with a Bren gun, having made a gallant attempt to bring down one of those persistent aircraft. He himself was in good heart and we appeared to have suffered only two casualties, both of them from concussion. He had already deployed two companies astride our present line of communications and a third company had just marched off to take up a position in support of the right flank. It seemed likely that we would be attacked before dusk.

We *were* attacked before dusk, but Parkin had prepared a concentrated mortar and machine gun concentration which kept the Japs at bay. It was Captain Taj Mahommed's company of P.M.'s against whom the Japs launched their forward troops. That company was holding its own when, as was to happen time and time again, the battalion was ordered to withdraw because things were going badly elsewhere.

As a matter of fact we learnt later that General Wavell, the new Commander-in-Chief Far East, after a visit to the front had decided that the 11 Indian Division, after its defeat in the Slim River battle, was temporarily unfit to withstand a further attack. He had therefore issued orders for the immediate withdrawal of all forces to Northern Johore.

The next bound back took us to a place called Labu, half way between Malacca and Gemas. I was sent on ahead and as I drove through Kuala Lumpur, the air raid siren started to wail. I saw hundreds of Chinese and Malays scuttling into drains for shelter. The shops of the town were boarded over giving them a melancholy look. The famous cricket ground in front of the Selangor Club was studded with poles and formidable obstacles of every kind, a desperately depressing scene to anyone who had known this colourful place in peace time.

When the battalion reached Labu everyone was so dead tired that having struggled from their vehicles to their allotted positions, they lay where they were and quickly dropped off to sleep. John Parkin I put in an empty Malay house of attap and wood built on poles which raised it to a height of six feet from the ground, and he was soon fast asleep. My own H.Q. was in a small hut also built on stilts. This modest home I had found to be occupied by a withered little Malay of great age and his

wrinkled wife who was totally blind. I knew just enough Malay words to make myself understood and I had sufficient silver coins to arouse his interest. The result was that we struck up the nicest possible relationship. There was nothing that little old man wasn't willing to do. Time and again he produced boiling water for me, either for shaving or for tea, and he lent me every manner of cooking utensil. He laid out special mats on the floor of the verandah on which my H.Q. staff could sleep and he offered me a clean looking cushion for my head. He hopped about like an elf, the more he could do for us the more pleased he was, and all the time his poor blind wife smiled sweetly from her wrinkled face. This old couple seemed to sum up for me the tragedy of Malaya.

We spent three frustrating days preparing a position we were never called upon to hold. Just before the sun went down on the last day a number of mysterious figures appeared on the far side of the marsh immediately on our front. They were dressed in white shirts, white shorts and shoes, and were completely unarmed. There were about twenty of them and a little later these were joined by four men in khaki with field glasses which they hastened to use. We stared at them in the fast failing light with only a hundred yards of marshland between us. Like a number of other things in this campaign in Malaya it was all very phoney.

By the middle of the month we found ourselves holding the key position astride an important road junction just north of Segamat. West of us at Gemas the Australians carried out a very successful ambush in which they killed large numbers of Jap infantry and put seven tanks out of action. On our front we were plagued by Jap planes but little else. Divisional H.Q. received a direct hit and was forced to move to another position.

Then came a report that the Japs had landed at Muar on the west coast, and indicating that we must be prepared for yet another withdrawal. This was a bitter pill to swallow, for we had come to believe that here near Segamat we were going to make a final stand and that there was to be no further withdrawal. The Australians' successful venture at Gemas and the presence of ack-ack guns for the first time had put an entirely fresh complexion on the situation and had stimulated us all with a measure of much needed hope. Now we were to go back yet once again without having seen a Japanese soldier in our

present position. It was bad enough to fight without air support and without tanks but with command of the seas on both sea-boards in Japanese hands, what could be done? There seemed nothing to stop the Japs nibbling at both coastlines well in rear of our main forces and then infiltrating up the various creeks until they were in a position to cut our lines of communication. Continual retirement like this without a proper fight was a poor kind of tonic for morale.

By way of variety we were now to be loaned to the 27th Australian Brigade for the forthcoming battle on the Muar River. After dark we started to move back through the town of Segamat. The latter was at this hour in flames. No one seemed to know whether this was the result of enemy action or the work of fifth columnists. Later it appeared that it was neither. A number of rubber merchants anxious to destroy as much as possible before the arrival of the Japs, had set fire to their stocks and with the help of abundant supplies of petrol whole streets had soon become engulfed in flames. Meanwhile the tramp of marching feet and the roar of slowly moving traffic echoed through the cool night air while sheets of flame and smoke in heavy and fiery clouds belched forth from the red hot buildings. Alongside flowed the river on its stormy course with the reflection of a blazing town glowing and lighting up the ruffled waters. On the bridge itself General Barstow, the Divisional Commander, was watching the troops pass across. The sappers were busy working on the demolition charges. The guns rumbled by.

A fair-sized battle developed the next day, but then news of the battle further west began to reach us. More disaster; apparently the Japs had been reinforced by a fresh Guards Division and the latter had annihilated the 45th Indian Brigade which had just arrived from India, as green as could be. This created a desperate situation, as the Japs were now within close striking distance of Yong Peng which lay on the main road communications of Westforce, of which the 5/11 Sikhs were part, and which was still some fifty miles to the north.

Things now had to move so fast that General Percival came forward himself from Singapore to control the situation by personal contact with Heath and Gordon Bennett. Two Australian battalions, one from Westforce and one from Mersing on the east coast of Johore, were hurriedly brought across in an endeavour to hold the Japs while the main body of Westforce

was withdrawn. Both Australian battalions fought with great gallantry and achieved their object but only with the loss of many men and practically all their heavy equipment. To make matters worse, of fifty-two Hurricanes, which had recently arrived from the Middle East and had been assembled with great speed, twenty-five had been lost in the first week. How gloomy it all sounded.

The withdrawal continued, and we were soon marching through Labis in the dead of night. We were now nearing the beginning of the end. Singapore seemed absurdly close. Another night on the move, a ten-mile march and then a longish M.T. journey brought us to the northern outskirts of Kluang. West-force was still a fighting concern but that withdrawal had been only just in time.

There can be little doubt that had it not been for General Percival's personal intervention at this stage the whole of West-force would have been lost. By his personal contact with Heath and Gordon Bennett, the three generals were able to take decisions and issue orders on the spot. Had these quick decisions not been taken, the Japs might well have broken through and swept down the central road to Singapore, for there was little at that time to stop them. And in this event they could have prevented — by blowing certain vital bridges behind us — any of our forces ever getting back to the Island of Singapore, a subject which is mentioned in greater detail in the Epilogue at the end of this book. But in any case I wonder if it is widely realised that in order to control that desperate situation in northern and central Johore General Percival had to travel by road — there were no aeroplanes available — from Singapore to the Yong Peng area and back on the 16th, 17th and 19th January, one hundred and fifty miles each day. This meant that his other work at Singapore had to be done mostly at night. The daily routine meeting of the Far East War Council commanded his presence early the next morning. Those who think and talk about armchair Generals would do well to make a study of General Percival's day-to-day programme during those ten exacting weeks of the Malayan Campaign in World War II.

We arrived among a series of hillocks in a large rubber plantation at 4 a.m. We were all absolutely dead beat. Good old De Souza was already there with his band of helpers. We were soon sipping cups of steaming hot tea, our eyes barely open. An

intense longing for a soft bed with clean sheets swept over me and I wondered when we would see such things again. Instead I curled up against a tree where Wallace Beery had laid out my ground sheet and was soon fast asleep.

We all slept late, and while John Parkin was reconnoitering some position west of Kluang, I set off with a Sikh driver in a 15 cwt truck to see what I could do about raising some food for our depleted larder in the officers' mess. At Kluang I found the majority of shops boarded over as in most large towns further north, but one or two Indian shops were still operating. I parked the truck in the main square and with the driver walked into the Cold Storage building. Here we found a riotous mob of Chinese coolies in the process of looting the place. Not a single item of food remained on any of the counters, but an air conditioned ice room was still harbouring fish and rabbits. By hacking away with my driver's bayonet we extracted four rabbits and three large fish.

On the way back I stopped at the Post Office, which I found to be in telephonic communication with Singapore, so that before long I was talking to Ruth at 2nd Echelon. Our conversation could be overheard by all and sundry and in any case I could not say very much about my present whereabouts, but it was some relief to know that she was well and that Lynette was due to sail for England at any moment. I asked her what her own intentions were and she told me that so far very few women had been evacuated but that a scheme was being prepared and would be put into operation if things got much worse.

That night I produced my fish and rabbits and we dined on a table in the rubber. The C.O. of 5 Field Regiment, Lieut-Colonel Jephson, stayed to dinner and enjoyed himself immensely. John Parkin was in his best form, and with plenty of whisky to inspire conversation we sat up late talking about far better things than the present.

Next morning found us on the move once again and this time we were actually advancing. Our days of frustration were over.

Chapter 5

THE ACTION AT NIYOR

IT WAS NOW KNOWN that the Japs were preparing to attack the aerodrome at Kluang. The regiment was therefore ordered to make a flanking march and attack them from the west as part of a general brigade counter-attack. For this operation Parkin was given one battery of eight 4.5 inch howitzers of 5 Field Regiment to act under his command.

At 2 o'clock the regiment set off by route march. No map of the area was available so an old friend of mine, Leslie Davies, was sent from Brigade H.Q. to act as guide, his experience of the country as a whole being considered a sufficient qualification for this extremely unenviable task. Just before we set off we were joined by three volunteer officers who had been sent up from Singapore on being posted to the battalion. First to appear was Carey Foster, a veterinary surgeon, whom Ruth and I had known in peace time and who had performed some technical operation on a cat of ours to make her immune to the affections of all tom cats. With Carey Foster came two rubber planters, Gorman and Blake, both in their early twenties.

As our leading company marched off down the road leading to the west, the Japs attacked the airdrome on our right and we could hear the sound of a full scale battle raging at what seemed to be singularly close quarters. My job was to bring up the rear in charge of the transport which now included twenty-four vehicles of the gunner battery in addition to our own fourteen vehicles — a quite impossible procession to control of over two thousand yards in length. Fortunately the route lay for the most part through rubber with only occasional patches of swamp and jungle, so we hoped to avoid being spotted by Japanese aircraft.

After going about three miles west along the road to Ayer Hitam we swung north through another rubber estate. By six o'clock we had covered eleven miles and must have been about two miles from Niyor. Just as Parkin was about to call a long halt, the leading troops encountered an enemy road block and

an ill-prepared ambush. At the same moment light automatic fire opened from front and flanks, and this was followed almost at once by mortar fire. Down came the first bomb among a group of men belonging to battalion H.Q., wounding an officer called Hutchinson as well as John Parkin's orderly and two other men. Fortunately the battalion formation almost outflanked the road block and good leadership enabled our troops to seize the commanding high ground on either flank. Further forward the leading platoon were shooting at the Japs who were in a shallow trench on a crest beyond the road block. When Parkin went up to join the Sikh commander the latter was beside himself with joy claiming that his men had killed twelve Japs. He was obviously on top of the world and had a complete grip of the situation. But then a sudden burst of light machine gun fire hit him in the shoulder. A moment later his platoon havildar was killed by a second burst.

It was now fast getting dark. Parkin decided to form a perimeter where we were. He had reason to be well content since we were in a good position on the high ground on either flank. The Japs continued to fire from the front and from the left flank and this continued spasmodically far into the night. Once darkness had fallen our men had strict orders not to fire back.

Just before dark I had reached a position one thousand yards in rear of the road block, which was suitable as a harbour for both carriers and transport. The gunner battery had selected a similar position behind some coolie lines and were already unlimbering some of the guns. The officer in charge of the waggon lines asked me for infantry protection and I told him that a company of Sikhs (D Company) and the carrier platoon would provide this. I had just succeeded in getting all vehicles into harbour when Hutchinson was brought in on a stretcher. The ambulance was placed nearest to and facing the road and the doctor and his orderly were soon busy with dressings. I then dragged De Souza and the mess staff out of their truck and told them to make tea. "Hutch" was talking normally but he seemed to be slightly concussed and his arm was still bleeding. I gave him a cigarette with his cup of tea.

Meanwhile everyone was ravenous. As soon as a cooked meal had been dished out to the men in the transport harbour I went in search of food for the C.O. and his officers in front. Leaving

a young officer called Donaldson in charge of the transport, and the wounded in the care of the doctor, I set out along the dark road with a large hamper from the officers' mess truck. De Souza had assured me that it was packed with the make-up of a first class dinner for at least eight of us. Carey Foster came with me carrying the drink. The night was pitch black and the way difficult to follow without stumbling. We tried desperately but vainly to move silently in case a Japanese sniper should decide to press the trigger at an awkward moment.

We found Parkin in a one-room school building, open on all sides above a three feet wooden wall but with an attap roof overhead. The total floor space measured little more than forty feet by fifteen and this was now congested by what seemed in the darkness to be quite a crowd of officers. A carefully shaded lamp gave forth a dim light in one corner enabling Parkin to confer with his battery commander over a map. The latter, Major Don, had brought his O.P. staff with him. Somewhere on that concrete floor his two British signallers were resting. Also in the building I could just pick out Leslie Davies, seated on the other side of John Parkin.

Dinner was greeted with hushed whispers of approbation and Carey Foster and I did the serving. The C.O. warned us that the Japs were lying up only fifty yards away and told us to whisper rather than talk. My memory tells me that everyone invariably shouted for potatoes at the same moment and that the Japs must have had a pretty good idea of what was going on. Twice during the meal a wild burst of fire broke the silence of that jungly atmosphere, but thanks to a liberal supply of whisky the interruption went almost unheeded. Everyone was happy, exhilarated and bursting with benevolence. Strangely perhaps there was no fear of what the morrow might bring. For the moment life was exciting.

After dinner Parkin sent Baja Brown back to the transport with Carey Foster, and the other officers disappeared into the night. Only he and Don remained in the building. Leslie Davies came with me in search of somewhere to bed down and we chose a soft looking spot with a clipped hedge between us and a sentry beyond. I had brought a blanket with me in anticipation of a cold night, so we rolled up together inside it and just lay and talked in whispers, discussing a better life and better times. While we were thinking out an imaginary menu for a



Lieut-Colonel John Parkin, D.S.O. and Bar. "But for his leadership not one of us would have got back to the Island"



dinner we intended to eat together in London after the war, a short sharp crack of small arms fire made us instinctively attempt to burrow in the ground.

On the whole the night was peaceful enough, only the drone of Jap lorries and motor cycles disturbing an eerie silence. But at dawn firing commenced again from both rifles and light machine guns. A little later the Japs opened up with their light artillery and mortars. Shells and bombs began to explode all round the school building.

Fortunately, Parkin had moved his H.Q. over the road at first light and Leslie Davies and I had moved across with them. Don and his two signallers had gone forward at the same hour to a piece of high ground on the left where he had now established his O.P.

As soon as it was light enough to see, Parkin sent out two fighting patrols from B and C companies to find out the numbers and exact positions of the Japs on the flanks and to the front. As the light improved the men of B company picked out two Japanese mortar positions and one gun position on the left front. It was not long before the howitzer battery behind us was dealing with these targets. One of our sections of mortars also opened fire.

Observation was poor except on the left where the ground was clear of trees. Here it was covered with scrub about four feet high for a distance of a thousand yards. Parkin wanted to watch the action of the patrol from C company and this took him across the front to a small rise forward of our right front where he obtained an excellent view of the road block and a stretch of ground beyond. From this viewpoint he was now able to witness a spirited action between this patrol and a formidable body of Japs.

The patrol had not gone as wide as they had been ordered and emerging through the patch of jungle close to its near end saw what they afterwards reported as a party of one hundred Japs by the side of the road. A steep banked nala some thirty yards wide intervened between the two. A section of the patrol descended into the nala and were attempting to scale the far bank when a shower of grenades and two flame-filled retorts caused havoc among them. A young Sikh was killed and two other men badly wounded. A furious fusilade followed with the remainder of the patrol covering their depleted section's

withdrawal, and accounting for heavy casualties among the Japs who had gone to ground west of the road.

A lively duel was also going on away to the left between our guns and mortars and those of the enemy on the edge of the jungle, a thousand yards away. A Japanese machine gun was firing from somewhere in the scrub on a low ridge but no-one was able to spot it. B company's patrol returned with news of Japs moving in the scrub in small groups all over their front. It seemed that we now had a battalion of Japs opposing us.

The gunners were doing a great job. From his O.P. Don had quickly located an enemy light artillery gun and a detachment of mortars. Our guns were on to them in a flash, silencing both targets. Don's two signallers wriggled with delight.

But among the rubber trees behind the front we were not enjoying Japanese artillery and mortar fire at all. Baja Brown was sitting alone behind a large tree stump. Carey Foster and Harry Taylor were standing close by. Leslie Davies and I were taking cover behind the far-too-thin trunks of a couple of rubber trees. Shells and bombs were bursting all over the area, some discreetly distant, some embarrassingly close. We were suffering quite a few casualties. The stretcher bearers were working overtime. There was nothing we could do but just hope and pray that before too long this unpleasant bombardment would cease. Carey Foster was doing the right thing in talking. He was giving us a discourse on the attractions of women in Australia, regaling us with stories of midnight bathing on the sandy beaches of Sydney. Then it began to rain and very soon we were all uncomfortably wet and chilled. Carey closed down with his reminiscences. We just stood and shivered in silence.

John Parkin was in his element. He was well forward with the leading company on the left, having decided to have a go at last. He had planned to attack the Japs with two companies, "A" company commanded by Captain Lyons to secure the high ground astride the road some five hundred yards ahead, "C" company to carry out a turning movement from the right with the object of turning the enemy's flank and getting astride the road behind him.

Lack of news from Brigade was worrying. It now seemed evident that the rest of the Brigade had not advanced from Kluang after all. There was therefore every likelihood that our communications might be cut behind us. Parkin sent a message

stressing this point and adding that there were numerous culverts and one large wooden bridge on the road, the demolition of which would mean abandoning guns and transport in any withdrawal.

The attack was ordered to commence at 10.45 preceded by three minutes' artillery concentration. At about 10.20 Don received a telephone message that there had been an accident at the gun position — a premature — resulting in a number of casualties, including one of our Sikhs. There were also certain difficulties in registering on the new targets because of the trees. Parkin would have to go ahead with his attack without artillery support in the opening stages. This was a severe blow. The mortar platoon would have to do the job instead. All four mortars were soon turned on the artillery targets although the trees made positions for them most difficult to find.

But worse was to follow. Don's O.P. had been spotted by a Jap machine gun and one burst of fire put all three occupants out of the fight. This setback still further hindered the gunners' task and it was some time before McEwan, the new F.O.O., and two reinforcements arrived to set up a fresh O.P.

And with the arrival of McEwan came a mutilated message received over the gunners' wireless from Brigade ordering us to retire to Kluang as soon as possible and by whatever route we chose.

Parkin was now faced with a serious problem. He realised that if we were to remain in our present position much longer there was every likelihood that our communications back to Kluang might be cut. On the other hand he knew that unless the Japs could be dissuaded from following us up, our retirement would be a desperate business. He also reasoned that if we could secure the high ground in front our movements would be screened from observation. He therefore decided to carry out the first phase of the attack and give the Jap a blow from which he would take some time to recover, and further to make him believe that we intended to continue the advance.

Meanwhile the transport was ordered to be ready to move back under carrier escort as soon as Parkin gave the word. Already one section of guns was getting ready to step back.

But now a further setback and with only ten minutes to zero hour. The Japs had worked their way round the left flank, wriggling their way like snakes among the scrub. Now they were

swarming round the transport harbour, one thousand yards behind us, and some were sniping at the gunners' wagon lines. We could hear the sound of a furious battle raging in that direction. Sandy Donaldson's carriers were firing at point blank range. Our Sikhs under Captain Gurmit Singh had manned the perimeter and were giving all they had. One or two British gunners came across from the wagon lines anxious to help. They were soon in action on the perimeter side by side with the Sikhs. With them came their battery sergeant-major, hungry for action, a grand type called Wiggins. Even old Wallace Beery had been pulled out of a 15 cwt truck to fight for his life. The ambulance and yesterday's wounded had left for Kluang early in the morning, but now a second batch of wounded men had collected in the harbour. For the moment they found themselves in the front line. Bullets were striking the canopies of the transport vehicles, including the reserve ammunition lorry. The noise was deafening. Slightly to the flank a platoon of Sikhs charged with fixed bayonets in a furious counter attack. Then suddenly the firing ceased, the din of battle faded. The Japs were licking their wounds, their twenty dead lying in the open. The Sikhs could see many more darting about in the undergrowth, but for the moment all was quiet. This subsidiary battle had been won.

Up in front most of us were beginning to realise that we would be very lucky indeed ever to get out of this situation. If the Japs were already threatening the transport they might also be astride the estate road leading back to Kluang. Worse still it was conceivable that they might even now be preparing demolitions on that one large wooden bridge, the destruction of which would mean not only abandoning the guns and transport but also the wounded. No-one appreciated these possibilities more keenly than John Parkin himself, but no-one would have guessed that he felt anything but supremely confident of the outcome. For there he was with the leading company, waving his familiar stick as he strode determinedly all over the front regardless of his own personal safety. He was now at his very best, the real commander on the spot. I admired his courage and quietly envied his active leadership which was just the example his men needed and expected.

The attack went in at 11 o'clock, a fifteen minute postponement being inevitable following this last diversion. The Sikhs then swept forward with tremendous dash as they fell upon the

Japs at the foot of the crest. The platoon which led the way suffered early casualties from a somewhat ragged fire. Then the rest with shouts of "Sat Siri Akal" charged up the crest. They stormed the Japs with their bayonets bristling in the sunlight, their eyes aglow with the fury of battle. They were riding on the crest of a triumphal wave. The Japs left their positions, some of them throwing away their arms in a desperate bid to escape, others being bayoneted before they could turn. Once on the objective the Sikhs continued the slaughter firing on groups of Japs attempting to get back to cover. Their success was complete. The bogey of the super Jap had been laid bare.

And this was not all. So infectious was this spirited performance of the Sikhs that now a platoon of Punjabi Mussulmans of B Company, finding they were unable to restrain themselves any longer, dashed off up the crest and beyond to bring in an enemy gun and mortars which they could see was now theirs for the taking. Though unauthorised this was certainly courageous, but alas it was also unfortunate. That Japanese machine gun which we had been unable to silence most of the morning, now mowed down the platoon commander and nine men. This meant delay while the wounded were brought back. With them came news that beyond the crest the Sikhs had fallen upon some one hundred and fifty motor cycles and about two hundred bicycles which the Japs had left behind. The tragedy was that they were now to be denied these spoils since the time for our retirement to Kluang was long overdue. Nevertheless, they found time to make some effort to destroy them and succeeded in bringing back a certain number of trophies in the way of Japanese light machine guns and rifles.

The fine spirit of the Sikhs had become infectious. It had created a feeling of intoxication which spread like a flame in the wind from man to man. I felt it myself. It took me forward to the edge of the rubber where I stood and watched with Jemadar Sarwar Khan.

Parkin then came across to join us. He was smiling freely and his eyes were bright. He had reason to smile and it suited him. He told me to get back to the transport at once and there to arrange to send up several boxes of reserve ammunition.

At the transport harbour I found a thoroughly confused and worried little army of motor drivers, officers' orderlies, the mess staff and others. They had not only been attacked by Japanese

infantry earlier in the morning, but more recently they had been through an embarrassing mortar and light artillery bombardment. Shells had been bursting all round the harbour and one had damaged two of the trucks. Poor old Wallace Beery was looking rather like an unhappy bloodhound. His eyes were asking to be back in Waziristan.

Parkin had arranged for the initial stages of our withdrawal to be accompanied by heavy artillery shelling beyond the crest. At the same time a section of carriers moved up to the front making a considerable noise. By these measures Parkin hoped to make the enemy think that we intended a further advance and that he might expect carriers to sweep over the crest as soon as we had removed the road block.

We now had some twenty-five casualties. By 12 o'clock they were all back with the transport and loaded into lorries or trucks.

The first phase of the withdrawal was completely successful. Then another serious setback. The heavy reserve ammunition lorry became ditched. It was resting on its side at an angle of forty-five degrees, the two nearside wheels deeply lodged in the clay-like red soil, about three feet below the level of the road. At a time when every second counted, when delay might mean disaster, this was a misfortune which soon had us all seriously alarmed. The contents of the lorry were far too valuable to throw away at the first sign of danger, so we formed a chain gang and unloaded the lorry, box by box. Then with two carriers, linked by a series of tow chains, and a formidable army of pushers, we eventually uprighted the lorry ready for a slightly panicky reload. We were delayed by this incident for twenty minutes, a very anxious twenty minutes at the most critical moment in the day's operations.

The withdrawal to Kluang had begun. We marched on either side of the estate road at a fast pace. The men were happy and confident, and bubbling over with enthusiasm. Soon the artillery tractors with their guns and trailers started to catch us up and as they passed between our ranks the British soldiers handed out packets of Australian biscuits to their Indian fellow-men, cheering them and generously applauding their triumph of the morning. It was indeed good to see and hear such things, to feel the warm tribute of the British gunner to the Indian infantryman. A wave of deep respect and admiration passed between them like the

feeling of comradeship among those who have shared a common danger. We all marched along on the crest of a wave; a Napoleon brandy sort of feeling.

Only after marching six miles like this did we sense danger. The rear party sent up a message that the Japs were moving across from the right to cut us off. They were too late.

Just before skirting the south-western portion of Kluang, Parkin ordered me to go ahead on a motor cycle to contact Brigade five miles further south. I arrived to find Brigadier Painter conferring with Brigadier Ley, the latter commanding 8 Brigade, the only other brigade of 9 Division. I burst in upon them rather hastily and perhaps a little informally, but was received with enthusiasm as the bearer of good tidings of which they had already received a certain amount of detail. Sipping a cup of hot tea, well laced with whisky, I told them our story. My reward was two thoroughly delighted Brigadiers.

The battalion halted two miles south of Kluang. During this halt all ranks ate an excellent meal. Then we set out again in the darkness to complete the last ten miles of a long, and weary march. At 2 a.m. we marched into harbour four miles north of Rengam. Everyone of us was just about all in. Since two o'clock on the previous day, the battalion had covered thirty-three miles and been in action for eighteen hours.

We fell on the ground in our company areas and quickly fell asleep. It was a cold night and we were without blankets, so that, tired as we were, rest did not come easily. I think we were all very pleased when the dawn broke, bringing with it a cup of tea and a peep of sunshine.

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This action at Niyor was one of the highlights of the campaign. In it the regiment gained a name for dash and determination, coupled with good leadership, and John Parkin earned a well-deserved reputation as a far sighted tactician and a cool and able commander. When contact was first made at the road block on the evening of the 24th January Parkin estimated that only one company of Japs was opposing us. During the night, however, this company was heavily reinforced, the sound of motor transport being plainly audible, and by dawn on the 25th a

rough estimate put the enemy strength at one battalion with mortars and light artillery.

Our own casualties were less than fifty and every one of the wounded was successfully evacuated. The Japanese casualties at a conservative estimate were at least a hundred and fifty, and this does not include those who suffered from our artillery fire on rear positions, which may have been considerable. Many months later a Japanese officer at the Kuala Lumpur prisoner of war camp was reported to have said that there were over four hundred Japanese dead buried in this area to the north-west of Kluang. The next morning's newspapers in Singapore made mention of five hundred Japanese casualties, but this figure was greatly in excess of the truth. One thing was certain — the Japs had been struck an unexpected blow and the extent of his losses was anyone's guess. Furthermore, as a result of the regiment's action, enemy pressure on the aerodrome north of Kluang ceased completely throughout the 25th and thereby enabled the withdrawal of both 8 and 22 Brigades to be carried out unmolested. It also gave time for all necessary demolitions to be carried out and for the wrecking of the runways on Kluang aerodrome. As a result of the latter the Japanese Air Force were denied this jumping-off ground for raids on Singapore at the very time when a large convoy of British ships, bringing the 18th British Division, was approaching that island.

On the morning of the 26th as we lay peacefully at rest, messages of congratulation were received from Major-General Barstow, Divisional Commander, in person; and from Lieut-General Sir Lewis Heath, 3 Corps Commander.

Even Major-General Gordon Bennett, the Australian G.O.C., who at a conference on the 20th had made some scathing comments on Indian troops, was impressed by this achievement and said so, and in his diary credited us with considerably more Japanese casualties than we had claimed ourselves. A few nights later mention of this action at Niyor was made in the B.B.C. news.

Above all it had exposed the growing supposition of the invincibility of the advancing Japanese soldiers, and had shown our men that the big brown chap was every bit as good as the little yellow 'un.

Chapter 6

FIGHTING IN CENTRAL JOHORE

DURING the morning of the 26th I wrote a long letter to Ruth which was interrupted by the arrival of Colonel J. B. Coates, the G.S.O.I., and an Australian Liaison Officer, Major Moses. They had come forward with the Divisional Commander to get full details of our action at Niyor, and while the C.O. was having an animated talk with General Barstow, I gave them all the information they wanted. We sat down on a large fallen tree while they both made copious notes in the true Press reporter's fashion. I found it an intensely stimulating half hour and I enjoyed myself a lot. Before they left I finished off my letter to Ruth and gave it to Moses who was going to Singapore that evening.

Shortly after their departure the C.O. sent for all officers to put us in the picture. He certainly had momentous news to tell us.

We were told that all forces on the mainland of Malaya were to be withdrawn onto the island of Singapore. The 9th Indian Division was to withdraw down the axis of the railway, and as there was no road at all by the side of the railway for twenty miles between Rengam and Kulai everything would have to be carried. Maxwell's 27th Australian Brigade with the 2nd Gordon Highlanders were to retire down the Ayer Hitam — Johore trunk road. What was left of the 11th Indian Division, now commanded by Major-General Billy Key, was to withdraw along the coast road from Batu Pahat. We were also told that the Causeway across the Straits of Johore would be blown on the 31st. Any optimism we had come to feel as a result of our recent success at Niyor now quickly vanished. It was quite obvious that things were going badly again. Actually what had happened, though we did not know it at the time, was that, after a period of silence due to a breakdown of communications, news had just come through that the garrison of Batu Pahat on the west coast was being cut off by a Japanese force which was moving through the jungle to the east and orders had had to be issued for its

immediate withdrawal. This, of course, would expose the left flank of all the troops holding the Ayer Hitam-Kluang area, ourselves included. So, at an emergency conference, a further withdrawal of those troops had been ordered. I couldn't help worrying about Ruth. Now that things were just about as desperate as they could be, would she be evacuated before it was too late? My intuition told me that she would stay as long as she was allowed to.

Baja Brown then left in a truck for Singapore. He had been detailed to reconnoitre the future brigade position on the Island. With him went most of our transport vehicles.

At 10 o'clock we were on the march again, moving to the south of Rengam. 8 Brigade were at this time holding a position at Sungei Sayong Halt. Overhead Japanese bombers were flying around like irritating mosquitoes, forcing us to leave the roads and move with great difficulty clear of them. We finally reached our new position about one and a half miles south of Rengam in the early afternoon.

And what a nightmare of a position this was. It extended from the railway on the west to the first of a network of roads stretching four miles to the east. All these roads converged and joined before entering Layang Layang, a village on the railway some six miles to the south. Our flanks were therefore completely in the air. Furthermore the rubber and scrub provided good cover and good going for the enemy round either flank and for their initial approach. And on the eastern flank the Japs had all those roads to use for their motor transport. We would have to have three companies forward.

Parkin was a worried man. With some difficulty the signallers got a line through to Brigade and soon he was talking to Painter. After stressing the obvious weakness of the position he asked that his battalion should be allotted responsibility for the road approaches only, pointing out that if echeloned in depth down these roads we should have been able to delay the Japs for some ten or twelve hours, at any rate by day. This request was refused.

Painter too was a worried man. He knew only too well that this line which he had been ordered to deny was almost impossible to defend, and that there was every likelihood that the Japs might interpose between his brigade and 8 Brigade during the withdrawal down the railway. He had therefore asked Bar-

stow's permission for the whole of his brigade to go straight back to Layang Layang and take up a position there.

There was a very good reason why Barstow could not agree to this. The truth was that Gordon Bennett, now Commander of Westforce, was concerned with the safety of Maxwell's 27 Australian Brigade, which had to withdraw back to Kulai down the trunk road. And in order to cover this Australian brigade's right flank, we had to cover the cross track from the railway, through the Namazie Estate to the trunk road at Milestone 40½ until 4 p.m. on the 28th.

So we settled down to make the best of a thoroughly bad job.

On the right the pioneer platoon spent their time felling trees. Elsewhere the men were busy digging but this became a hazardous operation because of low flying Japanese bombers hovering around continuously throughout the afternoon. Our unit transport came in for a fearful strafing and we lost a number of valuable trucks. Four vehicles eventually reached Battalion H.Q. and out of one of them jumped Wallace Beery. He looked a far happier man than when I had last seen him in the transport harbour at Niyor. I wondered what had brought him up to the front line when he could have gone back to Singapore with Baja Brown. He had chosen the very worst moment to return. He was too old and too fat for what lay ahead.

Just then I developed a most painful foot. No doubt this was a result of the long marches of the past weeks in boots which were beginning to require repair. My havildar-major on the other hand had mislaid his boots on one of the trucks and now found himself clad only in a pair of P.T. canvas shoes. We therefore agreed to carry out a temporary swop until the havildar-major's boots were brought up on the ration lorry which was due to arrive next day.

That evening a message from Brigade told us that everything on wheels had to be clear of Milestone 435 on the railway by 5 p.m. next day. All the guns and transport still remaining with both brigades of the Division were to go back by the track leading from the railway through the Namazie Estate to the trunk road at Milestone 40½, while the track was still covered by the 27th Australian Brigade.

What exactly were the implications of this message?

It meant that we were to fight for twenty-four hours in a position which was known to be tactically unsound, without

artillery support, without carriers, without mortars, with no reserve ammunition other than dumps, and without any means of evacuating our wounded. Even our wireless sets were to be sent back so that our only means of communication would be the railway telegraph line. Any supplies would have to come up by rail.

Nor was this all. On the afternoon of the 28th we would have to withdraw some ten or fifteen miles to our next position still without any supporting arms or means of evacuating the wounded. No wonder Parkin wore a look of thunder.

Captain Prithi Pal Singh, our Q.M. was ordered to send up two days cooked rations with extra tins of milk and packets of biscuits to reach us without fail by 12 noon next day, since we had then with us only rations for the morning meal on the 27th. Havildar-major Gujjan Singh's pair of boots were to be put on this lorry too.

The men were badly in need of sleep but they were not to get it. Japanese planes had made digging so difficult during the afternoon of the 26th that they had to spend a lot of the night preparing defences in order to make the best of a very bad position.

The next morning Parkin went to reconnoitre the country round Layang Layang. (I can't think why this repetition but I quote from the maps of Johore.) During this reconnaissance he met Brigadier Lay, commander of 8 Brigade, who was still moving back in search of a suitable position well south of Layang Layang. On his way back that twice-named village was bombed, but luckily for all of us Parkin returned unscathed.

During his absence we had prepared two well-laid ambushes and the pioneer platoon had prepared twelve trees for final felling as soon as 8 Brigade were through.

At 1 o'clock the Japs began to shell Layang Layang with heavy stuff. This was the first time in the campaign that we had encountered enemy medium or heavy artillery. Once again we were plagued by Japanese planes overhead.

At 4 p.m. the rearmost troops of 8 Brigade withdrew down the railway passing through Taj Mahommed and his P.M. company with the Japs on their heels.

Japs then appeared from everywhere. They were advancing astride the railway and their mortars were pounding Taj's company positions. An excited signaller reported that the Japs were

on top of him and round behind him, then his line went dead. We could see them moving round our left flank. Their use of cover, both individually and in groups was magnificent and far surpassed anything that even our best scouts were capable of. Our guns opened up putting down a concentration four hundred yards in front astride the railway. Gurmit Singh reported parties of Japs on the high ground west of the road some one thousand yards to our front from which position they were inspecting our lay-out, and also that many motor cycles could be heard moving on the road round their right flank. Back at Battalion H.Q. we were shaken to the core to find a Japanese light machine gun firing at us from the scrub-covered broken ground on our left. Taj had come back to battalion H.Q. for Parkin's conference and was now on his way back again. About 5 o'clock his company's telephone came to life. He told us that all was now well, but he had had an exciting trip back. Several Jap parties had infiltrated into the position, as a result of which his forward platoons had retired two hundred yards. He immediately reformed them, counter-attacked and re-occupied the position, a fine example of good leadership by an exceptionally good officer. But he still had too many Japs behind him on his left flank, in the rubber where it was difficult to see them, and still others east of the railway. Thank heavens the guns were still firing. Even so the threat from the left was so great that Parkin was forced to withdraw two companies to meet it. A rough estimate put the Japanese strength on our left at a hundred and fifty, but more were moving in the rubber beyond and would soon be well behind us. I couldn't help reminding myself that we were required to hold this position for another twenty-four hours, and no doubt the same thought had struck Parkin.

At half past four the F.O.O., a gunner officer called Green, told Parkin that he had to leave because his carrier had to go back with everything on wheels. However, in view of the serious situation facing us at this time, the battery commander agreed that Green should stay and walk back with us. This gave us another half-hour's artillery support and this did much to restore a very ugly situation. With Green, a British Signaller called Winterbottom also stayed behind. The decision for them to stay was right though no-one could have known then what trials lay ahead of these two men.

Our carriers had been active on the network of roads but at

five o'clock they pulled out and went back to join up with the battery of guns. The mortars were due to leave too, but the men of the mortar platoon agreed to carry two 3 inch mortars so that we would at least have some supporting fire in the fight back. This unselfish decision was to try them dearly for the next four days and nights. The four battalion trucks drove off at the same time and a little later the gunners pulled out too.

The ration lorry on the other hand had failed to arrive. This was a tragedy the implications of which it was impossible to measure at this time. It meant that there would be no evening meal for the men that night, and as far as we knew then, nothing for them in the days to come. Of infinitely less importance havilar-major Gujjan Singh wouldn't see his boots again until he got to Singapore—if he ever did get there. I decided to let him hang on to mine and I would go on wearing his brown canvas shoes.

While I was busy supervising the departure of everything on wheels, Parkin had reported the situation to Brigade. He had spoken by telephone to the Brigadier himself and in the course of this conversation had pointed out the dangers of our present position. He then went on to ask Painter for permission to withdraw gradually, as soon as it was dark, down the road to Layang Layang. This, of course, was the obvious answer in our present circumstances. Anyone could see that by the use of the network of roads to the east of our position, the Japs would be well behind us by dawn next day unless we withdrew during the night as Parkin suggested. Nor were we at all happy about the Japs who had been wriggling their way round our left flank during the late afternoon. Parkin went on to point out that just north of Layang Layang at least five roads converged into one, and this one road could be effectively blocked and covered by fire, whereas in our present position he had already been forced to withdraw two companies from the two nearest roads in order to cope with the more immediate threat down the railway. The roads at this time were therefore completely undefended; they were lying open to the enemy's mechanised transport with only a few improvised road blocks which our men had hastily constructed with inadequate tools. Finally, we were now out of touch with 8 Brigade who, we were forced to assume, were well to the south of Layang Layang.

If ever there was a sound case for acting as Parkin suggested

this was it. There was, however, one factor which weighed heavily with Painter. This was Gordon Bennett's insistence that we should hold our present position until 4 p.m. on the following day in order to cover the Australian Brigade's right flank. With this in mind Painter refused Parkin's request. Instead the latter was ordered to withdraw slowly down the railway to join up with the rest of the brigade early next day. The die was cast and it was loaded against us.

Only Parkin's tactical sense saved us from complete disaster. He persuaded Painter that he should be allowed to withdraw his battalion half a mile further south that evening. This was a very necessary precaution as the Japs had fully reconnoitred our present position and all its weaknesses. So, at 7.30 p.m. the whole battalion withdrew silently through the trees, company by company, moving in single file, each man gripping the bayonet of the man in front and slowly making his weary way to the railway. Still in single file we trudged down the railway track, stepping from sleeper to sleeper. My own H.Q. company were allotted a limited area just east of the railway. Here we formed a perimeter and sentries were posted. The wretched men had nothing to eat because of the failure of the ration lorry to reach us that day. They were dead beat and glad to drop on the ground to sleep.

Our withdrawal down the railway had passed off without interference from enemy parties of infantry but had been accompanied by a heavy artillery and mortar bombardment. Light automatic fire had followed on the heels of the two forward companies. The Japs then attacked the position from both flanks, only to find the birds had flown. They had missed our rear party by less than a hundred yards. It had been a very near thing.

Parkin's unerring foresight had once again pulled us out of the trap in the nick of time. I offered up a prayer of thankfulness, then lay on the ground and fell into a deep sleep.

Chapter 7

THE BATTLE ON THE RAILWAY

It was 1.30 a.m. when I woke up to the sound of M.T. movement at what seemed to be ridiculously close range. Every three or four minutes a lorry would rumble across a wooden bridge on the nearest road to the east of our present position. It was a distinct rumble like thunder or like a short burst of machine gun fire, a sinister sound with a sinister meaning. At intervals too could be heard the throb of motor cycles, they too moving over the bridge which told us that the doors of the trap were now fast closing around us.

And here we lay and slept — or just lay and listened — until dawn, when the same incessant rumbling continued. By this hour the lorries had closed up and there could not have been more than two minutes between each rumble on the bridge. A whole brigade must have passed behind us.

Meanwhile 8 Brigade had reached Layang Layang about 10 p.m. at which hour Lay had telephoned Painter telling him that he was moving on further south and would telephone again later. Then, unknown to us, the railway bridge across a stream at Milestone 439½ was blown up contrary to orders. This had two disastrous results. First, it destroyed the railway telegraph line which was now the only communication between the two brigades; secondly it would now prevent rations and ammunition being sent forward.

Also unknown to us at this time was the fact that 8 Brigade had moved further south down the railway towards Sedenak instead of occupying the position selected by Barstow about Milestone 439½. This opened up a wide gap between the two brigades, and the Japs would not be slow to exploit this. Nobody made any attempt to repair the telegraph line, nor were we told about the bridge being blown. Above all we had no idea where 8 Brigade would finally select their next defensive position.

And in bowing to the inevitable, through no fault of Painter nor of his Brigade, the Australians were left to hold their posi-

tion in the Namazie Estate throughout the whole of the 28th with their right flank in the air. It is only right to add here that during the morning the 2nd Gordon Highlanders on the road and the 2/26th Australian Battalion in the rubber withstood successive enemy attacks supported by mortar fire and low flying aircraft. It was during the afternoon however that the Australians felt the full effect of our enforced withdrawal, when a Japanese battalion tried to move round their right flank and reach the main road behind them. The Australian 2/30th Battalion covered themselves with glory on this occasion by launching a counter attack with the bayonet and throwing the Japs back in confusion. This first class battalion was led by Lieut-Colonel Gallegan, an outstandingly gallant commander, not only in the campaign but in the prison camp at Changi afterwards. There, known to us all as the famous "Black Jack," he commanded the 8th Australian Division with firmness and fairness for the greater part of those years of captivity, and earned the respect of us all.*

At 4.30 a.m. Parkin sent out a fighting patrol from "C" company under a young E.C.O. called Gannon to take offensive action against the Japs who were using the roads. The latter was given a route which would bring the patrol back to Brigade H.Q. by 10 a.m.

At 8 a.m. we were ordered to withdraw to join up with the rest of the brigade at MS 435 on the railway. Parkin was most anxious to do this because he had heard that the rations which had failed to turn up yesterday had been dumped somewhere close to MS 435. Apparently a Volunteer Officer had set out in his truck to deliver the rations to us while the battle was going on. When, however, he had arrived at Brigade H.Q. he was told to dump the rations and return at once. When Parkin heard this his face turned lobster red and from his tongue came a stream of incoherent oaths. For the sake of saving a 15 cwt truck the whole battalion were to go hungry. Just how hungry was already beginning to worry him.

*During the first six months of our captivity it was Major-General C. A. Callaghan, C.M.G., who, as Gordon Bennett's successor, restored the morale of the Australians. General Percival in his book "The War in Malaya" writes of Callaghan: "A more loyal and courageous man I never met." Callaghan was taken off to Formosa in July 1942, leaving "Black Jack" Gallegan in command of the Australian Division.

We reached MS 435 by 9.30 and there we found the two other battalions of the Brigade, the 2/12 Frontier Force Regiment under Hawkins and the 2/18 Royal Garhwal Rifles under Hartigan. As a result of heavy losses up-country these two battalions were mere skeletons. They were halted west of the railway while the clatter of machine gun and rifle fire was coming from the other side. The Japs were right on top of us.

Our rations for two days — from the evening of the 27th to the evening of the 29th — had been dumped in a railwayman's hut on the side of the railway track at the top of a steep embankment. The staff captain told me I could collect them from this hut if I cared to go and fetch them myself. I therefore detailed three men to come with me, and I also assembled the company quartermaster havildars to whom I would have to distribute the rations. Before we climbed up the embankment Hartigan warned me that the rubber on the opposite side was alive with Japs and that I could get the rations at my own risk. We must have presented easy targets as we ran along the rail track for thirty or forty yards before diving into the hut with our hearts very much in our mouths. Here we were in for a shock. The sacks had been opened and were less than a quarter full. A heap of chapattis and dal were scattered all over the floor. Instead of two days rations there was hardly one complete meal. It was possible that the Japs had been responsible for this looting, but whoever it was, there was no doubt who were going to be the sufferers. The wheel of Fortune was scarcely turning in favour of the 5/11 Sikhs.

For the men were setting forth on empty stomachs at a time when they were likely to be called upon to rise to unknown heights of energy and vitality. They had been fighting, marching and digging almost continuously for the last four days and now they were about to take on the role of advance guard in the most severe test of all. With the Japs now between us and Singapore we would have to fight a bloody battle if we were to get through, and it looked as if that battle had already begun.

But first — for a change — some heartening news. Gannon's company returned fifteen minutes late but with the story of a minor triumph. They had a difficult march through rubber and swamp and patches of jungle, in pitch darkness. They arrived at a ridge overlooking the roadway soon after dawn and from there they spotted over a hundred Japs seated on the roadside eating

breakfast. A group of officers, separated from the rest, were in conference. Having crept into position Gannon blew his whistle and every light machine gun and rifle in the company opened fire at a range of a hundred and fifty yards. The Japs had bolted into the rubber leaving over seventy killed and wounded on the roadside.

The Brigadier's plan was to move back through the rubber keeping west of the railway and to attempt to get astride the railway at Layang Layang. We had no idea where 8 Brigade were and we were in communication with no one. We were now very definitely on our own.

There was no definite route or track. We simply marched on a compass bearing, keeping the railway in view, over undulating ground and for the most part in rubber. The Japs were keeping track of us on the other side of the railway.

Then they opened up on the vanguard and a number of men fell. Very heavy fire from the front and left flank made us realise they were here in some strength. They had crossed the railway to dispute our passage.

Quickly recovering from their surprise, our leading platoons fixed bayonets and with loud cries of "Ya Ali" and "Sat Siri Akal," charged forward and were soon swallowed up in a dense patch of jungle bordering the railway. For the next half hour the noise of firing and shouting in front was augmented by the bursting of mortar bombs in the rubber where the rest of the 5/11 Sikhs were grouped. Parkin was magnificent. Having quickly taken over control of the battle, he was now down in a hollow, directing operations with the aid of his familiar walking stick, completely oblivious of the mortar bombs which were bursting all over the area around him. Up on the higher ground I stood with the men of rear battalion H.Q. immediately in front of Brigade H.Q. The sound of firing continued, increasing rather than diminishing in intensity. Once again I thanked God for the profusion of rubber trees against which Japanese bullets were striking. The mortar bombs were giving us hell. Four men who were standing nearby were wounded. They were brought back to an improvised R.A.P. close to Brigade H.Q. Some of our men were now fighting the other side of the railway, contrary to Parkin's orders, and these had to be pulled back. And now Japanese aircraft were skimming the trees obviously looking for

us. Maybe we were too close to their own troops as they dropped no bombs.

On our route to the south lay a swamp clothed in thick elephant grass rising to twice the height of man. The map showed a ridge, some fifty feet high immediately south of the swamp, which not only lay across our line of advance, but, abutting on to the railway, overlooked the area of the fighting. Parkin realised that we must seize this ridge before the Japs got there, and he ordered Gurmit Singh to lead his company of Sikhs across the swamp.

I could see Parkin down in the low ground on the edge of the swamp. He alone had directed the battle; the honours of the day were his and his alone. My conscience now took me down the slope to his side and I asked him how I could help. He told me to bring up the pioneer platoon as stretcher bearers and organise a means of evacuating the wounded. He warned me to be careful of snipers in the tree tops and in the high grass. In the thickest part of the elephant grass I ran upon two Sikhs lying across the pathway. They were both dead, their legs and arms outstretched, blood clotted in deep ruts upon their faces, their long black hair unfurled across their shoulders.

Getting the casualties back was no picnic as they had to be carried over the ground still swept by enemy fire. The pioneer platoon were magnificent and no-one did a finer job than Jemadar Sher Khan, the platoon commander. I saw this undersized Mohammedan carry a wounded Sikh, far bigger than himself, for the best part of two hundred yards with Japanese bullets sweeping his pathway. Doesn't this make a mockery of all that communal butchery between Mohammedan and Hindu when a partitioned India became independent?

Gurmit Singh's company had in the meantime crossed the swamp and seized that vital ridge. The Sikhs were often up to their arm pits in the swamp. Elephant grass and bushes formed a barrier maddening in its delay. But they won through and the seizure of that ridge could have been the deciding factor in the fight.

The Japs had been driven across the railway and the firing had now ceased. We had suffered nearly fifty casualties of which ten had been killed, and this at the very time when we had no means of evacuating them. We had only twelve stretchers and we had no food. Medical equipment was now limited to a small box

which the doctor carried and this contained an entirely inadequate supply of drugs. Treatment of the wounded was therefore of a regrettably rough nature. We set to making stretchers with poles and ground sheets.

After the fierce din of battle an eerie silence now fell upon the scene. It seemed fairly certain from the absence of any sounds of battle ahead that 8 Brigade were nowhere near us. So the Brigadier decided to abandon the original objective of Layang Layang and to make a flank march through the jungle west of the railway in a desperate bid to make contact with 8 Brigade. I was told to follow on with the wounded. As we could not attempt to progress through the swamp we were forced to follow a gravelled track in the open where we could have been spotted by Japanese aircraft had they still been around. Even so we had to cross a wooden bridge which had been completely destroyed except for one single wooden plank. This breasted a twelve foot span, below which was a drop of fifteen feet into the shallow waters of a stream. The plank, being a foot wide, presented no difficulty to those who could walk, but to the long procession of stretcher bearers with the wounded there was absolutely no hope of crossing this obstacle. It was then that Bernard Harvey, the Staff Captain, came to my rescue. Together we found a strong length of wood which acted as a second plank and somehow the wounded were brought across.

Behind us the other two regiments of the brigade were following on slowly. Very soon a halt was called to take stock of the situation, and now our two flank companies withdrew from their railway covering positions to rejoin us.

We had twenty-five stretcher cases and ten walking wounded. Three of the latter had been shot in the foot but I noticed that they had already provided themselves with strong sticks with the aid of which they had been hobbling along gamely, their faces grim but their spirit as resolute as ever. Somehow we had been able to produce blankets and in these each stretcher case was now carefully wrapped. The mess staff set to making tea which warmed their chilled limbs as they lay motionless and silent. One or two had been badly wounded, they had been hit in the stomach and I wondered if they would live till nightfall. I walked from man to man and found myself quite speechless, though I longed to be made capable of uttering words of comfort, encouragement and hope. As it was the things I was

feeling inside me and the words which must have been written in my eyes were all that I had to offer. These hideous moments were repeated to me time and time again during the next seventy-two hours when my place was close to the wounded in a long strung out column of weary and hungry men. Their groans were clearly audible in the quiet of the night whenever the column was halted. There was to be no relief, no comfort, no food, only one cup of tea on the 29th and again on the 31st, no sanitation, and above all only a very faint ray of hope with which to infuse them with the will to stick it out. Yet in all this time I never heard one single complaint from any of these marvellous men whose sufferings must have been unspeakable.

MALAY PENINSULA



MAIN ROADS ———
ROUGH ROADS - - - -
STATE BOUNDARIES - - - -

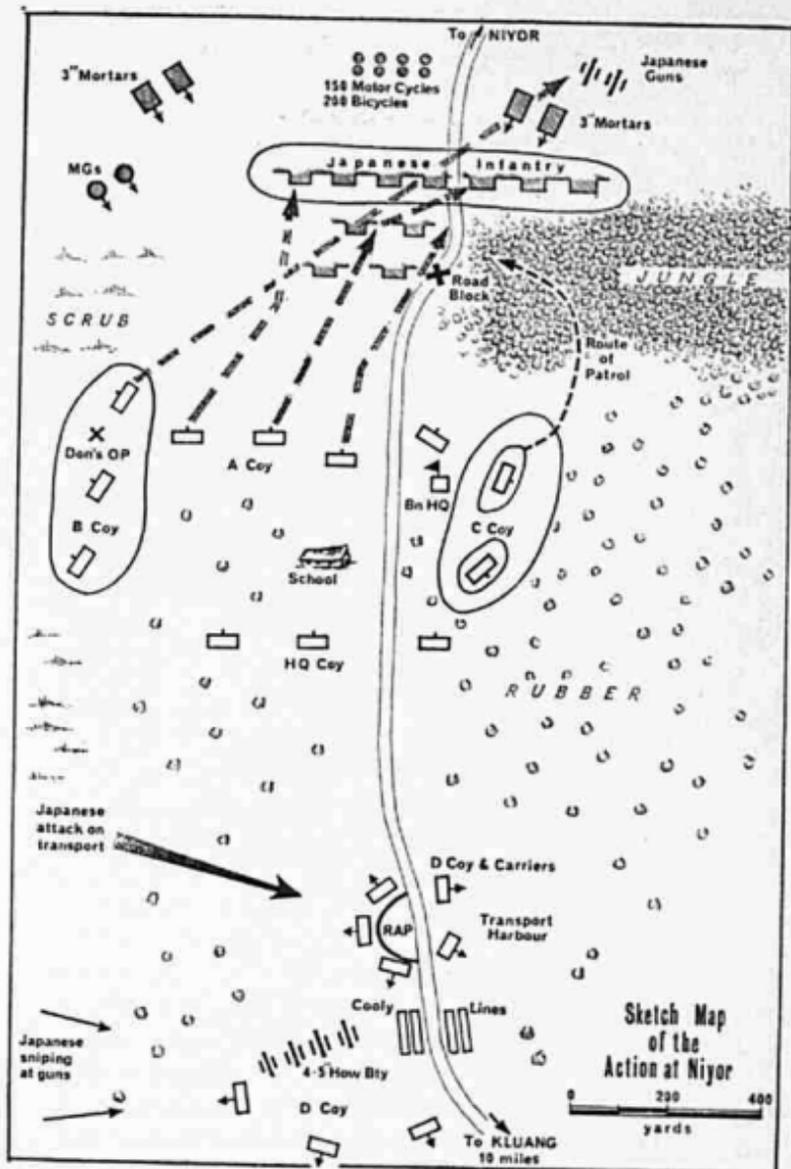
SUMATRA

SINGAPORE

THE KUANTAN ZONE

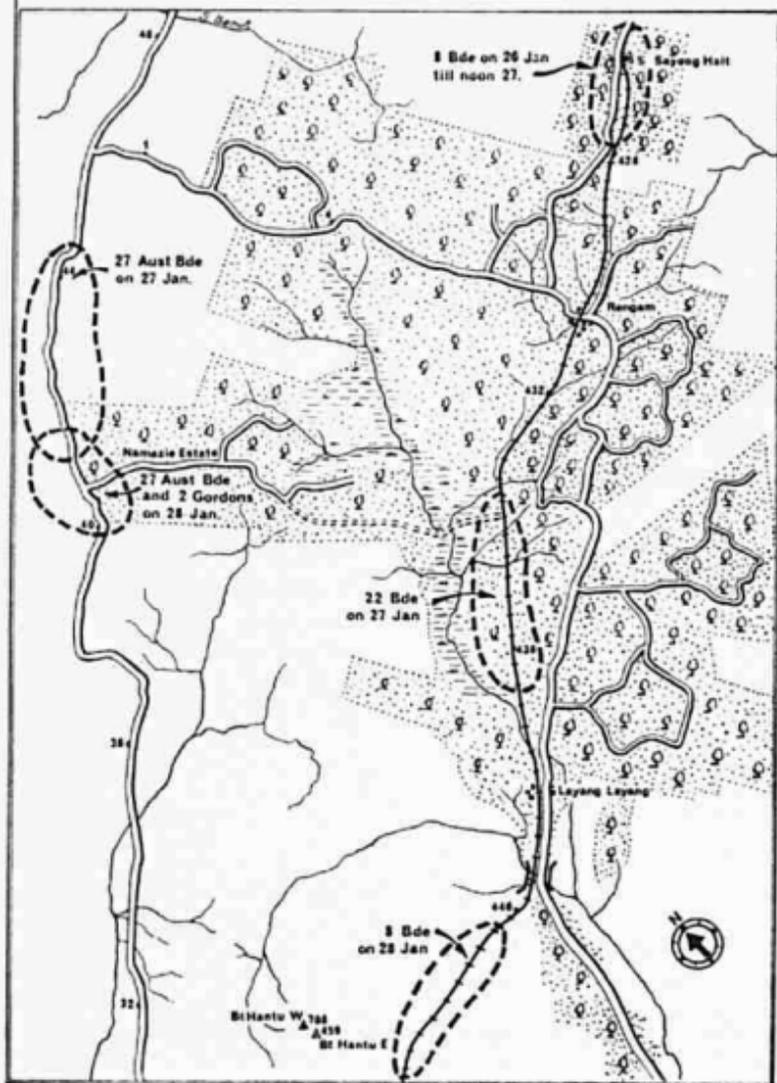
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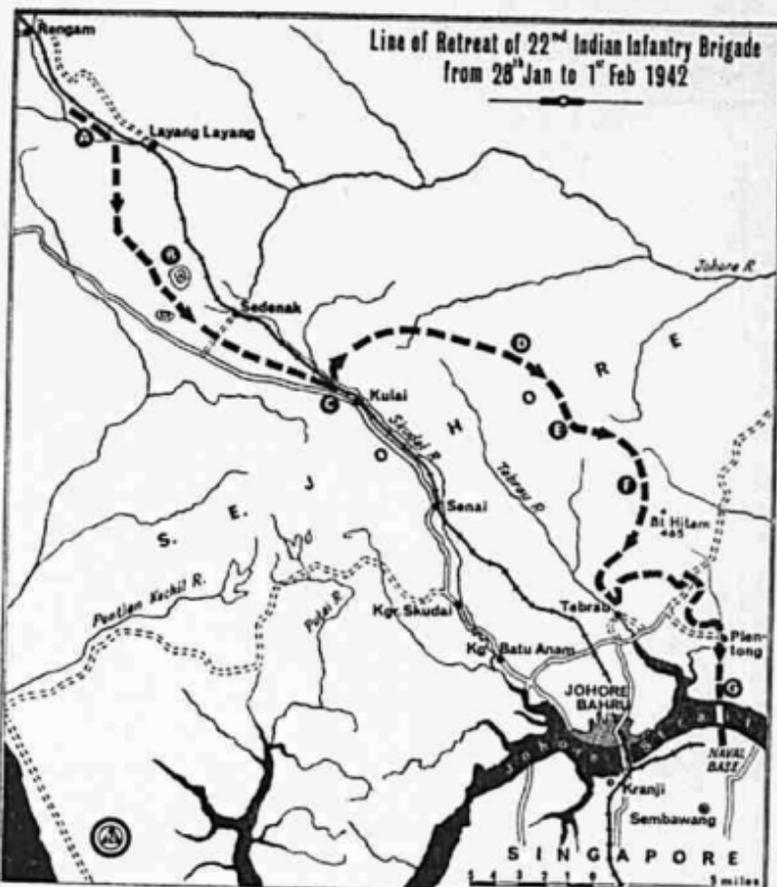


Retreat down the Trunk road in Southern Johore

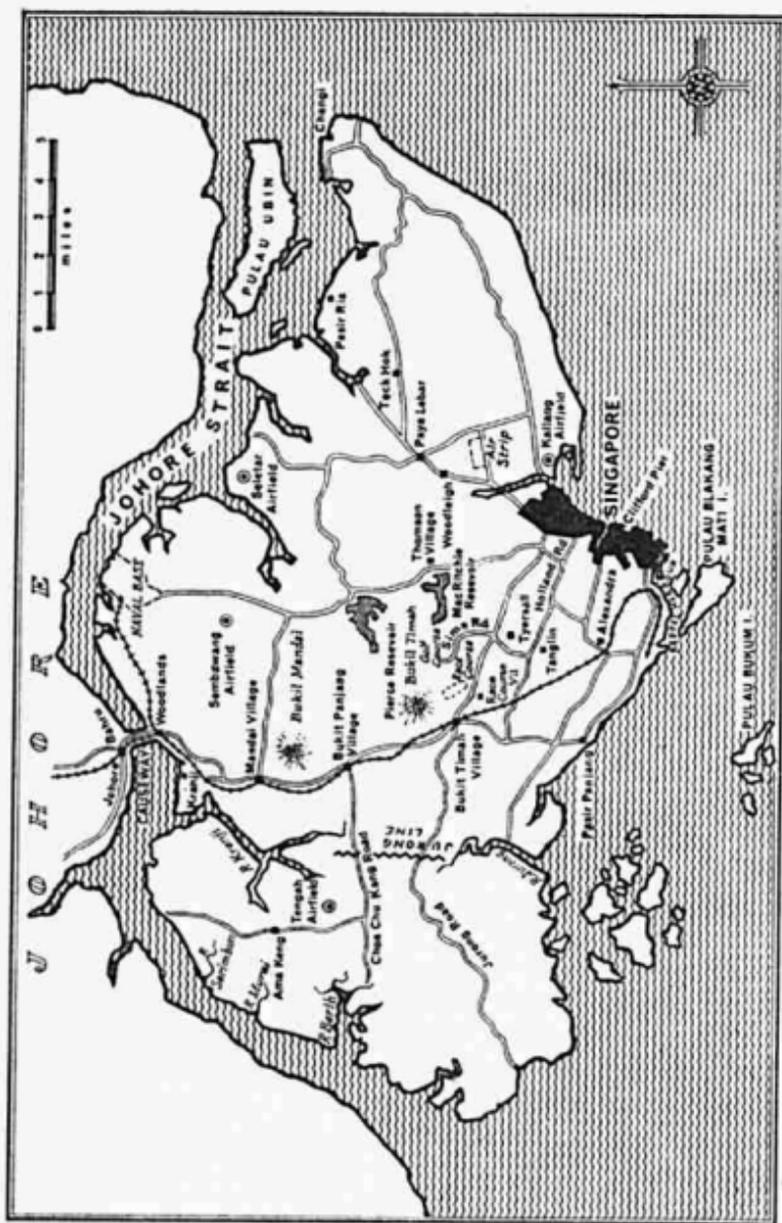
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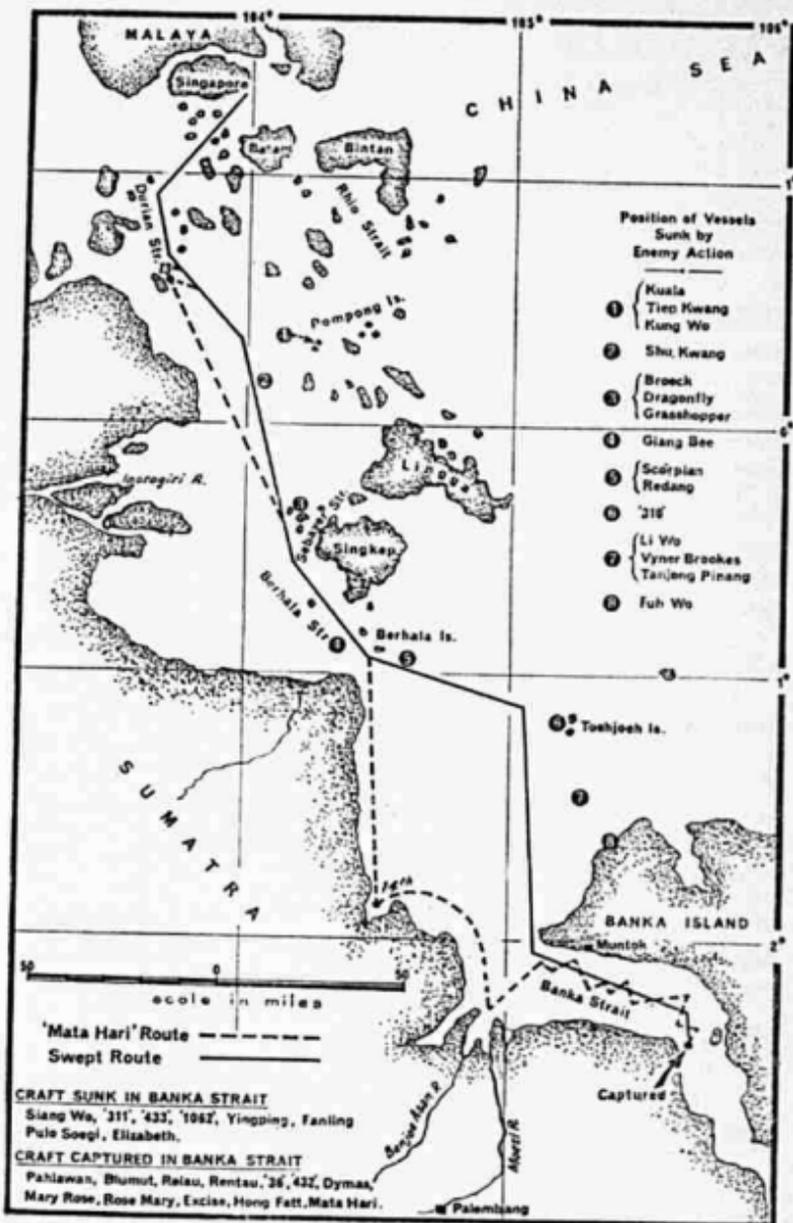


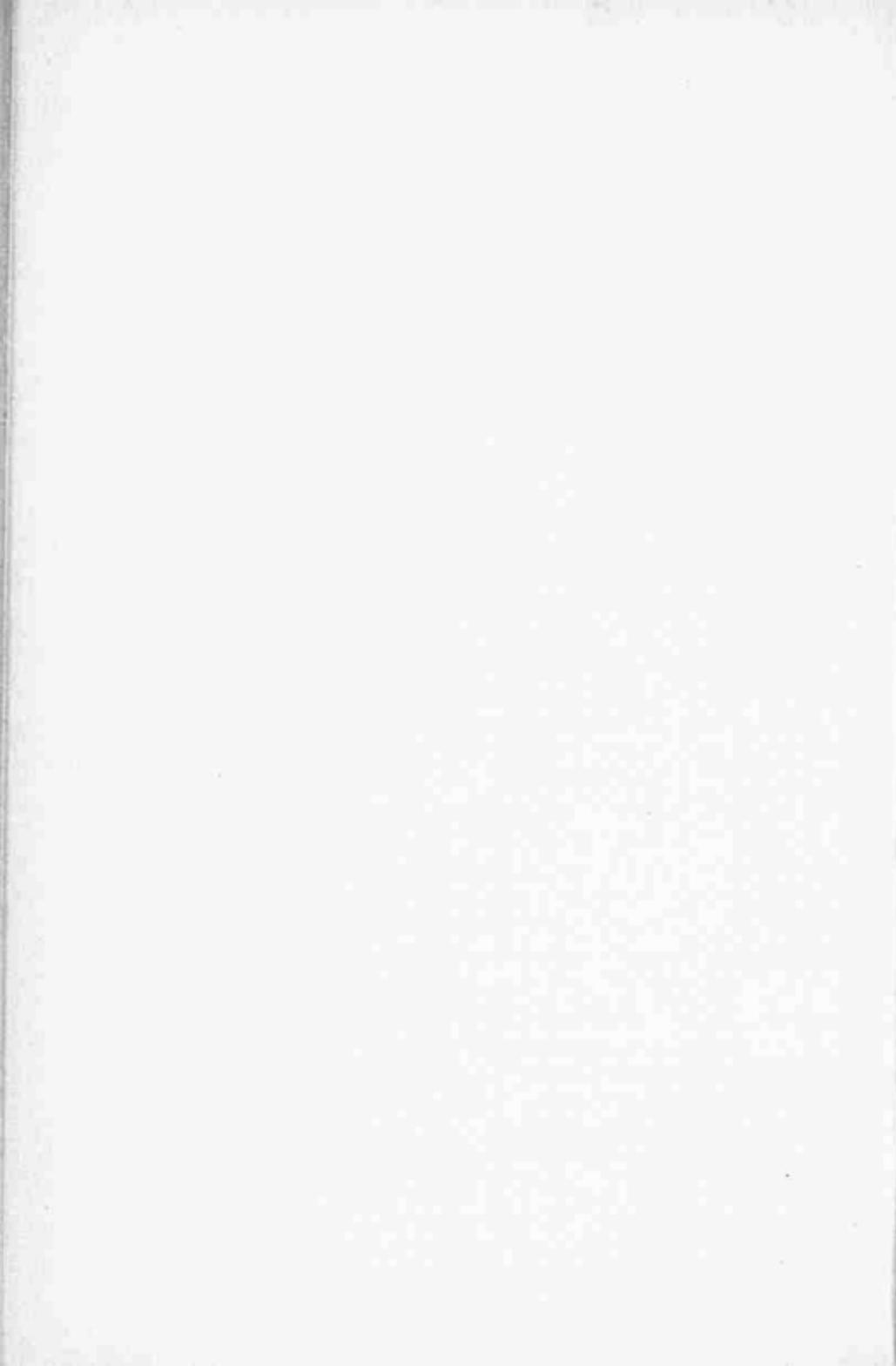
Line of Retreat of 22nd Indian Infantry Brigade
from 28th Jan to 1st Feb 1942



- A The battle ground on the 28th Jan.
- B Bukit Hantu (The Hill of Ghosts).
- C Where we nearly walked into a Japanese camp, and where we lost B Company.
- D Where we left the wounded in a Kampong with a dispensary.
- E The scene of the ambush, and where we covered the withdrawal of the rest of the Brigade.
- F Where we became motorized.
- G Where the few survivors crossed the Straits of Johore.







Chapter 8

THE PITILESS JUNGLE

SHORTLY after daylight that day Major-General Barstow, anxious about his 22 Brigade, had set off up the railway in a trolley car with two staff officers. He wanted to confer with both his brigade commanders. From Lay he learned of the premature demolition of the bridge. When, however, his small party arrived at the bridge they found that it was still passable on foot. So they walked along the railway embankment towards Layang Layang station hoping to contact Painter. Then a burst of rifle fire at close range sent them leaping down the embankment, the General to the right, his two staff officers to the left. The latter eventually got back to Divisional H.Q. but Barstow was never seen again. He was killed before he could reach the edge of the jungle. This tragic loss of our gallant and gifted Divisional Commander remained unknown to us for the next four days.

While we were licking our wounds Painter held a conference to decide on the next move. One conclusion emerged before all others and that was the realisation that we could not afford to fight further battles like the one we had just had for the simple reason that we could not evacuate casualties. Furthermore, apart from the two 3-inch mortars which the mortar platoon were carrying with great fortitude, we had absolutely no fire support. Painter therefore decided to abandon any attempt to push through down the railway to Layang Layang, and instead to make a flank march through the jungle. We were about to do the vanishing trick.

The 5/11 Sikhs were still operating as vanguard and the Brigadier ordered Parkin personally to lead the march. As the way would be through thick jungle a platoon of the Garhwalis was brought up to the head of the column to cut a way through with their kukris.

We set off due west and after moving freely through the rubber for a mile we turned south into jungle. Here we quickly formed single file and followed on down a narrow track which

led in the right direction for three quarters of a mile, then stopped abruptly on the edge of a swamp. Not wishing to launch the wounded through the swamp, the Brigadier and Parkin counter-marched down the length of the column and set off once again along a second track. This, however, also stopped abruptly after a short distance, and judging by the noise merely led to an enemy battery position. A second counter-march found us following along the original track once again. We had now wasted the best part of two hours and everyone was getting restless and irritable. Darkness was fast approaching, the air was damp and chilly and both officers and men were tired and hungry. But there was no prospect of food. The wretched men carried nothing beyond the scanty ration of the morning and most of them had already eaten this. The officers' mess staff carried a mess basket, but they were marching at the extreme end of H.Q. company, separated from me by a long line of men moving along a hacked away pathway, and the chance of getting to them was remote. Nor would it be possible to send out to individual officers in the column whatever the mess basket might contain. So, as the men were to go hungry I resigned myself and our officers to a period of starvation too.

As a battalion we were now strung out in a long line of some fifteen hundred yards, and behind us followed the other two battalions of the brigade, also in single file.

We plodded on throughout an intolerable night. Every three or four minutes the column would halt and officers and men would fall on the ground and drop instantly off to sleep. The cut away track along which we were moving was not wide enough to accommodate any one of us lying across it at full length and as we were advancing in very close formation — each man feeling for the bayonet of the man in front of him — we were far too bunched at every halt to allow for the stretching of cramped and weary limbs from front to rear. This soon became a nightmare, the ever-growing desire for sleep and rest being frustrated by the lack of space in which to lie. Men therefore dropped where they were in a huddled heap and propped themselves up in a sitting position, one against the other, their senses too numbed even to feel the leeches and ants on their skin. When they advanced at a wearisome pace of a quarter of a mile an hour they dragged their legs along in a kind of dream, still with their eyes closed. Dear God, how tired they were. The



The late Subedar-Major (Hon. Captain) Sucha Singh,
O.B.I., 5th/11th Sikhs



Captain K. P. "Drag" Dhargalkar, O.B.E., 3rd Cavalry.
"The Japs put him in one of the infamous Bangkok cages
and kept him there for eighty-eight days"
(Chapter 33)



stretcher bearers struggled on manfully though the weight of the wounded was driving the stretcher poles into their shoulder bones. The way was dark and narrow, but this was not all. Numerous tree trunks lay fallen across the way, some of them three feet high, and over each the wounded had to be carried. Thank Heavens I had a torch. And so the march went on through the grim hours of a dark and seemingly interminable night.

Slowly the outline of the trees grew clearer and soon the sky was light behind them. The high-pitched notes of the monkeys, like a warbling quartet, came echoing through the jungle on the morning breeze. The sun was rising but we could not see it. Dawn at last had broken to find the column on the edge of a swamp; weary, hungry, grimly silent. Five of the wounded had died.

At this point the Brigade Intelligence Officer was sent on ahead with five men of the Brigade Intelligence Section to make contact with 8 Brigade and to warn them that we were coming. This little party was mistakenly fired on by the rear party of 8 Brigade but succeeded in getting through. They eventually contacted Brigadier Lay well south of Sedenak, a very fine effort indeed. As a result of this enterprise a large stock of food was dumped for us at a certain camp in the Tebrau Estate, beacons being lit to indicate its whereabouts. One or two splendid members of the Malayan Volunteer Air Force even flew their light defenceless aircraft in an effort to find us so that a message might be dropped. Unhappily these well-meaning gestures were fated to meet with failure and we remained unseen and unfed to the end.

During the night an Indian Medical Officer had somehow joined the column. He said he had been captured by the Japs just south of Layang Layang at about 10 a.m. on the previous day. Under dire threats he had been sent with a letter written in English to be delivered to Indian troops, telling them that the Japs were the friends of all Asians, that they wished only to fight the British. The letter enjoined the Indians not to fire on the Japs but to give themselves up, when they would be well treated. This officer had delivered the letter to Brigade H.Q.

At 11 a.m. a long halt was called and I went forward to the head of the next company where I found Parkin and the brigade staff. The wounded were brought up at the same time. The

officers' mess staff arrived to put the kettle on to boil close to a stream. Each of the wounded men was given a cup of tea. I passed each stretcher in turn and once again found myself tongue-tied for want of adequate words with which to address these gallant men. The walking wounded were magnificent too. A young Punjabi Mussulman with his right hand badly shot away was smiling almost cheerfully and smoking a cigarette with his other hand. His companion, another young P.M., had his foot heavily bandaged. He was hobbling about with a pole as support, as though nothing untoward had happened. Their spirit was something quite out of this world. After the guts they had shown in the battle of the 28th I knew Parkin was determined that we should see them through now, no matter what it cost us.

Yet this was not the feeling among the majority of officers in the Brigade. There was already whispering about the question of sacrificing the wounded, there was talk too that if the speed of our movement was to be dictated by the carrying of the wounded then there was no hope at all that any of us would ever get back to the Island. Knowing this, Parkin asked leave to proceed with his battalion independently. The Brigadier, however, refused this request, and so the advance went on at the same wearisome speed.

The actual carrying of the wounded presented a problem in itself. By this time we had twelve stretcher cases. To each of these six men were detailed as carrying party. Four men bore the stretcher while the other two walked behind ready to relieve two of the others. In this way each of the six was afforded certain periods of rest during his four-hour tour of duty. The men were carrying out this exhausting task without complaint though God knows it provided another trial on top of all they had been through during the last five days. There was no question that they were infinitely more exhausted than the men of the other two battalions in the Brigade.

That night we passed through several stretches of swamp. There was then the pitiful picture of stretcher bearers floundering in the bog up to their knees while the stretchers lurched on their side at an angle, and the wounded men clung helplessly to the shafts at the sides. Their cries of alarm in the night had a haunted ring about them.

Later we came to more difficult country still. Here were steep

jungle-clad hillsides intersected by ravines and steep nalas. Heavy rain had made each foot-hold insecure. Over such country we found it too difficult to negotiate the wounded so we turned off south in order to skirt the furrowed line of lower hills.

It was about this time that I looked round to see the faithful Wallace Beery close behind me. He had been out of touch with me since the previous day and I was worried that this ordeal might prove too much for him. Shortly afterwards I found him helping to carry one of the wounded and my admiration for this grand old warrior returned with a rush.

A cut away track now led us along the edge of a long winding ridge, but soon the ground sloped away down a ragged steep incline. The men were slipping, loosening stones of all sizes which came tumbling down upon the men below. The stretcher bearers were slipping too, swearing and groaning under the weight which was bearing down on their shoulders, and shouting words of caution to those around them. They were stumbling over rocks concealed in the undergrowth. I stood in the darkness and watched them pass, my torch giving short-lived guidance. Weariness and weakness suddenly seemed to grip me. I felt my head aching with fatigue. The desire to lie down and sleep was almost overpowering. The tin helmet on my head was biting into my forehead. It was just about more than I could stand, and only half realising what I was doing, I whipped it off and hurled it into the darkness and down the slope. The cool night breeze then blew lightly through my hair and brought momentary comfort with it.

It was then that Subedar Major Sucha Singh came up to join me. I could sense by his manner that he thought I was at the end of my tether and in need of help. Together we struggled up the hillside on the far side of the ravine, and as he reached the top himself, he turned to offer me his hand so that he could pull me onto the level pathway above. Although he was old enough to be my father, and probably more tired than I was myself, instinct had led him to perform this simple act of chivalry. When we were once again walking on the level, he pulled out a bottle of brandy, and having carefully wiped the neck with his handkerchief, he offered it me to drink. I had given him that bottle over a week ago after a little illicit looting in Kluang. He then took several swigs himself and we both smiled and felt much better. Despite the rigours and privations of the last few

days, his manner, fatherly and kindly, was tinged with a courtesy and politeness which made me feel both meek and humble. I have heard it said that there is no finer gentleman in the whole wide world than the Indian. I do not dispute this.

Dawn on the 30th found us on the edge of a wide belt of open undulating country stretching for miles from east to west. The whole area was under pineapple cultivation. So here at last was food.

Before emerging from the comparative safety of the jungle the Brigadier called for all C.O.s to meet him for a conference at the top of a very high hill immediately east of us. This was the last buttress of the range whose lower contours we had been wearily traversing during the night. We quickly identified it as Bukit Hantu, which being interpreted means "The Hill of the Ghosts."

Parkin told me to collect company commanders and to meet him at a rendezvous near the top of this feature. Little did any of us realise that it would take us one and a quarter hours of climbing to reach the top.

It was a scorching day and the sun was blazing. We set off scrambling from rock to rock and halting repeatedly to recover our breath and to eat a pineapple, which even on this unusual feature were plentiful enough. And how good it was to hack a large hole in the centre and plunge one's face into the inviting gap. Nevertheless, the exertion of this climb after two days and nights of incessant struggle without sleep and food put a very severe strain on us all.

The view from the top, however, provided compensation, for there below us stretched a large portion of eastern Johore. Away to the east we could see the blue China Sea. The rest of the landscape was made up of vast belts of jungle and rubber with a few scattered areas of open country dotted about. Immediately below us lay an enormous stretch of pineapple plantation which was interspersed with numerous ravines of rich red soil. One or two native houses gave off coils of smoke and round one rambling house a group of people had collected. We took out our field glasses fearful for a moment that they might be Japs.

That exhausting climb might have had tragic consequences. As it was the Brigadier failed to reach the summit and the three C.O.s decided themselves on the next move, that the Brigade

should advance across the pineapple plantation in open formation and make for a belt of rubber on high ground away to the south. We expected Japanese aircraft overhead but the risk had to be taken and by careful camouflage and concealment we hoped to make the journey without being seen.

Having rejoined the column below it soon became apparent that our Brigade Commander was missing. Then suddenly his orderly appeared obviously in great distress. He reported that he had left the Brigadier half way up the hill in a state of great exhaustion, having been ordered to return to the column himself. The indomitable Parkin therefore went up the hill once again with his own orderly and discovered the Brigadier outstretched upon the grass in the shade of a large boulder. He was all in and told Parkin to take over command of the Brigade and leave him where he lay. Parkin, however, persuaded him to make the effort and with difficulty he and the orderly brought him safely down to where the head of the column was now resting. Here our own medical officer attended to him, and after half an hour's rest he declared himself ready to continue the march.

Let it be said here that this recovery of our Brigade Commander was a most courageous performance by a man who even at the outbreak of war had been far from fit. Since then the mental as well as the physical strain imposed on him by the rigours of the last seven weeks' retreat must have tried him sorely. And now he had become involved in perhaps the severest test of all. From now on he had only his courage to take him along.

Nor was the Brigadier the only casualty at that time. David Davidson, his Brigade Major, was also in a bad way, and Parkin too though looking as determined as ever, was feeling the effects of his exertions. Before moving off again we made some tea and gave a cup to each of these three as well as to all our wounded.

Then we emerged from the comparative safety of the jungle grass in which visibility was nil. The men camouflaged themselves from head to foot with tufts of greenery sprouting from every item of their clothing, giving them the appearance of a band of Zulu chieftains. The wounded too were covered in green foliage. We looked indeed a strange entourage. The men, of course, were ravenous. They fell upon the pineapples like a pack of hungry wolves. Deployment down to sections had fol-

lowed the moment we left the jungle. Very soon the formation assumed the shape of an enormous Union Jack.

Japanese squadrons showed up in the skies and not less than a dozen formations flew overhead during those two otherwise quite pleasant hours of plodding across the open. One or two individual machines scouted around for a time, sometimes descending embarrassingly low. By remaining still or by lying in a furrow the men escaped detection, and though there were many moments of uncertainty we finally reached the cover of the rubber trees unseen.

On our way across the plantation we picked up seven Dogras belonging to the Baluch Regiment who were clothed in Malay garb and appeared to be living on the land. They told us that 8 Brigade had been driven out of Sedenak two nights previously. These seven Dogras now attached themselves to the column.

In view of the exhausted state of the men Parkin suggested a rest for some hours but the Brigadier was unwilling to take the risk. We did, however, halt for half an hour, when most of us snatched some much-needed sleep.

It was still the 30th of January. On that day, too, four big ships were standing by in the Singapore docks to evacuate thousands of women and children. So while the 22 Indian Brigade are sleeping beneath the rubber trees of Johore, let's journey south to the Island and see what's happening there.

Chapter 9

LYNETTE SAILS FOR ENGLAND

SOON AFTER DAWN on that same Friday, the 30th January, the *Duchess of Bedford* steamed into Keppel Harbour, packed with reinforcements from India. By the time the sun came out she had been safely moored at Numbers 17 and 18 Godowns. Now she was required for a very different task — the evacuation of women and children.

Lynette had reached the age of one year and three weeks when her embarkation instructions to board the *Duchess* came through by telephone to 2nd Echelon H.Q. She herself was sitting on the floor in an improvised play-pen in the room next to Ruth's office with three other small children for companionship.

This was all part of Singapore's wartime programme. Every morning for the last three weeks Ruth had brought Lynette with her when she came on duty at 8 a.m. Before this her amah had been a faithful attendant at home throughout the working day. But the air-raids each morning and afternoon by anything up to a hundred bombers had gradually broken down that likeable woman's nerve, and she had left to join those of her family for whose safety she feared.

Thus it was that Lynette should find herself at 2nd Echelon at a time when the staff of that organisation was working at full pressure. Life in the play-pen had been no bed of roses. Every time the air-raid warning had sounded, those children had been seized by their working mothers and rushed outside to a slit trench. Here they had remained for twenty minutes or so with nothing more exciting to look at than the blank yellow soil of a trench wall, or by craning their necks upwards, the deadly spectacle of Japanese planes in an azure blue sky. At the age of one that sort of thing must have had little appeal.

Ruth had been working at 2nd Echelon for nearly six months. A little rashly she had also signed on as a part-time driver with the Malayan Medical Auxiliary Service. This involved reporting

to a First Aid Post at Raffles College within two hours of getting home from work and after depositing Lynette with her friend, Ann James. This First Aid Post was competently staffed by nurses and women volunteers while the College itself housed walking-wounded survivors of the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*.

During the morning Brigadier Archie Paris telephoned Ruth to advise her to leave the Island with Lynette since the whole of the 22 Indian Infantry Brigade had been cut off in Johore and, in his view, there was little chance of any of us getting back to Singapore. In the kindest way he told her that she must just hope that I would be made a prisoner of war. His wise counsel, alas, had come up against that type of feminine will and courage to which there was no answer. She had made up her mind to stay.

The air-raids on Keppel Harbour that morning grew heavier than ever, delaying Ruth with her last minute preparations before joining Ann James and driving to the docks.

Meanwhile Indian soldiers had to be disembarked from the *Duchess of Bedford*. The unloading of vehicles, stores and food turned out to be a slow business because the alerts kept the natives scurrying for shelter from which they refused to move until long after the All Clear had sounded. Just before noon the Japs made a dead set on the *Duchess of Bedford* and on the ship lying ahead of her. They flew in formations of twenty-seven at a height of 20,000 feet, twenty-seven twin-engined bombers with the all-too-familiar red rising sun painted on their wings. One bomb struck the tug lying under the liner's bows, sinking the little vessel and damaging the ship lying ahead. Then a stick of bombs from the port wing of the Jap formation met the water right under the liner's stern, making a tearing gash in her plating. And from the starboard wing a load of bombs burst among the sheds on the quayside, setting them alight.

Jimmy James had hurried home from the Base Ordnance Depot to drive his wife and two babies to the docks, picking up Ruth and Lynette on the way. Not long after that noon raid on Keppel Harbour the party reached the docks area in search of Godowns 17 and 18. Smoke was still belching from various buildings as they drove slowly through the docks. Soon they were ordered to leave the car and to make a wide detour on

foot. Since every porter had disappeared from the devastated area they had to carry their baggage as well as the three children. The clanging bell of a fire engine forced them to stand against a pile of debris while it passed. Slowly they groped their way through twisted and tangled lengths of metal, stepping over smouldering planks of wood and broken glass. A horde of Chinese and Malays came stumbling out of one of the sheds. Abandoned and smashed-up cars, some upturned, further blocked their way. The heat from a blazing warehouse grew unbearable.

At the gangway a seething mass of men, women and children struggled to get aboard. At the same time hundreds of sacks of rice still lay in the holds waiting to be unloaded.

On board the liner at last Ruth found the deck packed with suitcases, hand luggage and bedding rolls. European and Asian women alike looked lost and bewildered as they searched for a steward who might help them to find their cabins. Children clung to their parents' clothing, their young faces mystified and inquiring as they were jostled in the crowd. Some people had already laid out mattresses on the deck with the obvious intention of sleeping there. Others simply sat wherever they could, weariness and desolation written all over their faces.

In the saloon the purser had rigged up an anchorage for children in arms by placing suitcases round an area 15 feet by 10 feet on the same lines as the 2nd Echelon play-pen. Just as the three children had been dumped in this anchorage the air-raid siren started that long, frightening wail. Soon the deadly drone of Japanese bombers could be heard above the clamour of life on board. They passed, and the crumps which followed echoed from a distance.

Meantime, Jimmy had found their four-berth cabin already occupied by another English woman with a twelve-year-old son and a daughter of ten. According to the steward, Ann and the three infants were also booked for the same cabin. "You'll find it a bit of a squash," the steward told Jimmy, an understatement which the latter was not prepared to question.

"All visitors ashore" came the announcement over the loud-speaker, and they knew those dreaded goodbyes must be said, goodbyes which were to speak volumes of tears and anguish. At the foot of the gangway Jimmy joined Ruth, and together they walked to the car in silence.

Throughout the night British and Indian soldiers were still unloading ammunition, stores and food. More urgently, men were working against time repairing the gash in the ship's plating, hoping that temporary repairs would enable her to leave for Java in the morning.

During the night, too, Jap planes returned again and again. Aided by a full moon they dropped their bombs on the harbour installations, setting fire to godowns and warehouses all along the Harbour Board front, and creating every kind of havoc. They were making a dead set for those four big troopships which had brought the 18th British Division to the Island, and which were now packed with thousands of Singapore's "useless mouths" to be taken back to England. Hour after hour they came. But the night passed and those ships survived.

Early next morning the *Duchess of Bedford* joined up with the *Empress of Japan* to be escorted by H.M.S. *Dragon* en route for Java. All went well until approaching the southern end of the Banka Strait, when a lone Jap bomber dropped two of his bombs within thirty feet of the *Duchess of Bedford*. After turning he came in again, this time dropping the second pair about fifty yards ahead of her dead on the track.

Once south of the Banka Strait the way lay clear and Batavia was reached on the 2nd February, and here the *Duchess* lay up for three anxious days while more extensive repairs were carried out. Fortunately the Japs did not bomb Batavia until the day after the *Duchess* had slipped out on the run to Colombo. At this stage she no longer had the protection of a naval escort.

She remained at Colombo for five days. As she slipped out to sea again on the 15th, news came through of the fall of Singapore.

It was then that Ann fell ill with dysentery and it was all she could do to cope with her own two children. Lynette was therefore deposited in a play-pen on deck by day and taken down to her cabin each evening. Only the kind intervention of Brian Harrison's wife, Daphne, saved the child from being left behind at Durban. She now took charge of Lynette in every way.

But they were still far from home. The crossing and re-crossing of the Atlantic still lay ahead.

Chapter 10

ORDEAL OF THE WOUNDED

BACK IN JOHORE the 22nd Indian Infantry Brigade were halted among the rubber at the southern end of that vast pineapple plantation. While I was asleep Leslie Davies got hold of a Chinese guide who offered to lead us between the railway and the main road. We set off once more through the rubber, the way being even soft under foot and I resumed my place with the wounded. Darkness was fast approaching. About midnight we were nearing the native houses of Kulai and here we were warned that the Japs were already in the village and that no noise whatever was to be made.

It was during this night march that I first sensed trouble among the men who were carrying the wounded. Parkin had decided that each company in turn should take over responsibility for our casualties for a period of twenty-four hours. As a battalion we had now been carrying these wretched men for nearly sixty hours and the strain was beginning to tell. It was not simply a matter of exhaustion, nor was it only because of the undulating, difficult country that an undercurrent of revolt among the men had begun to show itself. It was something which I came to learn myself when at a short halt two of the stretcher bearers disappeared into the darkness and did not return when the column started to move again. I called to Lyons who was at hand and together we took over the two rear positions of the deserted stretcher. It was then that I learnt for myself the hell which these wretched stretcher bearers were having to endure. The weight of the casualty was sufficient to tax the strongest, but in addition the smell of gangrous wounds and two and a half days' excreta was something which defies description. I could now well understand the feelings of those two men who had disappeared into the darkness. Dear God, how revolting it was. What a merciful relief it was to reach the next resting place on the outskirts of Kulai.

During this halt the Subedar Major came and sat with me on

the ground. He looked very old and tired and he obviously wanted to off load some of the things which were troubling him. It was then that he told me of isolated cases of refusal to carry the wounded. The men concerned had told him that they would prefer to be shot rather than to continue with what to them had become a nightmare. I knew now how they felt, but there was no alternative and I told him so. We then got up and walked between the stretchers which were well spread out beneath the trees, and we checked up on the number of men missing. We looked at the wounded and found most of them to be as brave and resolute as ever. They were clinging onto life with tremendous grit and it was certainly up to us to see them through if we possibly could. Some of them were speaking in hushed whispers and some of them smiled, while others looked drawn and groaned aloud without restraint. One man was becoming hysterical and I was nervous that he might suddenly yell out at the top of his voice at a time when silence was so essential. The walking wounded were also resting on the ground. Those two young P.M.s were smoking cigarettes and whispering to one another in the semi-darkness.

The Subedar Major reckoned that we now had four absentees among the stretcher bearers, a calculation which caused him to hammer on my chest with grief and agitation. There were tears in his eyes. "They will die," he said, referring to the wounded men, and hoping for a suggestion from me. The poor old man was overwhelmed by tiredness and weakness, yet his in-born loyalty and sense of duty would not allow him to rest like the others. Instead he was driving his flagging strength to breaking point to keep his men together, and above all to see that his wounded were not deserted. It was an object lesson of courage and devotion, inspired by the knowledge that he was like a father to all those men, and must not fail them.

"Come with me," I said, and together we went from company to company asking for volunteers who failed to respond. I asked both Gurmit Singh and Lyons to detail men for the task but here again I met with no success. Finally, Taj Mahommed, like the good officer he was, made every effort to help me out, but even his influence could only provide me with two out of the four men I required, and these came forward with obvious reluctance. I was now absolutely desperate. I appealed to the men of H.Q. company and was answered with a sleepy stare.

The men were lying down in groups spread out all over the wide area of rubber. Many of them were already asleep and at any moment I expected the signal to advance. How was I going to get them formed up again as a column before the leading elements had moved off was something which worried me less than the more immediate provision of two more stretcher bearers. Being unable to produce an answer to this, I asked the Subedar Major to help me to collect company runners. Then Taj came up to tell me that he was taking his company off to a place he had found near the outer edge of the rubber a good one hundred and fifty yards from the rest. I questioned the advisability of this but let him go.

In the meantime our Chinese guide had disappeared into a hut which contained two other Chinese villagers. The latter then came out to tell the Brigadier that a force of five hundred Japs were in bivouac a few hundred yards ahead of us. The question of whether we should take offensive action was quickly discussed, but the state of utter exhaustion and weariness of both officers and men precluded any hope of a successful night attack, and the difficulty of evacuating any wounded also weighed heavily against such a course. One of the three Chinese then offered to lead the column round the Japanese forces in the neighbourhood.

This little man set off at a fast pace on a puzzling course with the Brigadier and his small staff in hot pursuit. It was some time before Parkin could catch them up, halt them and get the rest of the Brigade thoroughly woken up. As he strode through the rubber Parkin gave me the briefest orders and pointed out the approximate direction of our future line of advance.

This night was like a really bad dream and, looking back, the nightmare began at this point. The group of runners which I had placed with such care close to my present position had separated and were now fast asleep at the foot of different trees. Realising that it would take too long to rouse each of them sufficiently to carry out any important mission in the short time available, I rushed across the ground to "D" and "A" companies in turn and roused them in time to get them on the move within a reasonable period. I have no recollection of seeing "C" company on this occasion but I remembered that Taj with "B" company was sleeping in the area of his own choosing which he had fortunately pointed out to me. So I ran as fast as my

legs would carry me, glad of the light canvas shoes on my feet, and found three or four men of Taj's company sleeping heavily round a tree. Three of these men I now shook lustily and dragged them to their feet. I called to Taj but there was no reply. I told the men to find Taj and to wake him and follow on at once behind H.Q. company whose whereabouts I pointed out. I could not afford to waste a moment more for there was still the wounded to reckon with. Reaching H.Q. company I roused them man by man rushing down the line of unconscious bodies and shaking all the men I could see. Then to my relief came the report that the stretcher bearers were complete. I said a brief silent prayer and tore away towards a group of huts where I could just discern the last few men of the 2/12 F.F.R. about to disappear from view on leaving the rubber. A gap of some sixty or seventy yards already existed between them and the companies of our battalion who were even now only partially ready to march. Having caught up the men of the 2/12 F.F.R. I found myself walking along with a young officer called Campbell, whose light-heartedness and cheerful disposition fell upon me like a breath of fresh air. He might have been walking to church for all he seemed to think of our predicament. We walked along together talking in whispers and I began to feel better. The next company was following us at some distance, but it was a light night with a nearly full moon and I hoped that the men could see us well enough to keep in touch without losing their way. I only hoped that H.Q. company were following on behind them and the other companies behind them again. There seemed to be every likelihood that one or other of them might have started too late and then pursued their way along the wrong track. I pictured some of them walking straight into the Japs, and when we suddenly stepped down onto the railway track I stopped to make a check as the men passed by in single file.

The leading company came through intact and close behind followed H.Q. company. I counted twelve stretchers and breathed again more freely. Then out of the procession stumbled the Subedar Major, once more engulfed in contortions of despair and again endeavouring to hammer on my chest by way of relief to his pent-up feelings. This time it was to tell me that Taj's company was missing; they were lost; what was I going to do about it? I sent him on his way in the procession and turned back the way I had come, passing shoulder to shoulder with the

men who were following on towards the railway. I wondered whether I would ever regain touch with the Brigade myself as I did not know what route the Chinese guide was intending to take after following along the railway line.

I was now alone amongst the rubber trees and the few native houses of our recent halting place. I ran across to the place where Taj and his company had been halted. It was completely deserted. The moon was now at her full. I ran like lightning to where the other companies had rested but not a soul could be seen. A faint shout came to my ears from the direction we had come from earlier that evening and I made my way across to the track which leaves the rubber at this point and peered into the more open space beyond. Not a sign of a single living soul, not a stir, only the guttural croak of the bullfrog. All around there was a hushed stillness and then I realised that I was pretty scared. A sudden outbreak of barking by neighbouring dogs did not make me feel any easier. It was obvious by this time that the company had left the area. Perhaps Taj had been awakened too late to steer his company on the right course and having set out along a route which he had no doubt hoped to be that which the rest of the Brigade were pursuing, he may at that very moment have been walking straight into the Jap camp.

On reaching the railway track again I found it completely deserted. All around me everything was quiet and still and only the distant barking of dogs could be heard. The moon shone with dazzling brilliance and I felt as if I was walking along the railway sleepers in broad daylight. I was able to move lightly owing to the rubber soles on my shoes. I had a rough idea where the Brigade had left the railway but I could not see any likely looking pathway at first. The track soon widened into a fair road. I took out my compass and was surprised to see that I was moving north, but a little later I spotted a single line of troops turning a corner in the road some distance in front of me. Here they wheeled round to the east again on to another road and a little later turned south. I caught them up and passed through the Garhwalis and finally reached a new zone of rubber where my own battalion and the 2/12 F.F.R. were already halted. Parkin was one of the few who was still awake so I told him of the loss of Taj and his company of P.M's. No matter what his thoughts may have been he took it very well. Straightaway he sent out a patrol to attempt to contact them. The attempt failed.

Not until three and a half years later did we hear the story of Taj and his company. It appeared that he was awakened too late, and when he had finally roused his company, he had followed along a pathway west of the railway instead of crossing the track to the east side, as we had. The astonishing thing is that he and his company had then marched through the rest of Johore undetected by the Japs all the way down to within a mile of the Causeway. On being informed that the Causeway had been blown up, he realised that there was now no chance of getting back to the Island to fight again. So he turned about and went in search of a hide-out in which he and his men might live until the war was over. Continuously hounded by the Japs he and his men were still at large in the jungle of Johore when Singapore capitulated on the 15th February 1942, about which great disaster he knew nothing. It wasn't until the middle of April 1942 that he and his splendid company of P.M's were finally rounded up and made prisoners of war.

Back in the rubber, now east of the railway, the Brigadier decided to make a second attempt to contact 8 Brigade and this time Young, the Brigade Signal Officer, and his signal section were sent forward. This party soon ran into the Japs and were all captured.

Now that the whole Brigade had arrived in the rubber it was decided to move forward across a formidable stretch of water and bog immediately to our front, and to have a prolonged halt on the far side. Without even a short spell of rest, therefore, we now had to get our wounded across a monstrous bog. I wondered if we would be able to do it.

Now ensued the most exacting ordeal of any which I had witnessed during the last three days. The bog through which we had to pass was like quagmire which dragged one down to one's knees and left one helplessly floundering in its midst. A search in my haversack showed me that my own torch was now useless and without some form of light I visualized the most appalling disasters ahead. I appealed to the men for a torch and a sepoy handed me one which gave forth a beam of light adequate for my purpose. Standing to one side of the only possible crossing I placed myself in the narrow flow of stream water which trickled through the bog, and proceeded with the aid of the torch to conduct the stretcher teams across. This was a ghastly undertaking, far and away more frightful than on the previous night

when conditions had been bad enough. It was accomplished because these men who were carrying the wounded showed the will and courage to go through with it no matter what the effort cost them. I saw two leading men of the first team step off into the bog and cautiously pick their way over the stream, soon to find themselves sinking slowly down until the mud had engulfed their feet as far as their knees. The men in the rear had only reached the shallow waters of the stream and were therefore standing nearly two feet higher than the two at the forward end of the stretcher. This naturally tilted the stretcher forward at a steep angle and I could hear the cry of alarm which escaped the lips of the wounded man as he felt the stretcher lurch below him. Shortly all four men of the team were floundering in the bog. The man on the off fore position suddenly staggered and his knees were shaking wildly. He sank on one knee with a shout of terror in his hoarse voice and the stretcher lurched over on its side throwing the wounded man against the head and shoulders of the spare file who assisted as best as he could at the side. This was an awful moment and it happened over and over again in one form or another. I think it was the groans and at times the shrieks of the wounded which struck the deepest note of horror. I saw a blanket covering trailing in the bog and directed a lone sepoy to rescue it. One or two men from H.Q. company rendered valuable service. They stood on the bank not far from me and when one or more of the stretcher bearers floundered dangerously in the mire they would rush to his assistance and help him to extricate his legs from the clinging heavy mud. On the other side of the crossing the same difficulties were encountered. There the wounded man would almost inevitably find himself tilted backwards at the same steep angle with his head close to the level of the mud and his body uncomfortably positioned in a semi-vertical position. And through this hell passed twelve stretchers, twelve wounded men who were by now gangrous, delirious and half mad, forty-eight gallant men who carried the stretchers, twenty-four others who accompanied them, and a host of others who rendered service in some form or other. I must have stood and squatted in my position in the stream water for over an hour while the labours of the men and the sufferings of the wounded went on before my eyes in a slowly moving picture of unforgettable misery.

A few hundred yards beyond the bog the whole Brigade was

sleeping. I therefore found a suitable place for the wounded and halted the rest of my company close by. Then, as though in answer to a natural impulse, instinct took me away into the darkness far from the sleeping column and there I fell upon my knees and prayed. Then I dropped on the ground and felt the weak fibres of my manhood dissolve into a flood of tears.

Chapter 11

FATE OF THE WOUNDED

WHEN I returned to where the wounded were lying I found everyone fast asleep. In the whole Brigade not one single soul was awake. Knowing how anxious the Brigadier had been to get well clear of the Japs before daylight this struck me as being most extraordinary.

Surely we ought to have been pushing on as fast as we could go? I suppose I was too tired to do anything about it, too tired even to think. I must have collapsed in a heap on the ground, out for the count.

Sometime later I was awakened by Bernard Harvey who appeared to be beside himself with agitation that we had halted at all. He asked me what I thought we were all doing, slumbering in this way when we ought to have been pushing on with all speed. I was far too tired to argue with him but I ran over to where Parkin was sleeping and roused him. Harry Taylor, who had been commissioned to wake him some long time ago, was snoring heavily nearby so I gave him a shaking too. The army was soon astir and while darkness still hung heavily about us we resumed the advance once more. The Chinese guide had already left us.

Five hours later we halted astride a track which led through a vast enclosure of rubber and here it was that I found Parkin again. He invited me to share a portion of bully beef with him, a gesture I appreciated greatly. He had kept that tin of bully beef as his iron ration throughout the campaign. While we ate I poured out some of my troubles of the previous night and he gave me a sympathetic hearing. I told him we could not face another swamp or bog. Not only were the wounded just about at the end of their tether, but the stretcher bearers could not face another ordeal like that. I added that there was even some doubt in my mind if the men would be willing to carry the wounded very much further.

Around us a number of small fires had been lighted and

separate groups of individuals were making tea. Tins of milk appeared mysteriously from certain haversacks. Some of the men had collected rice from a deserted Chinese house in the estate and were trying to boil it. The wounded were just listless and silent as though the trials of the past three days were beyond their comprehension. Some of them shot quick sidelong glances as though to reassure themselves that they were not going to be deserted. Sepoy Basta Singh was smiling bravely — Basta Singh, who had spent a large part of his service in the Quartermaster's Guard! A lovable, roguish, courageous character. His blanket had fallen from the stretcher during that crossing of the bog showing a terrible wound above the ankle, half covered in a bandage, festering. The walking wounded looked haggard and drawn but they would keep going. Their spirit was as resolute as ever; they were fighting the battle of their lives. Many men were missing. I looked for Wallace Beery but someone told me he was a long way behind and coming on in his own time with a host of others too weary to continue the uphill struggle. I knew that he would never make it. I never saw him again and out of my life slipped someone I had come to look upon as a very human part of my war time existence. He had looked after me for eight months since we had first arrived at Kuantan. He had been with me in Singapore on ten days' leave, when he had shown an almost child-like devotion to Lynette. I would have given much that I should not have left him like this.

While we were halted a Tamil appeared from nowhere. He told us that a big coolie settlement equipped with a dispensary lay only half a mile away. It was not long before the Brigadier and Parkin had together decided that the wounded should be left in this dispensary with an Indian sub-assistant surgeon to look after them. At the same time orders were issued that all loads were to be lightened and ammunition to be drastically reduced. Here we at last abandoned our two 3-inch mortars and seventy bombs which the mortar platoon had carried since the afternoon of the 27th without a word of complaint. This was a remarkable performance and could constitute a record carry of this useful weapon.

Parkin ordered Lyons and his company of Sikhs to take over the wounded, see them properly fixed up in the settlement, and then proceed independently to the south coast.

The Sikhs accepted their task as stretcher bearers in silence.

As they were about to move off I noticed Gurmit Singh standing there with tears streaming down his face. Many of the men of his company were also crying like children. There was something infinitely tragic and touching about this final ceremony.

I stood and watched them pass knowing that we were about to leave them and a little stab of pain jabbed my conscience. They had been through seventy-two hours of utter hell, yet they had never complained, had never given up hope and were still fighting to keep alive. Behind them came those two little P.M.'s, both so young and both so game. One was still hobbling along with the aid of a pole, as he had been doing ever since we had left the battle ground three days before. His legs were clotted with dry blood and one foot was bound in mud-soiled bandages. The other had his hand bound up with a handkerchief and there was blood clotted all over his wrist and arm. I shall never forget those two young men as they followed behind the stretcher cases. They were both smiling and their eyes were bright. Dear God, what guts they had. They have no place in the history of these events, they were unknown except to the few of us, and they are now forgotten. But they were two of the countless forgotten heroes of the Malayan campaign. Let those who speak of the disgrace of Singapore pause and pay tribute to the little men like these.

Only six days previously the Japs had shown what bestiality they were capable of in the treatment of a group of Australian and Indian wounded who had to be left behind among the marshes to the west of Yong Peng. There, after indulging in an orgy of bestial savagery they massacred those wounded men in cold blood, and then finished the job by pouring petrol over both dead and dying before adding the lighted match. We on the other front had a pretty good idea of what the Japs might do to any prisoners they captured in battle, but we had not yet heard these horrific details of their treatment of our wounded. That was just as well.

As things turned out I am happy to be able to add that practically all of those we left behind in that settlement not only recovered from their wounds but went on to survive three and a half years of captivity. I would like to think that somewhere in India or Pakistan they are today living peaceful and contented lives, the horror of that march long since forgotten.

The three officers who accompanied the wounded to the settle-

ment, Lyons, Martin and Gorman, made their way to the coast, the latter acting as guide. Unfortunately Lyons sent forward two of his platoons under the command of one of his Subedars to attempt to catch up the Brigade, and these were never heard of again. The three officers struggled on with the remaining platoon and after two more days of weary progress through Japanese patrolled country, they reached the coast with twenty men and were brought across to the Island in a naval launch.

Our advance through the rubber was now pursued with slightly more vigour. Most of the men had eaten a portion of boiled rice and quite a number had had a mug of tea. The mortar platoon now carried only their rifles and the men of the rifle companies too were able to stride out more freely. There being no longer any responsibility for me with the wounded I took the opportunity to stride out on my own, walking with and talking to anyone I happened to see. The Garhwalis and the 2/12 F.F.R. were advancing in separate columns on either side of the main body of our battalion.

We continued to make headway although the going was difficult on account of interminable rows of switchback undulations. We must have been keeping some two and a half miles east of the railway and moving slightly east of south. At five o'clock we called a halt close to some native houses which had been recently deserted. The men found sacks of rice which they took away to boil. A number of fires soon sprang up. Taylor and I made a determined effort to catch one of a dozen well fed hens, but having reduced them as well as ourselves to a state of nervous exhaustion, we saw two of the biggest birds fall to the blow of an orderly at Brigade H.Q. Fortunately, Gannon succeeded in catching a hen which he plucked and boiled himself. Later that night I ate my share in the darkness.

During the course of the afternoon's advance Parkin had complained of the number of individuals of Brigade H.Q. who were continually encroaching upon his Battalion H.Q. By way of solving this difficulty Bernard Harvey had tied a dirty piece of white cloth to a branch of a tree and ordered it to be carried by an orderly to denote the whereabouts of Brigade H.Q., and to discourage men of other units from advancing too closely upon them. This was a most unfortunate action, the significance of which failed to penetrate our senses numbed as they were with

fatigue, hunger and lack of sleep. Its harmful effect was to become apparent later.

The advance through the rubber continued all through the day and far into the night too. About midnight we found ourselves crossing a number of estate roads and from the noise of motorcycles at close range we knew that Jap patrols were operating in the estate. It was now more than ever necessary to move silently.

At 2 a.m. everyone was exhausted. It was therefore decided to form a perimeter camp and sleep until dawn. At this time we must have been close to the source of the Tebrau river which runs out into the sea near Plentong.

The layout of the perimeter kept us fully occupied for some time and when all sentries had been posted and the men were mostly asleep on the ground, I bedded down at the foot of a tree and soon fell asleep. The night was damnably cold and none of us possessed any form of covering, so that even the exertions of the last four days and nights could not stop me from continually getting up and walking round the perimeter in order to get some warmth into my body. I spent a miserable three hours in this way and was glad when dawn found us once again on the move.

Chapter 12

THE AMBUSH

WE were off again at first light and now we must have been within sixteen miles of Singapore. I began to think of being with Ruth again, yet wondered whether she had been evacuated, realising that this was the sensible course for her to take. At the same time I was tormented by the possibility that she might have stayed on in the hope that I would get back, and at this very moment our chances of slipping through the Japs in these last sixteen miles must have been pretty slim.

At 10.30 a Jap cycle patrol of twelve men was spotted on the road on our right, and a little later another cycle patrol was observed ahead of us. It now seemed clear that the Japs knew where we were and it would be a miracle if we did not run into them soon. About 11 o'clock our advance guard suddenly halted. They were approaching an estate road when about sixty Japs were seen to be coming straight at them in close formation. Then almost at once the Japs opened fire with everything they had. A second formation of Japs then began firing from somewhere over on our right. The noise was terrific as bullets by the hundred whistled through the trees. We had been caught in march formation and were completely dazed by the suddenness of the attack. A dozen men in the leading group were hit in the first burst of fire.

For some minutes there was confusion and most of the men in the column dropped like stones in search of non-existent cover. But up in front our left forward vanguard platoon, led by an outstanding V.C.O., Jemadar Ajit Singh, went straight for an enemy mortar detachment, killed three Japs and captured both the mortar and its bombs.

John Parkin was soon up with the advance guard determined that we would make a fight of it despite everything. With the whole of Gurmit Singh's company and two platoons of "C" company he started to form three sides of a square on a slight eminence. Meanwhile, a vast herd of men in the main body of

the column rose to their feet and stampeded their way onto some high ground on our left, stopping among a group of wooden huts. This seemed to be the only sensible thing to do and I soon found myself crawling along on all fours with Hartigan, the Garwalis' C.O., while bullets were striking the rubber trees all around us. On our way to the high ground we crouched for a few moments in a ditch beside a small hut in order to get our breath. Here behind the hut we found Leslie Davies with six or seven men all looking as scared and bewildered as we were ourselves. Behind us were groups of men spread out over a wide area; some were still lying on the ground, possibly wounded but more likely exhausted. Others were on their feet but standing wearily and looking at small groups of Japs through the trees. It was quite obvious that there was little fight left in the Brigade.

Presently I saw the Brigadier and his staff and I moved across to join them. We could see the Japs moving across our front, not much more than a hundred yards away. Someone shouted "Don't fire at them, they're British troops." We stood and watched through binoculars and true it was that among the trees and foliage there was some sort of similarity, yet what would British troops be doing in the Tebrau Estate on this first day of February? "Of course they're Japs" said Ian Campbell standing close beside me, and several other British voices shouted agreement. In front of us Gurmit's men were lying on the ground and returning the enemy's fire with the limited ammunition they still carried.

In the meantime the Brigadier had decided that our troops were incapable of further offensive effort, and his main concern was to extricate the Brigade as best he could. He therefore ordered Parkin to form the rearguard while the remainder of the Brigade withdrew through the rubber.

So now we were alone, a bare one hundred men and I doubt if any of them had as much as ten rounds of ammunition. Parkin ordered us to fire at every Jap we could see. I even took a rifle off one of the men myself and took a pot shot at a Japanese soldier walking across the front.

The Japs had rounded up several groups of exhausted men and were dealing with these newly captured prisoners when a voice among them shouted in Urdu not to fire, because they were being held by the enemy. Whereupon Parkin ordered Gurmit Singh to fire at every Japanese his men could see, and this they

did until their scanty supply of ammunition was nearly exhausted. What was infinitely more menacing was the sinister movement of small Jap parties attempting to work round on our left. Parkin then ordered our little rearguard party to fix bayonets and told us we would fight where we were. He was armed with a tommy gun and meant what he said. I whipped out my revolver and said a little prayer about sleeping in clean white sheets that night in Singapore.

And so we waited for the attack that never began. When we had given the Brigade time enough to get clear we began to withdraw ourselves moving slowly through the rubber. Only on the left did the Japs look as though they might attempt to follow us up.

Our retirement was a sad and sorry business. We set off with less than a hundred men and many of these fell upon the ground before we had gone very far, declaring themselves unable to go any further. We were moving in a north easterly direction in order to make a detour of the area in which we knew the Japs to be active. But here the ground became undulating which added to the difficulty of keeping direction: it also taxed our dwindling energy even further. I was walking with Gurmit Singh for whom I felt the greatest admiration, when suddenly he stopped and told me he could go no further. He said he felt his legs were dead and he was incapable of any further effort. He was crying quite openly and unashamedly. There was nothing I could do. I told him to rest for a while and come on in his own time but I knew he was finished. It was a sad end to the fine showing he had made all the way down the mainland. I was sorry to leave him but Parkin had told us that there could be no resting until we had got clear of the Japs in the immediate vicinity, and that there could be no waiting for those who dropped out. Several others fell out at the same time and a little later we crossed a ravine and from the crest on the far side we could see the whole of Gurmit's company halted and lying on the ground. We shouted to them to come on; we even sent a man back to tell them they must make the effort, but the man himself did not return.

Why didn't the Japs attempt to follow us up? They certainly had quite a number of prisoners to look after and, though they knew us to be exhausted and short of ammunition, they had learnt that we still had some fight in us. Perhaps too they felt

that as their own troops had by this time reached the Causeway, there was no escape for us anyway. In this they were just about right.

The few of us who were left were looking and feeling desperately weary so Parkin called a halt. I counted twenty-four men among whom I noticed two of the battalion carpenters of the Pioneer platoon. Subedar Major Sucha Singh, that grand old patrician of the battalion was with us too, and so was Jemadar Ajit Singh. Three E.C.O.'s, Taylor, Gannon and Blake, appeared to be in good shape; there too was our indefatigable little doctor, Captain Sahibzada Irshad Ali. With Parkin and myself we numbered thirty-two.

We waited twenty minutes but no stragglers came in. Before leading on once more Parkin took the Subedar-Major and Jemadar Ajit Singh aside. He asked them why there had been so little fight in the Brigade when we had been caught in the ambush. They looked at him strangely, then Sucha Singh, speaking in Urdu, said "Sahib, we all knew the General Sahib had decided not to fight and when you suddenly called upon the men to fight, they were quite unprepared for such an eventuality." Then observing the look of surprise in their Commanding Officer's eyes, he added "You see, we saw the white flag at Brigade H.Q. yesterday evening." So that dirty white cloth which Bernard Harvey had attached to a branch to denote the whereabouts of Brigade H.Q. had conveyed — not unnaturally — a confession of failure, a will to surrender.

It was now well after mid-day, and the date February 1st. During the last ten days the regiment had been marching, fighting or digging without rest. They had suffered one hundred casualties, killed and wounded, and had inflicted more than twice that number on the enemy. For the last five days we had all been without food. Most of those with us now had reached the limit of their endurance. That grand old man, Sucha Singh, was looking very tired. How, I asked myself, would he walk the last twelve miles? Only a miracle would pull him through.

We were faced with two alternatives. One was to lie up for the remainder of the day getting the rest and sleep we all so desperately needed, and to move by night to the east coast where we might hope to procure small boats in which to paddle ourselves back to the Island. The second alternative was to push on as fast as we could to the southern coast and hope to reach

the sea just east of the Causeway and cross the Straits of Johore after darkness. We decided to adopt the latter course.

Having made a wide detour to the east and then to the south we reached the edge of more jungle. Finding it too thick to penetrate with the speed of movement now necessary, Parkin decided to take a risk and to push on in the direction of Johore Bahru where the country lay open to a vast pineapple plantation. A prominent road led through the plantation and along this we now proceeded on our way. There were one or two small Jap air formations overhead but they were flying high and showed no interest in us. The sun was blazing and we still had a long way to go. Parkin was obviously exhausted and he had discarded all his equipment except his compass and revolver, but he did not possess that bulldog look for nothing and I could see there was plenty of fight in him still. The Subedar-Major looked very old and tired, but he too would not give up. Most of the men were in good heart. I think we all began to feel that our goal was now within reach and a fresh ray of hope spurred us on to make one last final effort to make our way through the Japanese network of patrols and reach the coast.

The sky gradually became alive with aircraft and several planes frequently swooped down to a lower level forcing us to leave the road and lie down among the pineapple crops, wearying and delaying us at a time when we longed to push on. When we came to a Chinese house we were treated to hot tea and biscuits and accorded all the assistance and friendliness of an ally. Presently we heard the sound of lorries approaching from the front and assuming that these would in all probability be carrying Japanese scouting parties, we quickly took up a position astride the road. We were lying on the reverse side of a low contour over which the road disappeared from view. Here we waited with our hearts in our mouths and then, suddenly, over the crest came a large open contractor's lorry, laden with tins of sugar and swarming with Chinese coolies, followed by an Austin car containing four Chinese clerks. We stopped them both at the point of the pistol and quickly unloaded the sugar tins into the ditch. It was not long before we were speeding in the opposite direction with Gannon at the wheel of the lorry and Parkin driving the car.

We drove through the vast stretch of plantation and at the end of three miles we suddenly came upon a party of Garhwalis

sitting down on the side of the road. Shortly afterwards we found the rest of the Brigade halted on the outskirts of a fresh belt of rubber. The Brigadier told us that he had information that the Tebrau bridge which was only four miles south had been blown up by our own sappers, which meant that we would all have to swim the river. Accordingly we were ordered to make for the bridge at once and to send back our transport to run a ferry service for the rest of the Brigade. Leslie Davies now came with us.

A mile further on our car started to groan. A series of grating noises brought it to a standstill. This turned out to be lack of water and at a nearby stream the defect was quickly remedied. When we were finally approaching the bridge we were stopped by a group of Tamils who told us that Japanese engineers were already repairing it. We therefore turned round once again and a little later we called a halt and Parkin held a brief conference. He sent Leslie Davies back in the lorry to inform the Brigadier that he was going to make for the coast south of Plentong, and advising him to do the same. When however Leslie got back he found that the Brigade had gone. Apparently a Chinese guide had offered to lead them to the coast, fording the Tebrau river, and they had moved off without waiting for us. Within an hour they had been surrounded by a whole battalion of Japs and forced to surrender. But of these events we ourselves knew nothing.

Meantime, we had lost our lorry. True we still had the car but this would accommodate only six inside and possibly four on the running boards and there were thirty-two of us. We were halted on the side of a prominent estate road beneath the familiar rubber trees. Sentries were posted and our tommy-gunner was prepared to defend our car to the last. We had very little ammunition.

Fortune now smiled kindly upon us, for round the bend came another lorry also loaded with Chinese coolies. This we quickly took possession of and after loading the men we set off in the opposite direction. Before moving off we had learnt of a route leading to Plentong from a Tamil who appeared to be reliable. We decided to give it a trial.

Parkin drove along the winding estate roads at death-defying speed, the tyres at each bend shooting the soft red sand in all directions. I held the door ajar, ready to leap out the moment

I felt the car overturn. Two miles further on we branched off along a small track which brought us onto the main road. Here once again the engine stopped and we leapt out onto the road to push. As far as the eye could see in both directions there was not so much as a stray dog or cat to be seen on this magnificent fairway which ran through Johore to Mersing. This was surely a most remarkable stroke of luck, for we had learnt that the Japs were at this time in Johore Bahru. And here we were emerging from comparative concealment on to one of the two main thoroughfares of these parts and finding ourselves travelling alone on a deserted road as though the whole of Johore were dead.

We drove like the wind towards Kota Tinggi. The car tore along the macadam as though on a race track, and before long we turned right into another rubber estate and were crossing a large bridge which had been prepared for demolition by our sappers but had not been blown. This second stroke of luck saved us from a swim.

Stopping to question Chinese and Malays we learnt that Jap patrols were on all the roads and in Plentong itself, yet we never encountered one Japanese soldier. Just south of Plentong we reached a small kampong which faced the western end of the Naval Base. From the local Malays we procured a weather-beaten sampan which we carried to the water's edge. The workshops and main buildings of Singapore's world-famed Naval Base on the far side were deserted, the scene was one of ghostly silence with a certain ominous look of desolation. We made repeated efforts to signal by flag and electric torch but no answer came back. I began to wonder if we had got back too late.

Parkin detailed Gannon and me to make the crossing, and instructed us to arrange with the Naval Commander at the Base for a patrol boat to bring the rest of the party across after dusk. There was also the rest of the Brigade to consider, for not knowing that they had been rounded up by the Japs, we expected them to reach the coast by nightfall. We waded out into the black muddy water for some fifty yards, pushing our dilapidated craft and often sinking into the mud up to our knees. In this way I lost that pair of rubber shoes which had seen me through the trials of the last five days, leaving me only a worn pair of socks. Subedar Major Sucha Singh sat in the bows in silence while Gannon and I paddled the craft across the water, and

then it began to rain. The Subedar Major showed his anxiety by taking off his equipment and boots, ready to swim if we had to. I had no wish to swim myself for the water was topped with a thick layer of oil and looked most uninviting. The rain drenched us to the skin and we began to feel cold. I noticed that the Subedar Major was praying and wondered whether his thoughts were more concerned with those we had left behind on the mainland or with his own personal safety. What worried Gannon as well as me was whether there might be one or two well-concealed machine gun posts on the far side, and that some jittery soldier might blaze off at us. So we took it in turns to wave a white handkerchief and hoped that such a gesture would ensure for us a friendly welcome. What we didn't realise was that with the Japs in Johore Bahru we might have been shot up from behind from somewhere east of the Causeway. Anyway we were lucky once again, as no one opened fire on either side of the Straits. The rain was coming down with increasing fury when we reached the steps leading up to the pier of the Naval Base Yacht Club. Here we were greeted by four smiling Indian Sepoys of the 5/14 Punjab Regiment. They were washing up dishes following some sort of meal in the club house.

It was at least comforting to find that the Island had not been evacuated, although it was obvious that the Royal Navy had left the Base. Even the fabulous floating dock which had been towed out from England at such colossal expense had been destroyed or sunk. The Royal Air Force also seemed to have gone, although apparently there were still a few Hurricanes on the Island. But what struck us most forcibly was the glaring absence of defences on this northern sector of the coastline on this first day of February when the most forward Japanese troops were in Johore Bahru. Having set foot on the Island, I left the Subedar Major at the Yacht Club and in his charge I placed my complete set of equipment. The sepoy's procured me a bicycle with two flat tyres and, barefooted as I was, I set off to contact someone who might direct me to the appropriate naval authority. Gannon followed at a distance on foot and shortly we came upon a lorry driven by a British soldier who took us to the officers' mess of the 5/14 Punjab Regiment close by. Here I left Gannon with instructions to collect our exhausted but still game Subedar Major, while I went on in a staff car to the nearest brigade H.Q. This turned out to be 28 Gurkha Brigade under

the command of Brigadier Selby, one of the giants of the fighting up-country. From here I was driven in the same staff car to the H.Q. of the newly re-formed 11 Indian Division, about five miles further on. It was now dusk and the late afternoon light was starting to fade.

This then marks the end of the 22nd Indian Infantry Brigade in World War II.

It was February 1st 1942 and the survivors of the 5/11 Sikhs were Parkin, Gannon, Taylor, Blake and myself among the British officers; Captain Schibzada Irshad Ali, Subedar Major Sucha Singh, Jemadar Ajit Singh and twenty-four Indian other ranks. They will be brought across the Straits of Johore in the following chapter.

During the night of February 1st/2nd, Lyons, Martin and Gorman with twenty more men and three officers of 2/12 F.F.R. (Hawkins, Campbell and Williams) also reached the coast. They too were brought across the Straits of Johore in a patrol boat of the Royal Navy.

At dawn on the 2nd February Leslie Davies (H.Q. 22 Bde) and Brunner (2/12 F.F.R.) arriving separately, also reached the coast and were brought across the Straits in a patrol boat.

Finally, on the night of February 2nd/3rd three more British officers and a British signalman got back to the Island. These were Little (H.Q. 22 Bde), Whalley (22 Fd Coy I.E.) and Green (88 Fd Regt RA). The signalman, also of 88 Field Regiment, was Winterbottom. The latter became separated from the others in the last few miles and finding himself at the sea once again, took off his equipment and boots and swam the Straits of Johore — a truly magnificent effort.

Thus by dawn on February 3rd these few were all that was left of the Brigade which had been fighting at Rengam only a week ago. In round figures the survivors were sixteen officers, one British signalman, and forty-six men.

At this inglorious moment, then, within the dark friendless atmosphere of the rubber trees of Tebrau, the ill-starred 22nd Indian Infantry Brigade of the 9th Indian Division passed silently out of the picture.

Chapter 13

BACK ON THE ISLAND

THE HEADQUARTERS of the newly re-formed 11 Indian Division was situated in an old but solid-looking white house which stood among groups of rubber trees and wild scrub just off the Naval Base road. The half-hidden turning was certainly well guarded but the flag on the car and the driver's wartime pass satisfied the military policeman on duty and away up a winding drive we sped.

It was not long before I found myself in the office of Colonel Harrison, the GSO 1, to whom I related a somewhat garbled story of the 22 Indian Brigade's retreat through Johore. Since the local naval commander was also present at the time, the matter of ferrying across the Straits the small party of officers and men I had left behind on the opposite shore was quickly settled. In the meantime my precious staff car had been recalled to Gurkha Brigade H.Q., which left me wondering how I was ever going to get back to the Naval Base. However, for the moment I was more concerned with my appearance, which must have been like that of a drowned rat, and also with the fact that I was still barefooted. Seeing an obvious look of anxiety on my face Harrison sent for someone to look after me, and I was soon having a bath in three inches of water in some bleak room upstairs. The good Samaritan in this case turned out to be an old friend in Roger Gauvain whom I had last seen in 1931 when we had played on the same side in the Christmas Day rugby match at Peshawar.

"What on earth are you doing here?" I asked him. "I thought you were on leave in India."

"So I was," he answered. "In fact I only got back yesterday."

"What a time to arrive back here," I said. "It's a wonder you weren't shot down on the way. What are you doing anyway?"

"When I left for India three weeks ago I was doing DAAG at 9 Div. H.Q. Now I'm about to take over Brigade Major of

15 Brigade. Tell me about yourself; how many of your brigade have got back to the Island?"

"Not many so far, but maybe they'll turn up tonight. We left the main body somewhere in the Tebrau Estate this morning. The Japs seemed to be all over the place. We nearly ran into several motor cycle patrols on the estate roads. They were even mending a bridge our sappers had blown up. I guess we were lucky to have been ordered to do the rearguard job."

"How did you reach the coast?"

"Sheer luck. We commandeered a Chinese lorry and drove the last twelve miles or so; otherwise we might never have made it. We were just about all in. There were only twenty-six of us left. We lost a lot in an ambush early this morning, and a lot more fell out with exhaustion after it. We were lucky to find the last bridge over the Tebrau river still standing. Our sapper boys had been unable to blow it, I suppose. Thank God for that."

"What about Ruth?" he asked me.

"I know nothing, Roger, but I must find out. She was living with Mrs Paris in a house in Holland Road when I last 'phoned her up country. She said she was sending our daughter home in a convoy as soon as she could fix it. Have you heard anything?"

"I was told your daughter went off on the *Duchess of Bedford* two days ago, and I was under the impression that Ruth went with her. Mrs Paris went off to India some time ago and I believe Ruth moved into some flat in the town. I'll try and check up for you if I can."

"Thank you, Roger, and can you also get me some shoes or boots? I can't wander about the Island barefooted any longer. Thanks for the shirt and trousers, I see you've even got me a pair of socks too. Mighty good of you. Sometime I'll have to shave, this is just about a week's growth you see on me now."

"I'll see what I can do," he said, throwing me a face towel and dashing out of the room.

I never saw Roger again. A telephone message below called for his immediate presence at an important conference. A soldier came to tell me the news just as I had finished dressing. Within ten days Roger had been killed in the battle of Singapore Island.

So I found my own way downstairs, still without footwear and feeling even more lost and bewildered than before. But

not for long. At the foot of the stairs I ran into Major-General Billy Key, the Divisional Commander, and with him was Esmond Morrison, who had commanded the combined Leicesters and Surreys, renamed the British battalion, all the way down the peninsula. Strange that I should meet these two men together, I thought, for they were two of the few big men of the war up-country whose stature as leaders had actually risen sky high, while reputations on other heads had floundered in the bog of defeat.

It was General Billy Key who had successfully extricated the whole of his Brigade Group from Kelantan, and more recently had commanded the severely mauled 11 Division in the later stages of the retreat down the peninsula. His virtues as a general were stamped upon his face for all to see. Shortish, thick-set, robust, round-faced, with a determined chin and the bull-dog look of defiance in his eyes, he was just the man to lead this re-formed Division. Beside him Esmond Morrison provided a strong contrast in build, being taller and slight. Here was a man who, from being the most popular bachelor in the piping days of peace, had now acquired a reputation as a commander in war second to none. He had taken over command of the British battalion after the battle of Jitra and through his personal leadership had restored the badly shaken confidence of his men, and proved himself not only an intrepid commander but also an inspiration to everyone who had anything to do with him.

And here they were standing together, beckoning me to step into the room beyond, and there to tell my story. They gave me a strong whisky which worked like a shot in the arm so that a repeat telling of the last five days' incidents behind the Japs proved to be a less exacting ordeal than I had feared. Billy Key showed obvious signs of relief to get news of 22 Brigade, as nothing had been heard of us since the night of the 27th/28th January. Not one of us knew then that that Brigade was at that very moment being marched back to Kuala Lumpur as prisoners with Japanese bayonets to urge them on.

Presently a batman came in with a fresh syphon of soda water and I was given another whisky. This was very welcome for it was then that the General told me the story of my own Divisional Commander's sad end.

I hardly knew General Barstow at all, but I knew of him. Here was a tremendously likeable man who had the happy knack

of making you feel that things were pretty good after all, no matter how desperate they really were. He never seemed to lose that spirit of confidence which did so much to lighten the burden of his subordinates in that depressing retreat down the peninsula. The Indian soldiers respected him and loved him. He had spent half a lifetime of soldiering amongst them, and he knew and understood them intimately. While we were living and training in the uncivilised parts of Malaya before the Japs attacked, he took a magnificent house at Frasers Hill and invited officers of his Division to stay in it on leave at ridiculously low cost to their pockets. I remember he was always mindful of our welfare. He was unquestionably a fine soldier, one of the very best in the great tragedy of Malaya, and it was good to find so many who spoke of him with both pride and affection during that dismal period of incarceration which followed the surrender of Singapore.

It was now time for me to get back to the Naval Base. Esmond Morrison led me outside telling me that the General had arranged this by placing his own car and driver at my disposal. There it was, parked outside the main entrance, and a packet of sandwiches and a thermos flask had been placed on the back seat. As I was about to get in, a batman rushed up with a pair of shoes which he said General Key had somehow managed to procure for me. I tried them on and sure enough they fitted perfectly. Within seconds we were tearing down the winding drive in semi-darkness, my words of appreciation for these acts of kindness drowned by the noise of the engine.

These were the sort of gestures which personally I have come to associate with higher ranking officers of the Army. My experience has been that the higher the rank, the greater the consideration one invariably gets, and the more pronounced the human touch. In modern times there is a tendency to denigrate Generals. Apart from the fact that it is the age when pygmies snipe at giants, such sniping is invariably based on ignorance and prejudice. My own experience of Generals has been a very happy one. Billy Key's thoughtfulness on this occasion was typical.

It was getting dark and the road was perilously slippery. Everything was partially blacked out. A continual roar of traffic blew in through the window; overhead searchlights were playing in the sky. I settled back against the soft upholstery and began

to unwrap that packet of sandwiches. A naval policeman stopped the car at one of the main entrances to the Naval Base. The driver showed his pass and we sailed through. A little later I was surprised to see the survivors of my own regiment already landed near the Yacht Club. They seemed to be deliriously happy, having just been given a double ration of rum, and were about to pack themselves into two lorries when I approached. They told me that a naval launch had brought them across the Straits only a few minutes earlier. This was smart work on the part of the Royal Navy. I dismissed the General's car and jumped into the front seat of the leading lorry where Harry Taylor was already singing lustily on the strength of the rum. Then suddenly a staff officer of 9 Division appeared through the darkness just as we were about to move off. It was Sedgewick of the 2/12 Frontier Force Rifles.

"I thought you would like to know your wife is still in Singapore," he shouted above the noise of the engine and Harry Taylor's singing.

"Are you sure?" I asked. "Someone at 11 Div. H.Q. was under the impression that she had left on the *Duchess of Bedford*." "That's wrong," he said, still shouting at me in the gloom. "She's living at a flat not far from Fort Canning; wait a minute, I'll give you the address." Producing a torch from his haversack he quickly thumbed through the pages of a small note book. "Here it is," and after a pause while he focussed the torch "32 Lloyd Road — " there's quite a gang there with her, Bill Hunt, John Clive and some others. Got it?"

"O.K. — thanks — 32 Lloyd Road — I've got it."

There was still time to find John Parkin to ask him for a spot of leave. After all the drama of the last seven weeks, and more especially of the last five days, I knew he would not grudge me forty-eight hours leave under such dramatic circumstances. Somewhere in the darkness I found him about to jump into a staff car to go off and dine with Billy Key. Pouring out my news of Ruth almost breathlessly, I assured him that I would first see the men settled in their new camp wherever that might be, and then find my way back into Singapore under my own steam.

"We're going to a village called Teck Hock," he told me. "It's out towards Pasir Ris near Changi on the east coast. Of course you can have forty-eight hours leave, but God knows how you'll get into Singapore tonight." "Thanks," I said "Leave it to me,

I'll hop a lift," and I jumped aboard the leading lorry once again.

What a maddening thing it was, I thought, that we should have been travelling at least twelve miles towards Changi when I wanted to be going in the opposite direction. "Well, that's life," I said to myself, "but whatever happens I'll get to 32 Lloyd Road tonight by hook or by crook. Maybe it will have to be by crook," I mused to myself, before falling asleep on Harry Taylor's shoulder.

Debussing at the village of Teck Hock we made our way in single file among the rubber trees to the area in which we were now to be quartered. The camp staff were already preparing a meal for the men and some rough and ready attap shelters were available for them to bed down for the night. Having seen that the men were happily settled, I whispered a few words of parting to Harry Taylor before disappearing into the darkness to find my way back to the main road.

It was after eleven o'clock. The moon was now at its height which made it unnecessary for me to use a torch. Once clear of the trees the way lay bright and clear. Here I was in Teck Hock village with at least twelve miles between me and Ruth. My chances of reaching her that night were not at that moment particularly bright, but my experience of life had taught me that something invariably turns up if you are both hopeful and insistent enough. This time the unexpected turned up in the form of a Battery Sergeant-Major of 5 Field Regiment. His was the voice in the darkness which came from the front seat of a gunner three-ton tractor parked at the head of a long line of military vehicles.

"Where are you making for?" said the voice in a quiet tone. "Can I help?" I jumped aboard and peered into the face of Battery Sergeant-Major Wiggins.

"Good evening, sir," he added, before I could say a word myself, "do you remember me at Niyor in the transport harbour, BSM Wiggins it is of 73 Battery of 5 Field Regiment, Major Don's battery, remember?"

"Of course I do," and I meant it. Here was the man who had been in charge of the gunner wagon lines when our Sikhs had put in that bayonet charge north-west of Kluang. It was, in fact, while that battle was raging that Wiggins' wagon lines and our transport had been attacked from the flank and the rear. Our own Gurmit Singh and Wiggins between them had organised

their defence on that occasion and had finally driven off the Japs, killing quite a few of them. What a coincidence that I should run into him now, at such an hour and at Teck Hock of all places.

We shook hands warmly and I perched myself on the seat beside him. "I thought I recognised your Sikhs," he quipped "but there weren't many of them; is that all you have left?" "Just about," I told him. "We've had the hell of a time since we fought that battle with you boys at Niyor," and I told him as briefly and as quickly as I could something of the last five days. His interest in all that had befallen us was sufficient to encourage question after question, but after a time, seeing my obvious weariness, he asked me what I was doing on the main road at that hour of night.

"That's just it," I said. "I happen to know my wife is still in Singapore town. She probably thinks I'm dead, or anyway a prisoner-of-war, and I must get to her tonight."

"Where in Singapore is she living?"

"In a flat at 32 Lloyd Road."

"Where's that?"

"Near Fort Canning."

"O.K. — slam the door, sir — we'll go," and Wiggins switched on the engine.

"This is mighty good of you," was all that I could say.

"It's a mighty good reason," he half laughed at me. "In any case I like driving at night."

Wiggins pressed his foot firmly down on the accelerator and we sped through the night along the rain-washed road at terrifying speed.

"Terrific reinforcements have arrived on the Island, you know, sir," he almost shouted. "Two more brigades of the 18th British Division and a colossal concentration of artillery. You should see the guns we have everywhere. The Japs will never set foot on this Island against the sort of artillery barrage we can put down now. We'll give them something to think about."

"I hope you're right," I answered and then thought of the complete lack of defences in the Naval Base that afternoon when I had crossed the Straits of Johore. But I wasn't going to spoil his enthusiasm by speaking those thoughts, and I continued to let him do the talking, while my own musing grew closer to 32 Lloyd Road and to Ruth.

We reached the flat sometime about midnight. The whole house was in darkness, not a light, not a sound anywhere. With a feeling of guilt I sent Wiggins back on his way with a few spontaneous words of appreciation but, alas, without offering him a drink for his kindness. Surely he would understand that this was scarcely an occasion for entertaining even one's best friend? Nevertheless, as I stepped inside the building through a door which had been left open, I glanced back a little sheepishly at the back of the tractor, thinking wistfully of the moral debt I owed that noble BSM. One thing was certain. In the forthcoming battle on the Island Wiggins and his men of 73 Battery would give the Japs everything they had — and they did.

I groped my way upstairs to a large living room on the first floor. Still in complete darkness I heard a voice singing softly and then I knew it was Ruth. And suddenly life was good all over again.

Chapter 14

TOGETHER AGAIN

WHAT a wonderful welcome awaited me. Despite the hour, everyone came out in dressing-gowns, someone switched on the shaded lights and soon the living room was alive with vibrant talk, clinking glasses and laughter.

"This is John Clive," said Ruth, introducing me to a tall thin man of fifty with a very obvious limp. He was leaning on a walking stick, a victim of polio some years ago.

"He's the king-pin financier from India," she added with a twinkle, "but now he's got nothing to do."

"And this is Vere Bartrum, also from India, our one and only veterinary officer."

"Why do we need a vet in the battle of Malaya?" I asked with a smile.

"You may well ask," said Ruth before Vere could answer himself, "even the few polo ponies on the Island are as fit as fiddles and the cavalry no longer have horses. But he's looking after the cattle so that we'll all have something to eat when we're besieged. We've got to hold out for at least three months."

I made no reply to this last quip. The idea of preventing the Japs from invading the Island for three months, without a navy and with only a handful of planes, seemed too absurd to argue about. Did they really think like this? I wondered. They should have seen what had been happening up-country. And why had the no-longer-wanted like Clive and Bartrum not been evacuated?

Bill Hunt came in with a dish of cold duck. No-one had to introduce us, for it was Bill who had taken over my job as head of 2nd Echelon nine months earlier. His wife and their young son had left for India only two days previously.

"You must be ravenous," he said, "so I suggest you eat before anything else, then I'll lend you a razor and you can shave and have a bath. How many of your Brigade got through?"

"As far as I know only about thirty so far," I said for what

must have been the third time, " but more are expected to reach the coast tonight. Yes, I could do with a shave, this is a week's growth."

It was certainly good to eat again. Ruth made me a mixed salad to accompany the cold duck, and I polished off a liberal ration of cheese. Then a shave with Bill Hunt's razor and a full-length bath. My various hosts lent me a pair of silk pyjamas and an Oriental dressing gown. How good it was to feel clean again.

It must have been nearly 2 a.m. when I found myself sinking into the world's most comfortable bed. Ruth lay beside me, and tired though I was, we both had so much to say that sleep did not come at once. She told me about Lynette's departure in the *Duchess of Bedford*, about her work at 2nd Echelon, her evenings at Raffles College, the incessant bombing and the weariness it caused, and about the atmosphere in Singapore while the battle raged up-country. She also told me how the bombing of her house in Holland Road had forced her to seek refuge with Anne and Bill Hunt, and how John Clive and Vere Bartrum had been bombed out of their homes too. Before dozing off myself my mind went back to the Tebrau Estate where we had been on the move since well before dawn. I thought of all the drama of that ambush and then our crazy drive to the coast in the car which we had seized from the Chinese, and the crossing of the Straits in that rickety sampan with gallant old Sucha Singh offering up prayers for our safety. I thought of the men we had left behind, particularly the wounded, and always the picture of those two young P.M.s kept creeping in. Then there was the rest of the 22nd Brigade who, as far as I knew, were still at large in the Tebrau Estate desperately struggling to reach the coast. I pictured them lying on the hard unfriendly ground among a mass of trees at that very moment, trying to sleep in the cold night air just as I had tried to do this time last night. What luck we had needed to get back ourselves, and what luck we had had. Not only luck, but John Parkin too, for unquestionably it had been his leadership and his bulldog spirit which had pulled us through. Without him I would have been back in the Tebrau Estate instead of in this bed of pink sheets. The Almighty had been very kind to me and knowing this I said a little prayer of gratitude before dropping off to sleep.

Sometime in the night the air-raid siren sounded and we could hear the patter of feet as the others trudged down the stairs

to the shelter outside. Suddenly the door of our room sprang open and Vere Bartrum shouted "Air raid — coming down?" I was sleeping the sleep of the dead. Even Ruth's prodding and shaking of my weary limbs could produce little response. "I'm too tired," I murmured, and dozed off at once. "Me too," I heard her say, as she snuggled up close. We never heard another sound.

The three men left early for their offices so we breakfasted alone. The Chinese boy cooked eggs and bacon. Outside the sun was shining and life seemed pretty good.

"The first thing we've got to do is to get you away," I said to Ruth when we had finished breakfast. "Let's go up to Malaya Command now." Somewhat reluctantly she agreed and we set off in a staff car which Bill Hunt had considerably left for us in the porchway outside. A Malay driver took us to Fort Canning where the offices of Malaya Command were working at high pressure. Here we ran into many old friends and while waiting to see Major Magee in the "A" branch about a ship for Ruth we passed the time over coffee with Ross Maclean and others in the Naval Intelligence Office. When eventually we went into Magee's office we were told that no ships were available at the moment. "If the further evacuation of women should become necessary arrangements will be made to put it into effect," Magee told us. "In the meantime we've got Ruth's name on the list of those wanting to leave Singapore, and she will be informed as soon as a ship is available. We'll ring her at 2nd Echelon." There was nothing further we could do at the moment, so we went off to shop.

The few clothes that I possessed were at this moment either in my valise or in a suitcase, both of which had been packed in one of the battalion trucks when I had last seen them in Kluang about ten days previously. Having cashed a cheque at Robinson's, the big store in Raffles Place, I managed to fit myself up with a temporary war-time wardrobe including shirts, trousers, shaving and washing gear and a few handkerchiefs.

In Robinson's I met several old friends who had been in action up-country themselves. While we were talking the usual morning air-raid siren began to wail and we all trotted down to some form of shelter in the basement, customers and staff alike. Here the atmosphere was just as it must have been in any air-raid shelter in London.

When the All Clear sounded we went to the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank and here I took out a letter of credit for about £100 for Ruth, which we hoped would cover all the expenses she might incur before reaching England. To find my account the best part of £100 in credit at this particular period of my life struck me as being ironical in the extreme. Ever since Ruth and I had married in 1934, life had been an uphill struggle to pay our way; we had been through crisis after crisis, bank statements in the red, bank managers' letters, loans, desperate cables home, overdrafts, bills and all that. How lucky are those who have none of this wearisome process in the pattern of their lives. But now for almost the first time in my life I had paid all my debts, settled every account and could still show a balance of nearly £100. It all fitted in with the unreality of our situation at this time.

We also paid a visit to Wassiamull's, the fashionable ladies' tailor and silk-merchant in High Street. This was because I wanted material for pyjamas, and Wassiamull had the most delectable choice of silks. We were under the impression that it would be at least two weeks before the Japs attempted to invade the Island and after last night's experience of clean sheets and charming company, it seemed only right and proper to invest in pyjamas again. So I bought enough material for two pairs. The next thing was to find a tailor to make them up and I decided to try an Indian tailor in a small boarded shop which I had noticed at the cross-roads in Paya Lebar, only one mile from where the battalion was encamped at Tock Hock.

On our way to lunch at the Cricket Club we went into the Cathedral where we fell upon our knees and offered up a prayer of thankfulness for our reunion of the previous day. The Cathedral at this hour was empty: it seemed alarmingly large but it was quiet and restful and we felt at peace. The whole mad world outside seemed far away.

This lovely Cathedral was at this time in the spiritual care of that wonderful man, the Right Reverend John Leonard Wilson, Bishop of Singapore. Later in captivity he became a kind of legend to all of us in Changi. We never saw him but we heard of him. We heard of his efforts to alleviate suffering among prisoners of war in camps all over the island during the first year of captivity when he was on parole in Singapore. And then we heard of him in Changi Jail after being arrested by the

dreaded Kempei Tai with fifty others and tortured in the Y.M.C.A. building in Singapore town. Later he was flogged unmercifully with ropes.

After the war this gallant man became Bishop of Birmingham, a title he holds today. I am proud to think that of all great men of the Church of England it should have been he who confirmed my daughter, Lynette, at St. Michael's School, Petworth, some fourteen years after the events which I am now relating.

We lunched at the Cricket Club with Bill Hunt and "Basket" Hennessey, the latter also working at 2nd Echelon H.Q. It was quiet but by no means uncrowded. It came as a shock to me to see steel pylons standing out on the cricket ground and on the tennis courts too; one of them had been planted in the middle of the one-time centre court where Pim Drooglever and I had played so many matches together. After the first course of hors d'œuvres the air-raid siren began to wail once again and the entire Chinese staff disappeared into some underground hide-out of their own. We remained at the table and talked, but after half an hour the All Clear had still not sounded, nor had the waiters returned. There was nothing we could do. We simply walked out of the main entrance and drove back to the flat. We weren't even given a chance to pay for the hors d'œuvres!

Ruth then went off to work at 2nd Echelon and I slept like a log at home. In the evening we all went to the Tanglin Club to swim and there we had an animated session of high-balls in the bar with a number of old friends. Then we went on to a house nearby where we found quite a party going on with Desmond Shean and Michael Braithwaite from Malaya Command, and some poor chaps who had been hurt while fire-fighting after a raid on the docks that morning. Shortly after our arrival, the hostess, Mrs Clyne, stepped into the circle, having just returned from a day's nursing in Alexandra Hospital. Her husband, a volunteer, was away on duty with the 3rd Cavalry. A bomb had landed in their garden during the day, blowing the windows and roof out of the main living-room in which we were now all talking.

The next morning I went with Ruth to 2nd Echelon with a view to meeting the British and Indian staff with whom I had had such a happy association. Bill Hunt took me on a conducted tour of the new 2nd Echelon which had expanded since my time over the length and breadth of a large three-storied Chinese

school. It was good to see everyone in such good heart. The messenger boys were still beaming with smiles from ear to ear, and the little Chinese telephone operator looked just as happy.

From 2nd Echelon I went off on my own to Alexandra Hospital to see how Hutchinson was getting on. His arm was in a splint and the wound in his shoulder was heavily bandaged. He thought there was quite a chance he might be shipped away to India. There were one or two badly wounded men who had been on the *Empress of Asia* when she had been bombed and sunk three days previously. One poor fellow had been badly burned about the head and face. The nurses were working in their quiet, efficient way and making their patients' life a great deal brighter by their presence in those crowded wards. Major-General Gordon Bennett in his book *Why Singapore Fell*, describing his visit to the Australian General Hospital wrote: "These nurses are the nearest thing to angels I can imagine." The same could be said of those British girls in Alexandra Hospital, and for that matter of the British, Chinese and Malay girls who toiled on to the bitter end in the overcrowded wards and passages of the Civil General Hospital. It is perseverance and courage like theirs which is apt to bring a lump into one's throat.

During the later afternoon Ruth and I set off to walk the full length of Orchard Road to the Singapore Cold Storage. As we approached that august building the alarm sounded and immediately hundreds of Chinese, many of them small children, could be seen jumping into the deep brick-built drains on either side of the road. The dirt and the stench of these drains was terrible, but this was the only protection which these poor wretches could find against the savagery of the Japanese pilots. Air-raid shelters in Singapore were literally non-existent. Only in the larger stores, the better known business firms, banks and Government buildings was there any kind of organized protection, and this amounted to little more than exterior sand-bagging and shelters in the basement. It was because of the hardness of the soil and the high level of the water that a proposal to construct underground shelters had been rejected by the Government well before war broke out. On this occasion we continued on our way up Oxford Road. Only an occasional car passed by, otherwise not another soul was visible in the streets. The Chinese and Malays watched us as though we were mad from their unenviable positions in the street drains. In Ruth I could

not have asked for a finer companion. We ultimately sought shelter in the ice-cream department of the Cold Storage building and there we sat at the bar on high stools, sipping ice-cream sodas while twenty-seven silver-winged bombers passed directly overhead. A little later came the fearsome crescendo of crumps. This time it was Keppel Harbour.

That evening we looked in at Raffles Hotel. The open front verandah had been effectively screened to produce a complete black-out and inside Dan Hopkins and his band were playing dance music just as they had night after night for the last three years. It seemed quite fantastic that this should be happening at Singapore's largest hotel within days of invasion and possible extinction.

We dined with the others at home in the flat, and early the next morning I set off by hopping lifts to Teck Hock village, fervently hoping to be able to see Ruth again before she might be evacuated.

The officers were at breakfast under the rubber trees with a specially hired shamianah over their heads. It was good to see Harbakhsh Singh again. He and everyone else seemed to be in excellent form, especially John Parkin who was about to receive a second D.S.O. for his magnificent leadership in the campaign on the mainland. He was now to command a combined battalion of ourselves and the 2/12 Frontier Force Regiment. As we would then have too many officers Parkin decided that Lyons, Martin and I should rest in an Indian Reinforcement Camp in Pasir Ris where we would remain until required to replace casualties among the officers of his newly formed battalion.

On arrival I was told that this Indian Reinforcement Camp was to take over the defence of half a mile of the coast close to the village of Pasir Ris. However, the next day a battalion of the Norfolks took over the front and the I.R.C. came back to their present area for training and instruction in Japanese tactics.

During the next two days I hopped lifts into Singapore and on each occasion I was able to see Ruth. We again went up to Malaya Command but there were no further developments concerning her evacuation and no more news of shipping. Everyone was calm and hopeful and Ruth herself was as gay as ever. We were told that the moment further evacuation was considered necessary she would be called at once. So we went off to lunch at Raffles Hotel with Pim Drooglever, who treated us

to a war-time special meal which finished with Drambuie on the table and Jap planes overhead.

On my way back I was passing through Paya Lebar when the air-raid siren started to wail. This might be the last chance to collect my two pairs of finished pyjamas from the little Indian on the corner and I was determined not to miss that chance. I therefore persuaded the driver of my lorry to park under a tree while I dashed across the road. The little tailor had locked himself up behind his boards but the immediate promise of payment of his bill had the desired effect and in I went. All I wanted now was an occasion to wear those pyjamas. I never got it.

On the 9th we heard of the Japs' invasion of the previous night. They had crossed the Straits in the north-west corner of the island where the 22 Australian Brigade had received a tremendous bombardment for twenty-four hours before the actual assault. The Japs had suffered heavy casualties and so had the Australians. Heavy fighting was still going on in the River Kranji area. The Japs had gained a firm foothold on the island.

Then at midnight on the night of the 9th/10th our half-trained battalion of reinforcements was ordered to move to the Tanglin Road, a distance of sixteen miles. By dawn on the 10th we were a very ragged column when we finally halted beside the club house of the Tanglin Golf Course.

I had now lost all contact with my own battalion under John Parkin, and from now on my story is that of 4 I.R.C. battalion, an improvised composite unit.

Chapter 15

LAST DAYS OF SINGAPORE

ON our arrival in this new area we were told that we had been placed under the command of 1st Malaya Infantry Brigade. Had he been able to see us, the commander of that Brigade would have had quite a shock. We had no transport and no telephone communications. We had not one single automatic weapon in the whole battalion. Three hundred rifles in the hands of these young reinforcements from India was all we had to hold up the relentless Japanese. Even some of our ammunition turned out to be American .30 rimless. We were hardly likely to play a hero's part in the fighting on the island.

In the meantime John Parkin's newly formed regiment had been whisked away to Changi to come under the command of 2nd Malaya Infantry Brigade. So I now had no chance whatever of joining up with that regiment. We could hardly have been further apart. Fate plays funny tricks.

All my life I have been told to count my blessings. At this particular time I remember it took me some time to find any to count.

The battalion spread itself out in a large semi-circle round the Tanglin golf links. One of my forward posts overlooked the 18th green. It seemed almost sacrilege to dig a trench within a delicate chip shot of the pin. My H.Q. I established in the ante-room of an imposing building nearby which in normal times had been the Manchester Regiment's Officers' Mess. We found it to be amply stocked with both food and wine.

I was lucky in my associates. First I had the good fortune to have a Subedar of the traditional type, a man who had seen service in World War I. I also had three stout-hearted subalterns who had arrived with a draft of reinforcements from India at the end of January. My second-in-command came from London, a young man of twenty-two called Eccles who, together with the Subedar and myself, composed my triumvirate at Company H.Q. throughout the remaining few days of the war. As platoon com-

manders I had a fiery young Scotsman, Cameron-Smith by name, a quiet restrained Englishman called Gough, and a recently promoted P.M. Jemadar. Cameron-Smith was a rare character with flaming red hair, who had an impulsive, flamboyant and carefree personality — a bit of a madman with a marvellous spirit, fearless, and itching to get at the Japs. Gough provided a strong contrast with his cool head and his quiet, deliberate manner. We worked well together — right through to the end.

The men in my company turned out to be sappers and miners from Bombay. Very young and inexperienced, they were anxious to do their best. "Sahib, we are sappers" they would say in Urdu, "we have learnt about bridges and demolitions but now you give us a rifle and tell us to dig trenches. We don't understand." So I told them that every man was now a fighting soldier, that they had been trained to fire a rifle and now they would get a chance to use it. By the expression on their faces they obviously considered this a phoney type of war. They remained puzzled to the end.

We were surrounded by 25-pounders. A British battery had unlimbered their guns in the mess garden. Next door to the Garrison Church where Lynette had been christened, an Australian troop had sited their guns. We had surely been allocated an unhealthy position. I realised we would almost certainly become the target for counter-battery fire. In the meantime frequent visitations from Japanese bombers gave my sappers their first experience under fire and very creditably did they react to it.

In the evening of the 11th I walked across the golf course to a house among the trees where Jimmy Larkin, my new C.O., had established his battalion H.Q. When I arrived I was greeted by an officer of the Gurkhas who told me that he was Larkin's adjutant and that his name was John Stephens. Taking me into one of the inner rooms he poured me out a strong whisky.

"Take this" he said, "you'll need it. The Intelligence Officer of 1st Malaya Infantry Brigade has just been to see us. Apparently we are to move up north along the railway line to fill a gap between two forward battalions."

"When do we move?" I asked.

"We don't know yet, but probably during the night. We shall get detailed orders any moment now." John Stephens looked worried and no wonder.



One-man tanks of the Japanese army, at the approach to the
Singapore Causeway

(Copyright Keystone Press Agency)

"It's slightly suicidal, isn't it?" I suggested. "I mean, what about the men? How will they react? You realise we have only rifles? Not one single light machine gun."

He didn't answer. We went through to an adjoining room and there we talked with Jimmy Larkin. Despite what lay before us they managed to exude a degree of cheerfulness. I then walked back to my company area.

Within the hour a message told me that the operation had been cancelled and I breathed again more freely. Someone had made a very wise decision.

During the night we listened in the darkness to a French woman speaking on the radio about the fall of Singapore. We knew this to be a piece of Japanese inspired propaganda, but it left us, nevertheless, confused and wondering. I thought of Ruth and wondered if by this time she had been evacuated. If she could get through to Java then with average luck she should be all set for Australia. As for Lynette I reckoned she should have reached Ceylon by this time.

The early morning dew lay heavily on the ground but the sky soon became clear and the sun hot and bright. Along the Holland Road masses of transport vehicles of all kinds were moving up to the front. A platoon of carriers passed through. There seemed to be troops everywhere. It was now February 12th.

I breakfasted at battalion H.Q. and learnt from John Stephens that the Japs had gained a firm hold on the island and that we were being driven back on Singapore town from the north west. Coates' 15 Indian Brigade had been cut off on the Jurong road. The Australian 22nd Brigade had suffered sixty per cent casualties in officers and nearly as heavily in men. A number of stragglers of this brigade were moving through our position now. I also heard that the Japs had brought tanks across the Straits and that these had already been in action on the Bukit Timah Road. How had all this happened? It seemed that constant Japanese bombing plus artillery and mortar fire had destroyed our field telephone service in the north west with the result that the searchlight system at the point of crossing had failed to work. Worse still our own artillery had never received the order to fire. It all seemed too bad to be true.

Presently Moses, the Australian Liaison Officer, arrived with fresh instructions. He told us that our role, which up to now had been somewhat ambiguous, was to form part of an inner

perimeter of semi-circular shape round Singapore town. We were also to deal with any snipers or raiding parties who broke through the forward areas. Apparently fighting had been raging fiercely on the Choa Chu Kang Road as well as on the Jurong Road, and we were giving ground in both places. Only in the gap near Pasir Panjang village were we holding our own and this was due to the 1st Malay Regiment who were fighting like tigers — little men with big hearts.

I returned to my company with a feeling of great despondency. It was quite obvious that the situation was fast becoming desperate. Within a few days, if not before, the Japs could be surging through the streets of Singapore, and what would happen then? We had heard what happened in Hong Kong. Last night I had kidded myself that with average luck Ruth would have left, but now doubt and misgiving returned. I could not be sure she had gone. Last night's shelling had been especially heavy and some of the loudest crashes had come from the direction of Lloyd Road. Since there was no immediate activity on our front I decided to ask for two hours leave of absence in order to find out about Ruth before it was too late. Larkin understood only too well, so in a borrowed car I drove to the flat.

Here I found a late lunch in progress and Ruth ready to leave. She had received orders to embark at Clifford Pier at 3 p.m. She was quiet and restrained but I saw no sign of distress.

We drove to the quayside and boarded a small motor launch in company with Sandy Godley of the Royal Scots and his pretty wife, Valda.

"Are you both leaving?" I asked.

"No, I'm seeing Valda off" answered Sandy, "but I've had no orders to get out of it myself. I'm supposed to be doing Liaison Officer with the R.A.F. but now the R.A.F. have gone, and everyone seems to have forgotten about me. I suppose I shall have to stay here and be captured."

What a frightful situation, I thought, another case of a no-longer-wanted being forgotten.

"You may still get the order to leave. It's not over yet" was all I could say, and then the air-raid siren started to wail.

From the launch the four of us looked back on Clifford Pier to see hundreds of natives running for cover. The air raid warning system had been caught napping, because within seconds of the siren's wail twenty-seven Japanese bombers appeared in the

west, and they were heading straight for us. A formation of about a hundred British and Australian nursing sisters was standing on the quayside. It was too late for them to scatter, nor would it have been easy for them to find any suitable cover, so they remained where they were, standing in two long lines and staring out to sea. Despite the stress and strain of war they were immaculately turned out in their smart tropical uniform. Not one of them looked up in the skies as the Japanese planes flew over their heads. There was something quite magnificent about their discipline. We watched from the launch, then looked at one another, but could find no words.

Soon we were boarding the one time coastal steamer s.s. *Mata Hari*. One 4-inch gun astern and little else gave evidence of the odds against survival if she were to be attacked. A good friend of better days in the ship's 2nd Engineer procured for Ruth a rough and ready cabin. I helped her down with her luggage and before we could speak of the future a bell was sounded for the return trip of non-passengers.

"The best I can hope for you is that you will become a prisoner of war" she said, gripping my arm tensely.

"And for you, darling" I answered "we must pray it will be Java and then Australia, eventually England."

We took our farewell in the passageway, then as the launch left the ship I watched the water widening between us.

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Back on land again I jumped into my borrowed car and drove like a madman back to my position on the golf course. The Japs were shelling the cross-roads just below the Club House making large craters in the roadway. The little car stood up to a rough passage. We needed plenty of luck.

As I approached Holland Road I passed a number of ambulances and lorries which were crowded with Indian soldiers clothed in pyjamas. Others were hobbling along the road, some with sticks or crutches, others with a red hospital blanket wrapped round their shoulders. I stopped to ask them what had happened and was told that the Indian General Hospital in Tyersal Park had been bombed with incendiaries and was blazing furiously. Two hundred patients had been burnt to death. These poor devils had been told to find their own way to the

Civil Hospital in town. On reaching my company H.Q. I found a young Chinese suffering from some kind of fever. He had made his way from the blazing hospital and was now stretched out on a couch in the mess. I gave him some tea and drove him to the Tanglin Hospital next door which, thank heaven, was still functioning.

At 6 p.m. the C.O. and adjutant of the Australian Base Ordnance Depot came across to inform us that the Brigadier commanding this sector had ordered us to take up a position forward of the Kay Seang road about a mile away and in this position we were to stand and fight it out to the end. There was to be no withdrawal. We would move at first light next day.

Early in the morning we moved to the new area. Our progress was painfully slow and we spent much time ducking into ditches and drains on the side of the Tanglin Road as bomber after bomber, flying independently, swooped down low over our heads. As we turned up the Kay Seang Road one machine came down so low we could see the face of the observer leaning out of his cockpit to watch the effect of his bombs. These were dropping on either side of us, fortunately at some distance, evidently aimed at the very position we were due to man.

My company was allotted the forward position on the right with a company of 2/2 Gurkha Rifles immediately on my left. The rest of the battalion was echeloned back in rear of a ridge which extended across the whole front. Immediately to my front lay a stretch of thick lalang grass, six feet in height, interspersed with small trees, shrubs, swamp and narrow streams — the type of country in which the Japanese revelled. It stretched away in front to the outer perimeter of Buller Camp and up the hillside beyond as far as the eye could see. Alexandra Hospital faced us less than a mile in front; it was packed with wounded.

My two forward platoons set about digging themselves in. We possessed no entrenching tools of our own so we had to scrounge from neighbouring houses. I also went to the Australians on my right and found them very helpful; they lent me picks and shovels. The enemy continued to be active in the air all the morning, which made digging extremely difficult. The men worked magnificently just the same but it was a slow job. They came in for rounds of abuse from the Australians for failing to hide themselves from Jap reconnaissance machines. The Aussies had remained in their slit trenches unobserved. We were

told our discipline was bad. It probably was, but our spirit was first class.

Cameron-Smith and Gough's platoons were on the right and left respectively of my 300 yards front and each of them had established his H.Q. in a two-storey house. Cameron-Smith's Bren gun was cleverly camouflaged behind an improvised wall of fresh green plants in the upstairs verandah. Weapon pits were concealed in hibiscus hedges, look-out posts established in bougainvillea shrubs, air sentries posted in bathrooms and lavatories — a life-like sketch of this thing they then called modern war.

I found a house for company H.Q. occupying a commanding position with a fine view of the area in front. It was stocked with a small amount of tinned foodstuffs, a refrigerator, a telephone and electric light, all of which were functioning. The water supply was flowing very slowly, but it was at least flowing. I discovered a small motor car in the garage and a complete set of modern furniture. Quite a find!

In view of the dwindling water supply I ordered the two long baths in the upstairs bathrooms to be filled. This was lucky, as a few hours later the water supply failed altogether. Larkin had established his battalion H.Q. in a large rambling house in the hollow on my left. Unfortunately we were uncomfortably close to two ack-ack gun positions which had been spotted and were coming in for a sticky time. Many salvos were bursting all round them and it seemed that many men had been blown to bits.

We found ourselves forming part of a salient with the enemy pressing towards Singapore on both sides of us. At the moment we were not in close contact with the Japs and information as to his whereabouts was very scanty. The Australians on our right consisted of hastily armed Ordnance clerks and M.T. personnel, while immediately on our left was the Bakery Section of the Australian Imperial Forces. The supply situation then began to raise difficulties. Although we were tactically under command of the Australians, we were still responsible for our own administration; unfortunately our staff had completely disappeared after being severely bombed in River Valley Road. We therefore found ourselves without food for the men. A scrounging party from one of the reserve companies was sent on a foraging expedition and returned later with sufficient food for

that day. Rumours and stories from the main front continued to flow in and it soon became clear that the situation was really desperate. Singapore was beginning to show the scars of battle. Oil installations in every direction were burning fiercely. The Base Ordnance Depot at Alexandra which was hidden in vast palls of smoke on our left had come in for a strafing, not only from the air, but from long-range artillery too. Even Buller Camp immediately to our front had been set ablaze. A very sad and sorry Singapore lay battered and bruised before the relentless invader.

Throughout the night, patrols went out hourly. The Gurkhas set off armed with kukris as their only weapons; they excelled at cutting throats.

The most outstanding feature of the day was the presence above Johore Bahru of a Japanese spotting balloon which remained in its apparently dangerous position all day. The one or two observers must have had a red-letter day reporting by telephone to their rear H.Q. on the ground positions and moves of our units on the Island. We could see some guns firing directly at it, but the range was obviously too great. If only we had had just one aircraft, but it seemed that the R.A.F. had gone—lock, stock and barrel.

Another Sunday morning dawned, another fateful Sunday, and the date — 15th February.

A conference at battalion H.Q. during the morning left us in no doubt that the last battle was about to be fought and this time it would not be the British to win it. Jimmy Larkin tried hard to impart coolness and confidence, but he carried a heavy burden. He told us the situation as he had heard it from the Australian C.O. on our right, finally ending with the dramatic words:

“Gentlemen, we fight, and if necessary die, in our present position.”

Back in my own company area I spent some time brooding on these discomfiting words and wondering how I would pass on the message to my own officers and N.C.O.'s. From what I had just been told it appeared that the Japs were as likely to be behind us as in front of us, a piece of information which seemed to offer an excellent reason for staying where we were to the last. In due course I passed on the message to my rather bewildered subordinates.

Towards mid-day five dive-bombers swooped down over our house with their machine guns firing rapid. They then proceeded to bomb the ack-ack gunners just behind us, some of their bombs falling wide and bursting in my company area. Casualties began to flow in.

While the raid was still going on an Australian runner came across the undergrowth on our right with a note for the C.O. Shortly after his arrival at battalion H.Q. all company commanders were summoned once more. The note had come from the C.O. of the Australian unit on our right and read as follows:

"The Japs are massing for attack; should this attack be launched we are to fight to the last man. The white flag has gone forward for an armistice and the answer is expected at 16.30 hours. If this is accepted, troops will stand by to lay down their arms; if not, we shall continue to fight."

We were sent back to our companies with the order to stand and fight. At that moment another heavy artillery bombardment opened up from away on our right. It soon became quite clear that our position and that of the Australians were the principal targets and shells began to fall all over the area. I was far too absorbed in ducking low to avoid those screaming, whining missiles which one could not see, to ponder over the dramatic note which the C.O. had just conveyed to us. Fortunately my mind was now to be fully occupied with other more pressing thoughts and on reaching the comparative safety of my house-on-the-hill I quickly sent round word to my three platoon commanders concerning the impending Japanese attack. At the same time I ordered my small staff to move upstairs to take up their fire positions in the bedroom windows while my own orderly, Mohwaraz Khan, was to remain with Eccles and myself at my O.P. in the dining-room. A moment later came a sickening crash and a shell had exploded only ten yards from the window of the front room, which was separated from the dining-room by two walls and a small alcove. The glass windows of this main living-room being shut and bolted were smashed to smithereens. A large amount of earth flew through the open windows at which we were standing and scattered the crockery in all directions. Then a second shell landed plumb outside the dining-room window, sending up shovels of black dirty soil which came hurtling through the windows with even greater violence than on the first occasion. Eccles was standing close to the window

with Mohwaraz Khan just behind him, while I stood at the back of the room in the doorway. All three of us were covered with dust, everything in the room was covered with dust; in fact, the air itself was dust. For a second we could see nothing, but in the next moment I found myself staring into the youthful face of Mohwaraz Khan, and he was laughing.

I shall always remember that young man with the winning smile. I can see him in my mind today, his beautiful pure white teeth, his handsome features, his silky jet black hair, Eton-cropped like all Punjabi Mussulmans, his pugri half off his head, but smiling through a thick coating of dust as his eyes met mine. I felt a thrill of pride and respect and my heart went out to him in that moment. I don't know where Mohwaraz Khan would rank in the social register of men. If breeding, wealth, colour, success and all such factors be taken into account, he would, I suppose, rank far down on that register. But for sheer courage, cheerfulness and character at that moment, to me he was way up high on the ladder, a giant among men.

The bombardment continued for the greater part of an hour and a great number of shells fell in the battalion area causing heavy casualties. To add to our discomfort another unit of artillery began to shell us from the opposite flank, from the open country away to our left. So shells were whizzing over our heads in both directions at the same time. I couldn't help wondering what would happen if they were to meet head-on in mid-air.

In the meantime the Japanese attack had begun. Parties of the enemy appeared on the crest a thousand yards in front of us. These were quickly followed by other formations and by individuals working independently so that the skyline soon became alive with tiny moving figures in the evening sunlight. Cameron-Smith's Bren gun cracked off several long bursts. I thought this would prove too much for his patience. One or two enemy snipers then appeared in the long grass just to the west of Buller Camp. They could not have been more than four hundred yards from our house on the hill, but they were difficult to pick out even with field glasses and they soon disappeared from view. Our riflemen were firing for the first and last time. They were giving the Japs all they had, even though the range was too great. It was their swan song and they were determined it should be a good one. They might be young and inexperienced but they

possessed the right spirit. They would die fighting if it came to that.

We watched and waited from the upstairs windows of our house. The hillside facing us was now alive with Japs, but instead of wriggling their way towards us, they were swinging right handed and making for the town and the docks. It seemed that we were to be given the go-by. Then slowly the sun went down and darkness began to set in. Firing of every kind ceased, Jap planes no longer appeared in the sky, the Island became hushed and still. Perhaps the end had already come.

Then came the usual rumours. We were told the Japs had captured the Singapore water supply, the streets were crowded with dead and dying, the hospitals full. A million bottles of spirits had been blown up by our own engineers outside Raffles Hotel, appalling atrocities, harrowing experiences of escaped prisoners, and so it went on — all very confusing and depressing.

The night brought a stillness that I had not known for the last ten weeks. Yet such quiet after the constant din of battle brought little comfort. I lay awake for hours, too tired to count the blessings which were no longer there, too tired even to sleep.

Early next morning we learnt the worst. We had surrendered unconditionally and years of imprisonment lay ahead. Jimmy Larkin had been ordered to report to Gordon Bennett's H.Q. near the Golf Course. On his return he sent for all his officers and in an obviously emotional voice he read out to us a copy of General Percival's last message to his troops. We listened in silence to these words:

"It has become necessary to give up the struggle, but I want the true reasons explained to all ranks. The forward troops continue to hold their ground, but the essentials of war have run short. In a few days we shall have neither food nor petrol and many types of ammunition are short, and the water supply upon which the vast civil population and many of the fighting forces are dependent, threatens to fail. This situation has been brought about partly by being driven off the dumps and partly by hostile air and artillery action. Without these necessities of war we cannot carry on. I thank all ranks for their efforts throughout.

Adv. H.Q. M.C., 15/2/42."

I walked back to my company to find them assembled on the

green grass. It was obvious that they knew what had happened but I made a little speech just the same. They stood there in silence in the brightest sunlight, puzzled and pained. My subedar turned away, tears streaming down his cheeks.

At ten o'clock we fell in for the last time, with orders to march to Raffles Place, taking our arms with us to hand over to the Japanese on arrival. We marched by way of River Valley Road thus avoiding the horrors of Orchard Road where we were told hundreds of mutilated bodies lay in heaps by the roadside. The way led past numerous houses and gardens which were scarred by bomb or shell. We scarcely saw the Japs. Only an occasional sentry standing by such buildings as United Engineers told us of their occupation of the town. The Chinese and Malays kept indoors, few of them daring to venture forth. The town wore a sad look: even Raffles Place had been shelled. As we marched into it I noticed that the Indo-China Bank was flying the tricolor of Petain's France.

We were ordered to hand over our arms, which were being stacked in two large rooms on the ground floor of a building immediately west of Change Alley. The men were herded into this same building while the officers were marched into Robinson's large store on the opposite side of the Square. Somehow or other Mohwaraz Khan had followed me into Robinson's, together with at least a dozen other Indian orderlies. An hour later Jap orders arrived to the effect that all Indian troops were to move on the following morning to one camp, while all British personnel were to go to another. Rumour had it that our destination would be Changi.

I walked up to the furnishing department on the top floor and there on a £50 sofa I lay down and slept.

Chapter 16

AFTER THE SURRENDER

TWO HOURS LATER I woke up to find a large kindly-looking woman standing over me with a cup of tea in her hand.

"How did you produce that?" I asked her, "and what are you doing here?"

"I'm staying behind with my husband. He's the Number 1 here. This store has meant everything to us. We made up our minds to stay to the end."

"And the cup of tea?"

"Our kitchen adjoining the cafe is still functioning. Our Chinese boys will continue to cook."

"But the cafe is a shambles. There's a large hole in the roof."

"Yes, only yesterday a bomb fell through the roof. We were lucky to be down below at the time. What about you? At least you're alive."

"Yes, I guess I've been lucky, but then I never got involved in any real fighting on the Island. I was sent to rest in an Indian Reinforcement Camp and before I had a chance to get back to my regiment — the Sikhs — we had to move from Tech Hock to Tanglin in the middle of the night. I don't know where my regiment is nor what happened to it. But you're quite right — I'm lucky to be alive."

"Drink your tea and I'll show you round the place. I suppose you'll be sleeping up here tonight."

"I guess so," I answered, and at that moment we were joined by Jimmy Larkin and John Stephens, who, having dumped their equipment on two other sofas, came over and introduced themselves.

"We'll all be sleeping up here tonight," said John, "but let's hope no-one else has the same idea. Trust you to find a cute little hideout like this, Denis. Mighty comfortable sofas. Where can we wash?"

"I'll show you, come over here," and our kindly companion led us over to the ladies' hairdressing department. This we

found to be well stocked with rows of bottles of scent and a vast assortment of lotions of the most exotic nature.

"What about the water supply?" Jimmy Larkin asked somewhat anxiously.

"There is no water supply. It was cut yesterday afternoon after the bombing. The only water you will get is in those three fire buckets." This from Mrs Robinson's No. 1.

"We'd better hide those fire buckets," John volunteered, picking up two of them and placing them behind the door of one of the hairdressing compartments. Larkin took the third bucket and put it beside the others.

"When we've finished up the water, we'll have to wash in Eau de Cologne," I said, "after all, there's plenty of it."

We were taken to the kitchen to be shown a long shelf on which rare delicacies of the tinned variety stood invitingly in columns of threes. A large refrigerator in one corner contained fruit, vegetables and bottles of mineral water. Somewhere else we found bottles of whisky and gin. It looked as though we would be all right on the top floor.

Downstairs on the other floors some of the officers were playing billiards in the games department, some were selecting suitable footwear in the shoe department, but most of them were just sitting in silence, a confused and rather sad expression on their faces. It seemed extraordinary that none of them should have ventured up onto the top floor. Maybe it was because the lift was no longer working.

We ate high tea on the ground floor, a welcome meal produced by the staff of our I.R.C. battalian H.Q. Few chairs were available so most of us squatted on the floor.

Outside the building not a single Japanese soldier appeared on the streets. Rumour had it that the Japanese army had already been boarded in ships in preparation for fresh landings on the coast of Sumatra. Our situation seemed quite unreal.

I was anxious to find out what had happened to the 5/11 Sikhs in the last week. Where was John Parkin, Baja Brown and the other British officers? Where had Harbakhsh Singh, Prithi Pal Singh and the little doctor got to? Were they even alive? Curiosity and apprehension weighed heavily. It would be good to know the worst.

Just then Martin approached from the main entrance. He had

been outside in Raffles Place and had apparently spotted me through a window.

"The regiment are only just round the corner," he told me, "they are in a Chinese Recreation Club, less than half a mile away."

"What about the Japs?" I inquired.

"I never ran into one," he answered, "there's hardly a Jap on the streets anywhere. It's incredible. Will you come with me? P.P. says he will give us as much clothing as we can carry. He's giving away his store of clothing in the Q.M.'s truck."

"O.K.," I said, "but my orderly, Mohwaraz Khan, is somewhere in the building and we must take him with us."

A little later, in the cool of the evening, the three of us were walking through the streets of Singapore just as we might have done at any time during the past years. It was certainly a strange experience treading our way through this so recently captured fortress with the enemy in possession. Not a Jap to be seen anywhere. There was something quite uncanny about it all, something essentially unreal and even a little frightening.

Martin was right. We first ran into the trucks of our B echelon transport on the club cricket ground and here it was that I took my farewell of Mohwaraz Khan. He had found a number of his friends among the P.M.'s with the transport and was obviously happy to be among them again. We shook hands with great feeling. I had a very genuine regard for this young man, a regard which embraced respect, admiration, gratitude and affection all in one.

In the cricket pavilion Prithi Pal Singh and the doctor were sitting among piles of clothing.

"Well, it's good to see both of you again," I said, "you've survived, but what news of the C.O., Baja, Harbakhsh and all the others? What happened to the battalion?"

"The C.O. and Baja both came through. You will find them in some building over there," and P.P. pointed across the cricket ground.

"Heaven knows where Lyons and Donaldson are. They may have been killed or they may have escaped. We just don't know. Hutchinson is in one of the hospitals."

Just then a sepoy rushed through the doorway in a state of some agitation. He had spotted some Japs on the far side of the cricket ground.

"You'd better get back" was the doctor's advice to Martin and me, "they may be quite active at night and it's fast getting dark."

"Maybe you're right" I said catching hold of Martin's arm and pulling him towards the door.

"Wait a minute" called P.P., "don't you want some of these clothes? What about shirts, or socks? You will want clothes in prison you know."

So we each took a pair of khaki shorts, two shirts and a pair of socks.

"Thanks P.P. and good luck to you both. How long will it be, do you think, before the war is over?"

"It could be five years" the doctor said.

"Oh God, might as well cut our throats now" I said. "No, I reckon two and a half will see us out again" and I stepped out onto the green grass.

"You always were an optimist," I heard P.P. shout as Martin and I set off down the street.

We were now a little worried that we might be seen by a Japanese guard about to go on duty. It was one thing to be on the streets at this hour armed with the innocent excuse that we only wanted to hear news of our regiment, but what would the Japs have to say about our bundles of brand new military clothing? It would have been ironical in the extreme to have been locked up in some dark and dank punishment cell for looting. So we walked as fast as our legs would carry us without actually breaking into a run. Even at this fast walking pace our attention was caught by a handsome green Lagonda car parked in an unusual place as though it had been deserted. We could not resist crossing the road and peering inside. A bunch of keys was hanging from the switchboard. It was ours for the taking. The only trouble was there was nowhere to take it.

How comforting it was to arrive back in Robinson's store, as far as we knew still completely unobserved.

"Where the hell have you boys been?" we were asked by a dozen pair of inquiring eyes in the entrance hall?

"To see our own battalion round the corner," Martin answered.

"You must be crazy" came a chorus of voices. "A Jap sentry has just been posted in the square outside. He's down by the Indo-China Bank now. Take a look."

They were right. More than one Jap sentry prowled around

outside the building all that night. We were told they had orders to shoot if we showed so much as a light. This proved to be quite wrong because downstairs a vast throng of officers were smoking themselves to death with cigarettes they had found in the tobacco department, and what with matches being struck and cigarette lighters lighted the Japs must have thought we were giving a firework display. Nevertheless, the hours passed without a shot being fired. Only hysterical flows of Japanese vituperation against everything connected with the white man disturbed the silence of the night.

Up on the top floor Jimmy Larkin and John Stephens produced a bottle of whisky and a tin of cigarettes. The three of us sat up till midnight with the light of a torch, talking about everything under the sun including our dismal prospects for the next few years. Then we lay back on those heavenly sofas and slept in comfort for the last time for nearly thirteen hundred nights.

Early the next morning orders were received that we were to march out to Changi starting at 10 o'clock. Fourteen miles in the heat of the day, carrying all our possessions, was not going to be much fun.

We made good use of the ladies' hairdressing saloon. I simply could not resist washing in a basin of Eau de Cologne, an experience which I would love to repeat today. On the other hand my popularity at breakfast suffered from the effect of its somewhat overpowering smell. I was told it upset the bacon and eggs, which one of the Chinese boys had cooked for us. We made real pigs of ourselves with two tins of grapefruit, and then sausages to follow the bacon and eggs. It was to be our last square meal for three and a half years.

There was now only one Japanese sentry patrolling the area outside the building. We watched him marching in slow time along the pavement beneath us. At the north east corner of Raffles Place he turned the corner and wandered down Battery Road towards the Singapore Cricket Club. He returned at the end of roughly three minutes to repeat his tour of the square. I stood with John Stephens, still on the top floor, looking down on this solitary scruffy figure. His very presence down there was temptation enough to drop our one remaining tin of grapefruit on his head. Instead we decided to pay a visit to Kelly and Walsh's magnificent book shop just across the square. This was, in fact, a simple operation just so long as the sentry kept to his

time schedule. So the moment he had turned the corner into Battery Road we slipped out of the building and dashed across the square. Outside Kelly and Walsh we discovered that the entrance had been wired, but judging by a large gap in the wire, someone had already broken in. John offered me first choice and while he kept a wary eye round the corner I crawled through the opening and made a quick selection of a suitable book. My choice fell upon twelve hundred pages of Somerset Maugham's *All Together* which I thought would afford me the greatest number of hours' pleasure in the days to come. We then swapped roles and John came out with a massive tome of Rudyard Kipling's works. We were back in Robinson's with time to spare.

So delighted were we with this successful exploit that we couldn't resist repeating the performance, this time to the British Dispensary which was next door to Kelly and Walsh. Here we were surprised to find an elderly European about to lock up for the last time. I asked him for a toothbrush and a packet of aspirins. "You can have anything you like," he said, so I asked him to throw in a sponge as well — a nice expensive one.

At 10 o'clock when everyone else was falling in on parade I was hiding in an upstairs lavatory. Ten minutes later when our company of officers had marched out of Raffles Place on their long trek to Changi, I slipped out of the building and ran to the place where Martin and I had seen that green Lagonda car. During the night the idea had come to me not only to convey myself out to Changi in comfort, but to load the car with some of the good things, in the way of food, which were otherwise going to be left behind in our café kitchen on the third floor. This may sound selfish but in case my plan failed I felt it was hardly fair to suggest to either Jimmy or John that they should come along with me, and for this reason I had told no-one of my intention. This was just as well. The streets were no longer deserted. Small gatherings of Asians had come out of their homes into the sunlight. One or two Sikh policemen stood idly on the pavement, but they took little interest in me. There was not a Jap to be seen anywhere. The green Lagonda car was still there, so was the bunch of keys. It looked like being a walk over.

The door opened easily and once in the driver's seat I switched on the ignition, pulled out the choke and pressed the self-starter. Nothing happened — the engine wouldn't start. I

tried again and again. Still no spark, just that infuriating grating noise when the self-starter churns away without response. Why wouldn't it start? Had the owner been prudent enough to remove a vital part of the engine before deserting it? Or had he disconnected the ignition wires? This was almost certainly what had happened, and the laugh was now on me. Not only the laugh, but a Sikh policeman too, who had suddenly appeared at the open window. I felt him grab me by the shoulder as he asked me in bad English what the devil I thought I was doing. Everything seemed to happen at once. Only a few minutes ago the street was quiet and friendly. Now suddenly a crowd of far from friendly people began to gather round the car. There was only one thing to do — beat it.

Realising I was playing with fire I apologised to the policeman in bad Urdu and walked away with a sheepish gait, trying hard to look unconcerned. So far my plan had been a flop, and I must confess I felt rather stupid. There was, however, one other possibility in the "B" Echelon transport trucks of the 5/11 Sikhs which Martin and I had seen on the cricket ground the previous night. So I made my way as fast as I could walk to the Chinese Recreation Club, thankful that the crowd on the streets had let me go unhindered. But here again I was defeated, and for nearly the same reason. The Indian sepoy had been marched away earlier that morning and had taken the keys of their trucks with them.

So now I really was in a predicament. My brother officers by this time must have been well on their way towards the Civil Airport. I was dressed in khaki uniform, an Australian hat on my head, the only Englishman with a white skin, among an Asian people in this conquered city.

There was only one thing to do — nip back to Raffles Place and march out to Changi alone, and this I now proceeded to do. Still not one Japanese was to be seen anywhere. This was the first bit of luck which came my way. The second bit of luck appeared, as though in answer to a silent prayer, just as I turned out of Battery Road. There a second long column of British Officers and men were marching past the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, and to the tail of this I now attached myself. Saved by the gong.

The column presented a pathetic sight. It was led by at least four files of Brigadiers and full Colonels, each of them laden with

kit and carrying attaché cases and all manner of small baggage. Behind them followed a full company of officers and finally a long line of weary looking soldiers who came from all parts of England. As we passed Raffles Hotel we could see a group of English women in the upstairs windows who signalled to us the V for Victory sign. This encouraged the troops to burst into song. They sang all the old favourites, and how sad they made one feel. When they sang "There will always be an England," it was too much. Many a pair of eyes grew dim.

On the pavements the Chinese and Malays turned out to see us pass. They looked at us as though drugged with disillusionment, their faces strained, bewildered, inquiring; a you-seem-to-have-let-us-down kind of look. How sad and tragic it all was.

We halted at the end of two miles and the column fell out on the side of the road. I had had enough; it was not the fatigue of marching with a heavy load on one's back which hurt, it was the picture we must have cut before these bewildered people whom we were now leaving to the mercy of the Japanese. A number of military lorries were rumbling past on their way out to Changi, laden with British troops and stores. Some people, I thought, have all the luck. I decided not to be one of the suckers to march any longer, so I nipped down a side street while the column was still halted and signalled to the driver of a large open lorry crammed full of troops. As he slowed up approaching the cross roads I jumped on the running board. Forty minutes later I was in Changi, four hours ahead of the marching columns.

It was a perfect day. Overhead Japanese aircraft were flying around and it seemed strange to watch them without any feeling of danger. I found myself standing on the soft green grass in front of some married quarters, and though Changi was a confused mass of cars, lorries and troops, here it was peaceful and quiet. After the clamorous din of battle of the last ten weeks this spot where I stood was like a restful oasis. The green grass was closely cut, neat and trim. Here and there a cluster of palm trees waved in the gentle breeze from the sea. I felt desperately weary and lay down to rest, thankful to be alone with my thoughts.

And these carried me southwards over the seas, down to the Banka Straits where Ruth and *Mata Hari* would perhaps be steaming into the safer waters of the Sunda Strait. They drifted, too, in the wake of the *Duchess of Bedford* somewhere in the Indian Ocean, with the hazards of the Atlantic ahead. There are

times in life when events not only overtake but entirely envelop one. There is then no point in dwelling upon the outcome of such issues. One can only call upon the Almighty for His help, and this is what I did, not only at this moment, but many times again in the days to come.

In any case far more dramatic events were taking place in the Banka Straits and the fate of nearly five hundred passengers demands that we should return to that little ship, *Mata Hari*, where we last left her on the 12th February at anchor off Clifford Pier.

PART II

Chapter 17

ESCAPE OF THE LITTLE SHIPS

ALTHOUGH Ruth and Valda Godley had boarded *Mata Hari* during the afternoon of February 12th, it was not until dusk that embarkation began in earnest. On this day it was all too clear that the end of Singapore as a fortress was not far off and the final evacuation plan for European civilians was about to be set in motion. The best part of four thousand "useless mouths" had been evacuated on the 30th January in that convoy which had included the *Duchess of Bedford*. There were still a few thousand more women and children in Singapore at this late hour, and in addition to certain units of English and Australian nurses and a number of key naval and military personnel, as many civilians as possible were to be got away at once. Four ships were standing by in the Inner and Outer Roads. These were His Majesty's Ships *Kung Wo*, *Giang Bee*, *Vyner Brooke*, and *Mata Hari*.

Having seen her luggage bundled into her one-berth cabin, Ruth went up on deck in search of companionship. Though there were no Jap planes in the sky, shells were bursting over the city and on the waterfront. She could see a batch of a hundred evacuees being ferried out to *Giang Bee*, and on the quayside stood that group of nursing sisters immaculate in their smart tropical uniform. The continuous roar of our own guns and the bursting of Japanese shells around the jetties was a terrifying reminder of the way the battle on shore was going. Black billowy smoke was pouring into the sky from oil tanks which had been set on fire by Japanese bombing. It was a grim, desolate picture, and as Ruth stood there in the brilliant sunshine her thoughts turned to another ocean where she knew her daughter was facing hazards of a different kind in that troopship bound for England. She turned away to walk round the deck.

Anxious to find out exactly what was going on, she made her

way up to the boat-deck, at the forward end of which she observed the Captain's cabin, with the bridge overhead. Just then a beautiful tall girl with reddish-brown hair hailed her, and she turned to see Christine Clevely struggling with luggage. Christine had been working as a nurse at one of the Medical Service's First Aid Posts for the past two months, but she and Ruth had known each other since the early days of the war in Europe. Now, like Ruth, the time had come for her to get out of it.

Ruth turned back and that slow smile of hers told of her joy at meeting someone she instinctively felt to be a kindred spirit. She had always admired Christine; the thought of her presence on that ship gave Ruth a feeling of warmth as they exchanged greetings.

In many ways Christine was very like Ruth. They were both friendly souls themselves and they made friends easily. It was therefore hardly surprising that the 1st Officer, Vere Burton, of the R.N.V.R., should be helping Christine with her luggage. Outside the Captain's cabin four camp beds for the ship's officers were already laid out, and Vere was now offering his own to Christine. Then up came Gerald Tait, another old friend of Ruth's in India, where he had been quite a big shot in railways after retiring from the Army. He had rejoined the Army on the outbreak of war, but was now being medically evacuated with heart trouble!

Down below, the lounge was being prepared for use as a hospital, but sitting in one of the chairs Ruth found Valda Godley looking very forlorn and lost. She was worrying about Sandy, who, although his job as Liaison Officer with the R.A.F. was virtually at an end, had still not received orders from Wavell's H.Q. to fly out himself.

As darkness fell more and more passengers flocked on board, and soon every inch of deck space was taken up. A frantic mother had lost two of her three children in the crush on the quay and now she had no idea whether they were on another vessel or still among the throng on shore. A small boy went up to one of the ship's officers, nervously stuttering the tragic truth that his mother had been taken to another ship: how could he find her? An army sergeant was about to leave his wife and baby, when the poor woman became hysterical and threatened to jump overboard with her child if he went ashore. The wretched ser-

geant had no wish to become a deserter, but his pleading was of no avail, for it was obvious that his wife meant to do what she threatened. It was here that the man with the human touch came forward. This was Captain Carston who, as Captain of the *Mata Hari*, remembered that his ship was short of a clerk. Conscious that there was enough tragedy in his little ship already he pressed the sergeant into naval service.

Carston, a New Zealander from the farming district of Little River in South Island, had spent most of his life at sea. At the age of twenty he had enlisted in the 9th battalion of the Worcestershire Regiment in 1914 and saw service at Gallipoli and in Mesopotamia. After World War I he quickly secured a post with the British India Steam Navigation Company, with whom he remained until 1936. In that year his services were lent to the P. and O. Company and he was appointed to command that firm's small steamer *Mata Hari*, a vessel of only 1,013 tons. His new employment was to collect cargo at the various ports lying on either side of the Malacca Strait and tranship it to the big, home-bound Far Eastern mailships in Singapore. European cargo from the Outward Mail was discharged at Penang, and these consignments *Mata Hari* distributed to their various destinations along the Strait. This fortnightly plying between Singapore and Penang gave Carston an intimate knowledge of the waters in the Malacca Strait, a knowledge which was to be of inestimable value when the Japs invaded Malaya.

The Admiralty had taken over *Mata Hari* a few days before the outbreak of hostilities with Germany, but due to the deplorable lack of guns in England at that time, she was given antiquated Lewis guns instead of Bofors for use against aircraft. Instead of two four-inch guns she had to make do with one. The asdic equipment on the other hand was quite a late model, and with two depth-charge rails and two throwers, she was efficient as an anti-submarine ship.

Up to the time the Japs came into the war, Carston was on patrol and escort duty with *Mata Hari*. When the Japs invaded Malaya I remember listening on the radio at various times on that first day of war to a special announcement. This concerned the loss from a car in Raffles Square of important documents belonging to a high-ranking staff officer. The announcer went on to read out the numbers of a long list of missing documents. It was all very mysterious. It was, in fact, the means by which



Captain A. C. Carston, R.N.V.R., Captain of the "Mata Hari"



instructions were sent out to put "Scheme Betty" into operation, detailing the objectives to be dealt with by those who had been selected to act as guerillas in Thailand. *Mata Hari* had been selected to carry out the naval part of the scheme, and was on patrol off Penang when the first bombs were dropped on Singapore. Carston was ordered into port for refuelling, and there was handed his sailing orders to proceed forthwith to the west coast of Thailand in execution of "Scheme Betty." He was told that he was authorised to use such force as might be found necessary to carry out his instructions. But above all he was ordered to capture or destroy three Italian ships then lying in Tonkah harbour. Intelligence reports indicated that Japanese convoys were approaching Thailand and that the Thais were still proclaiming their intention to repel any invader. So on entering Tonkah harbour Carston was prepared for anything.

The Italian ships scuttled as soon as they saw *Mata Hari* approaching and were lying on the bottom with their upperworks blazing furiously by the time the latter got alongside. Meantime all over Thailand small groups of guerillas were doing everything expected of them. A few seized Puket airfield, and with ears hopefully but vainly straining for the sound of planes bringing British troops, held it for twenty-four hours. But the Japs quickly overran Thailand, swallowing up isolated units of our men in the interior. On the other hand, *Mata Hari* succeeded in getting out almost everyone from the coastal areas. On the 12th December Carston received orders that "Scheme Betty" was to be wound up, and he was ordered to return to Singapore. Under different circumstances it is probable that all those who took part in "Scheme Betty" might have found an honoured place in the story of these times. As it was, subsequent disasters in Malaya overshadowed this enterprise which, like many others, was doomed to sink into the oblivion of lost causes.

Carston had hoped on reaching Singapore that it would be an opportunity to spend a few days at home with his family, but while he was dining on the first night ashore, a telephone call brought him back to the ship. There he found orders for *Mata Hari* to act as escort to a minelayer whilst she laid her eggs in a new minefield across the northern entrance to Durian Strait. The ship was then to proceed at full speed through the Malacca Strait to a rendezvous near White Rock, an islet off the Sembilan Islands. There Carston was told he would meet five ships, and

taking them under his command, he was to establish contact with 3rd Indian Corps for the purpose of covering the left flank of our Army as it retired down the peninsula, and to prevent the Japs from infiltrating up the many creeks on the coastline. The ships proved to be entirely unsuitable for the job; mudbanks prevented them from being taken sufficiently close inshore to be used effectively, and without proper anti-aircraft armament they were most vulnerable to air attack. Nevertheless, with his little fleet Carston accompanied our retreating forces on the mainland until Port Swettenham was reached. From the latter place he was ordered across to northern Sumatra to assist the Dutch defences there, his new command being made up of *Mata Hari* and two other ships. One of these was sunk by Japanese aircraft off Belawan; another met the same fate off Sebang, and early in January *Mata Hari* was instructed to return to Singapore. By this time the Japs had advanced well down the peninsula. Their dive bombers based on Kuala Lumpur were in a handy position to chivvy any ship passing through the Malacca Strait in daylight, and this was something every sailor on that run feared most of all.

After returning to Singapore, *Mata Hari* remained on local patrols. By the end of January the Japs were close to the Island, and though Carston's family were reluctant to leave, he eventually succeeded in getting them away on a ship bound for India. Now at this late hour when Singapore was tottering he was about to face the severest test of his whole service, for from now on he alone was to bear the heavy responsibility for the safety of nearly five hundred passengers, including one hundred and thirty-two women and children, and this at a time when the odds of bringing them through to safety were heavily loaded against him.

Nevertheless, Carston was the man for the job. Behind that solid, strong, determined countenance there lay a simplicity and humbleness of mind which perhaps was only apparent to his devoted family and the few who knew him best. His early upbringing among the simple things of life in the heart of Little River had shaped his character before he had even gone to sea. There he learnt the meaning of family life in its simplest terms; he saw and felt the bond of sympathy and consideration which existed between those forty or fifty farming families and all the time he drew inspiration from the beauty and freshness of his

environment. When he went to sea at the age of fourteen and a half he soon learnt the meaning of discipline, of toughness, of consideration for his fellow men, and of many other things besides. His early training in the Merchant Navy had given him a genuine sense of duty and pride of service, and though modesty restrained him from speaking of his inner thoughts he had always cherished high ideals of conduct, of achieving some glory in his profession, and above all, of one day commanding a King's ship. He realized at the same time that such an honour imposed certain obligations which in some circumstances might test him to the uttermost. Five years of active service in the British Army during the First World War had shown him how unpredictable a man's conduct could be under the strain and stress of battle. Modesty again made him conscious and ever-fearful of his limitations. He had always prayed that if ever put to the test he would not be found wanting, but that rising to the occasion he would do all things expected of him. He might be now a little unsure of himself, conscious that years of easy living in the luxurious East had softened him, and so he wanted before all else, and now welcomed, the opportunity to prove himself. It was perhaps this modesty and humility which produced in him the human touch, the touch which made him order that sergeant from Malaya Command to stay aboard with his overwrought wife. There was no doubt that this human understanding would ensure for his diverse assortment of human cargo the most earnest consideration in every decision he would be called upon to make in the ordeal which lay ahead.

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By 9 o'clock embarkation was completed and Carston received his sailing orders. These instructed him to proceed to Batavia via Durian and Banka Straits, taking during the hours of daylight such cover from aircraft as might be available. The waters to the southward were entirely new to him, but his sailing orders were quite explicit, and *Mata Hari* weighed her anchor to proceed to Batavia.

As the ship was beginning to gather way, a loud hail came from a water-boat which was returning from the Outer Roads. The R.N.V.R. officer in charge announced that he had a hundred and twenty civilians on board and inquired if Carston

had any room left to take them on. Apparently they had been turned back from the ship to which they had been allotted because of an insufficiency of lifebelts. *Mata Hari* herself was overcrowded and in fact did not have enough lifebelts for the number of passengers on board already: but since this in itself laid Carston open to the charge of infringing the Safety of Life at Sea Regulations, he reckoned a few more would hardly aggravate the offence. So he took those hundred and twenty grateful souls aboard.

Mata Hari now had four hundred and eighty-three people on board, including the ship's officers and crew. Every inch of deck space was occupied by passengers or by their baggage. Those who were on the boat and shelter decks were exposed to the open sky and would, of course, have to take the sun and the rain as they came. At least they had cool fresh air and escaped the fetid atmosphere of the maindeck below.

Ruth put on her camel-hair coat and went up to join Christine. Just before weighing anchor Carston had asked Christine if she would organise a team of helpers for the issue of food and rations, so Ruth became one of the team.

Mata Hari finally got away about 10 o'clock, and Ruth climbed up to the boat deck, standing beside one of the lifeboats to take one long last look at the Island she had known and loved for two years. Everywhere the scars of battle stood out, oil installations in every direction were burning fiercely; along the waterfront burning godowns glowed redly through the darkness, sending up sudden fountains of sparks. The clamorous din of battle was almost deafening as Japanese shells burst in and over the city, and our own guns kept the air vibrating as they hurled back their own defiant shells. Even the water between Ruth and the shore seemed to be on fire. It gave her a feeling of unreality: she found it hard to believe that this fortress, once regarded as impregnable, could be tottering into ruins.

Her thoughts went back over the last two years, and she recalled the happy times she had spent on this ill-starred Island, of the friends she had made, the kindnesses she had known, the homes she had lived in, and it was here that Lynette had been born. She was aware of a great sadness, of a sense of loss. It was here that we had lived and now she was leaving it, yet leaving something of herself behind, nothing material, but something indefinable, moments of her life, little triumphs and little

setbacks, her thoughts and her moods. This Island had sheltered us and been good to us. We had lived and loved within its shores.

Chapter 18

RUNNING THE GAUNTLET

SINGAPORE was not the only burning island that night. Hundreds of oil and petrol tanks closely clustered on the islets of Bukum, Sabarok and Sambo had been set on fire by our own forces the night before, and were now lighting up the harbour and sea for miles around with a weird murky twilight. From these islands of fire, thick black oily smoke arose in columns to a great height, and then formed huge mushrooms which united to spread a glare-tinged pall over the scene.

While the ship was steaming out of the harbour the searchlights on Blakang Mati, like long probing fingers, were groping through the murk. Suddenly they remained still, fastened on a Japanese force attempting a sea-borne landing from the west. One of our shore batteries opened fire. Then a searchlight edged outwards, catching a launch creeping south. Shells were exploding in the water, until suddenly the launch burst into a sheet of flame. The next salvo blew the Japanese landing craft out of the water. Firing then ceased and the searchlight went out.

Somewhere in the vicinity of Peak Island, two or three miles from the Inner Roads, *Mata Hari* passed a big motor launch which had apparently broken down and was full of deserters. The occupants shouted out in the darkness demanding to be picked up and to come aboard, their request being made in threatening as well as foul language. When the *Mata Hari* failed to comply, a stream of Bren-gun tracer bullets passed between the funnel and mainmast. How lucky for those deserters that no-one was hit. Had it been otherwise the odds were that Carston would have blown the launch and its rascally crew to blazes.

No undue difficulty was experienced in conning the ship to abreast of Bukum Island. From there on, however, the smoke came low, reducing visibility to nil, and covering the vessel as

well as everyone on board with oily soot. In all his career at sea Carston had never experienced such utter darkness. It was worse than any fog. At times he found he had to feel his way across the bridge. Navigation became a nightmare. He knew there were minefields close by to starboard, and equally near to port lay the reefs and rocks of the southern edge of the strait. Carston had another anxiety, too; he knew that strong currents were sweeping in varying directions across his course. However, round about midnight, in a patch of thinner smoke, he picked up the light of the minesweeper whose job it was to mark the northern entrance to the "Swept Channel and Corridor" through the Durian Strait minefield, and this was regularly swept by our minesweepers. At this particular point the "Swept Channel" was only one cable — six hundred feet — wide, and here too were strong currents which varied in direction with the state of the tide. Consequently a passage through the channel was a tricky business even in clear weather. Unhappily, as *Mata Hari* was approaching the minesweeper the smoke again thickened, rendering any attempt to make the passage under such conditions absolutely suicidal.

Carston dropped an anchor in order to prevent the ship from drifting out of position on the tide. There they waited until four o'clock in the morning, by which time there was only a slight improvement. Carston knew he couldn't afford to wait any longer. At first light, Jap planes would be out looking for them and it was important that by then they should be at the southern end of the Durian Strait in time to seek an anchorage hard up against some small island which was likely to give cover during the daylight hours. So there was nothing else for it but to go blindly forward on dead reckoning and to call upon the Almighty to see them through the fairway, in which lurked hundreds of mines, each packing 600 lbs of T.N.T. And the date — Friday, the 13th February.

Carston anxiously watched the clock until at last it told him that by dead reckoning they were clear of the minefield. Almost immediately the smoke suddenly lifted and *Mata Hari* was steaming along in a perfectly clear atmosphere. Bearings showed the ship was, indeed, just outside the southern limit of the minefield, but a quarter of a mile to westward of her course! But for the chances of war, that great little ship should have been blown up a dozen times.

When dawn came at last Carston was able to take stock of his ship. There were all sorts of problems to deal with. The previous evening the main concern had been to embark the evacuees and depart without delay. Now Carston had to consider the questions of accommodation, food and feeding arrangements, provision for washing and bathing, sanitation, air-raid precautions, abandoning-ship procedure, and so on. All these demanded immediate attention. As far as accommodation was concerned the majority of passengers simply had to stay where they were on the decks and make the best of it. However, by squeezing themselves into two cabins, the officers made their rooms available for some of the older women. The lounge was taken over by the ship's surgeon for use as a hospital in case of necessity, but in the meantime it accommodated the sick and infirm. The food question was the least of Carston's worries. Having raided the godowns on the wharves of Singapore, ample stocks of tinned meats, fish, jam, milk, biscuits and so on were in the storerooms, but there was little in the way of fresh provisions, only a couple of tons of oldish potatoes. There was a shortage too of stoves and cooking utensils, and this meant that only one hot meal a day would be possible. For all other meals the volunteer catering staff would dish out biscuits, tinned meats, fruit and jam. Cutlery and crockery were in such short supply that the majority of passengers would have to use an empty flat fish tin as a plate and eat with their fingers.

Since the likelihood existed of the voyage continuing beyond Java to Australia or India, Carston thought it advisable to conserve his stocks of fresh water in case of difficulty in obtaining supplies at Batavia. He therefore put everyone on a ration sufficient for drinking purposes only. With the exception of infants, who were allowed one small bath a day, no one was to be allowed even to wash unless they cared to use salt water.

But the great headache was to provide sanitary arrangements for the number of people now on board. There were only three European-style W.C.'s for the use of the officers, and a dozen Asiatic squatting-type pans for the use of the crew. To make the best of a bad job, all the European-style closets and some of the Asiatic type were reserved for women. The men, therefore, had to make-do with the remainder.

Then there was the question of action to be taken when the "Alert" sounded. Carston did not feel at all easy about crowd-

ing everyone down below. He knew that if *Mata Hari* were to be struck by a bomb heavy enough to penetrate the shelter deck the explosion would cause heavier casualties than if the passengers were dispersed. Secondly, if by mischance the ship should be in danger of sinking suddenly, the exits from the deck were insufficient to allow all his passengers to escape. On the other hand he knew that Jap planes usually carried 56 lbs anti-personnel bombs, and he thought that if the vessel were to be hit by one of these, the main force of the explosion would be expended above decks. Then too, passengers below decks were reasonably safe from machine-gun bullets. He decided to have everyone go down to the main deck in the event of the "Alert" sounding.

The prospect of having to abandon ship, in view of the unusual number of passengers, was a nightmare. There were only three boats, in a not-too-seaworthy condition, the combined capacity of which provided accommodation for about seventy-five people, little more than half the women and children on board. The rest of them would have to cling to the few rafts the ship carried. Everyone else would have to swim, and in an area notorious for the ferocity of sharks, the prospect was not a very pleasant one. Carston was determined to be prepared for the worst and accordingly he gave orders for the boats to be lowered to the shelter deck rail so that the loading up of women and children could be undertaken with the least possible delay. When every woman and child had been provided with a lifebelt, the remainder of the limited stock was handed out among the men.

For some weeks past, our minesweepers had maintained a "Swept Track" which, running from point to point, stretched from Singapore to Batavia, and any ships straying from it did so at their own risk. However, sticking to the track in daylight laid a vessel wide open to air-attack, so Carston continued on down the Durian Strait looking for a suitable anchorage close to the shore of some island where his ship might become merged in the landscape and even sheltered from view from one or more directions. Round about eight o'clock, *Mata Hari* was headed to the westward, and half an hour later anchored in the southern entrance to a narrow passage between False Durian and a smaller island to the eastward about a hundred yards distant. The anchor had scarcely been lowered when a flight of nine Japanese bombers appeared coming from the north at a

height of about 12,000 feet. At such a height *Mata Hari's* low-angle 4-inch gun was useless, and the other weapons did not have the range. The Japs having spotted *Mata Hari* dropped six bombs each and these fell in the water all round the ship. One bomb which missed by a few yards caused a mast-high gush of muddy water from the sea bottom where it had burst. The other bombs had raised fountains all around, and from the cockpits of those Japanese planes it must have seemed that the little ship had gone up with one or other of those fountains, for she must have been completely hidden from view. Only one passenger was injured when a bomb fragment hit him in the leg, and then only because he had disobeyed Carston's order to go below. The whole flight of Japanese bombers, evidently satisfied that they had sunk the ship, continued steadily on their course. The raid was over.

Down below the best part of four hundred souls were herded together like sardines in a tin. Silent and resigned they stood. There was no panic. The children behaved splendidly; they tried so hard to show they weren't afraid. That little boy who had lost his mother on the previous day was standing close to Ruth as the bombs fell all round the ship. He seemed to draw comfort from the presence of so many others around him. An elderly woman who was on her own had taken charge of him and was standing beside him now. Close to Ruth too was a young Chinese girl with a lovely face. She was wearing a tight-fitting Chinese dress and even after that uncomfortable sooty night on the deck she still looked immaculate. Miss Angela Kong Kam Kiew had been nursing in the hospital at Kuala Lumpur and later in Singapore. When the Jap planes had flown away she went with Ruth and Christine up to the boatdeck and there she talked to them of her experiences up to the time she had left Singapore.

While they were talking the *Mata Hari* moved to the foot of an almost perpendicular hill on the southern end of False Durian island to shelter under the mangrove trees that grew out over the sea. There she had two feet of water under her keel even at low water. There too she was hidden from the south-bound Jap planes until they were practically overhead. She was lying close enough to the trees to make it difficult to spot her from any direction.

This could have been a day of rest, a day on which to bask

in the sun and enjoy the scenery of that tropical isle. But it was not to be. Flight after flight of Japanese planes appeared in the skies, sometimes nine and sometimes three times as many. Because of these persistent flights Carston felt compelled to keep his gun crews at action stations, and everyone else in readiness to move the moment the alert was sounded.

During one alert, when his passengers were taking cover down below, Carston watched the Japanese planes flying overhead. In the hot sunshine of that tropical day he found himself growing drowsy and his thoughts went back ten years to a day in 1932 when General von Hindenberg had presented him with a beautifully inscribed gold watch for his part in the rescue of four Germans whose flying-boat had come down in distress at sea. Now he suddenly realised that the watch and the Jap planes were linked in an ironic way, for it had so happened that one of the four Germans he had helped to rescue from the flying-boat was one of Germany's leading men in aviation, Wolfgang von Gronau, who in 1936 had been appointed adviser to the Imperial Japanese Air Force, and no doubt in that capacity had been partly responsible for the present efficiency of the Force which was now seeking to destroy his rescuer.

Nor did his ruminations end there. In that rescue there was another aspect.

It is, I believe, widely known that the average Chinaman is extremely reluctant to render assistance to a drowning person. Such churlish behaviour is not due to callousness, for at heart the Chinaman is a kindly fellow, but springs from superstition and tradition. According to an old Chinese belief a Higher Power selects those destined to die by drowning, and that Power ordains the time and place of the event. Such being the case, the heirs to ancient Cathay believe that should mortal man presume to intervene and run counter to Divine Will by staging a rescue act before the selected one has gone down for the third time, then assuredly the Gods will see to it that the man concerned is overtaken by dire consequences. However, like most enlightened Westerners, Carston had dismissed such a belief with ridicule, and up to this time had believed the flying-boat incident to have been closed long ago.

Yet now, as the planes kept droning up above in unending succession, he began to wonder if, in qualifying for that watch, he had not condemned himself to the vengeance of the Chinese

Gods. Could it be that, like the elephant, the Sinic Gods never forget nor forgive? Was it possible, he mused, that throughout the years these Omnipotent Beings had been contriving a punishment to fit the crime of not letting von Gronau drown? Had the Seric Jehovahs decreed that, because he had cheated them of an airman's life, this day an airman would settle the account?

While he was meditating thus in uneasy reverie, his train of thought was rudely broken by a voice beside him. "Once again the little so-and-so's have nothing for this address, sir!" With a start, Carston left the realms of fantasy, and returning to a hardly less-depressing world of reality, gave the order to sound another "All Clear."

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But away to the east of *Mata Hari* a very different story was being unfolded on the decks of H.M.S. *Vyner Brooke*. This was the ship which had sailed from Singapore about the same time as *Mata Hari*. After passing through Durian Strait that morning she turned eastward to an anchorage off Linga Island, intending to shelter there for the day. However, because of the attention she received from Japanese planes, the anchor was hove up at noon and she proceeded southward. Passing through Straat Lima in order to gain the eastern side of Singkep, the vessel headed for the Tochjoch Islands and anchored there early that morning. It had been the intention of her commander, Lieutenant R. E. Burton, R.N.R., to shelter at the Tochjochs throughout the whole of that day, but once again Japanese aircraft made his anchorage so uncomfortable that he decided to head for Banka Strait, roughly fifty miles away.

And while Carston was watching Japanese planes flying overhead from the bridge of *Mata Hari*, *Vyner Brooke* was hit by two bombs, one of which burst in the saloon, causing heavy casualties. Only two lifeboats proved serviceable, and into these were crammed as many women and children as possible. Other survivors either clung to the side ropes or swam alongside. A few minutes later *Vyner Brooke* capsized and sank, taking with her one hundred and twenty-five passengers.

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About this time, too, and also well to the eastward of *Mata Hari*, His Majesty's Ship *Li Wo*, commanded by Lieutenant T.

Wilkinson, R.N.R., had just sighted ten Japanese ships in line on the port bow. *Li Wo*, an ex-Yangtse River steamer, had been fitted out as an anti-submarine ship. Capable of fifteen knots and armed with a four-inch gun of doubtful vintage, she also carried twenty-four depth charges. Like *Vyner Brooke*, she was heading for Banka Strait when she realised that the ten Japanese ships were converging on her. Shortly afterwards another column of fifteen Japanese ships appeared on the starboard bow, also heading for the Strait, and their course, too, closing in on that of *Li Wo*. A cruiser headed each column and a destroyer brought up the rear. Wilkinson in his one-time Yangtse River steamer found himself facing a formidable part of the Japanese Sumatra invasion fleet.

Faced with the choice of surrender or fighting his ship to the last, he at once decided to attack using his one ancient four-inch gun. Hoisting an extra Ensign, *Li Wo* headed for the centre vessel of the fifteen-ship column, and opened fire when the range was eight thousand yards but closing rapidly. Though one Japanese ship was set on fire and several hits were scored on others, all too soon *Li Wo's* small stock of ammunition was expended, and the gallant little ship was ablaze fore and aft from the punishment she had received. Still undaunted, Wilkinson put his engines at full speed and went in to ram, selecting as his target the biggest ship in the column. As *Li Wo* backed out of the gaping hole she had made in the Jap engine room, a shell carried away her main steampipe, putting her completely out of action. Her decks were now a shambles and she was sinking fast. As nothing more could be done, Wilkinson gave the order to abandon ship, but true to his word (that he would never allow himself to fall into the hands of the Japs) and to the ship he had fought so well, he remained aboard to go down with her. Of the one hundred men aboard *Li Wo* when the action began, only eight survived the engagement.

The true story of this epic only came to light some four years later, when Lieutenant Wilkinson was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross.

Chapter 19

CARSTON'S DILEMMA

Mata Hari weighed anchor in the late afternoon and proceeded on her voyage, Carston's intention being to steam throughout the night with the object of making a dawn arrival at the Tochjoch Islands, where he hoped to find suitable anchorage. After the oppressive heat and feverish activity of the daylight hours, Ruth found it very pleasant to relax on the boat deck while, under the comforting cloak of darkness, *Mata Hari* steamed southward over a smooth sea merely rippled by a cool breeze. Her spirits rose and in the security of the night she cast aside the cares and anxieties of the day. With Christine, and Angela Kong whom she had gathered up after the air-raid, she grew animated and even gay. They talked about their experiences over the last two months, about their plans for the future and about their present situation. Ruth told them about Lynette and the *Duchess of Bedford*, and how that ship had been bombed throughout the day and night of January 30th, and how a stick of bombs had fallen under the stern and caused a large gash in the shell plating just above the water-line. She told them how the ship had been partially repaired in the night and had left for Batavia the next morning. She wondered where that ship would be now.

During the evening one of the ship's officers joined them, bringing with him two tins of bully beef and a handkerchief full of dry-looking army biscuits for them all to share. They were each allowed a tumbler of fresh cold drinking water to wash it down, and how welcome that sparse ration was. Somehow they had all made themselves look clean and fresh, and both Ruth and Christine had applied sufficient cosmetics to look as if they had just stepped aboard. Furthermore, they had put in such religious combing of the hair that last night's soot was now almost indiscernible. The little Chinese girl was a picture of cleanliness and freshness.

It was now nine o'clock and the passengers were just preparing to bed down when a succession of flashes were observed

on the horizon ahead. *Mata Hari* was at this time proceeding along the channel between Singkep Island and Sumatra. In the tropics lightning is often a nightly occurrence and Carston encouraged the passengers to believe that the flickerings were due to this natural phenomenon, but there was a likelihood that they were gun-flashes, and he at once gave the order for the crew to go to action stations.

He stood on the bridge with the Officer of the Watch, a worried man.

When the voyage began he knew he would have to be prepared to deal with hostile aircraft and possibly submarines, but the information which he had been given before departure made no mention of the possibility of meeting enemy naval craft in those waters. So far as submarines were concerned *Mata Hari* was an anti-submarine ship and she was fitted with the means of dealing with this menace, but the possibility of falling in with enemy surface craft raised an entirely different problem in view of the precision accuracy of modern naval artillery.

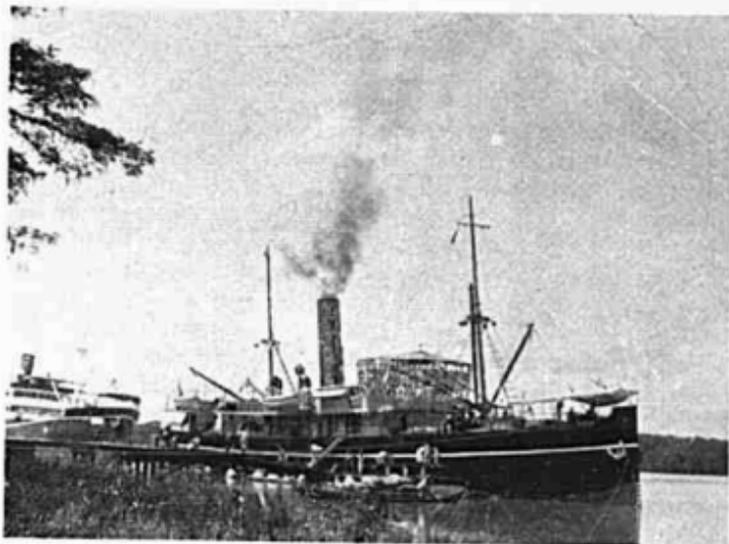
But why had he not been informed that Japanese ships were already approaching the Tochoch Islands? Our intelligence in Java and Sumatra had failed miserably in not broadcasting such information which must have been available early that morning of the 13th. At first light British aircraft based on Palembang had been sent out to attack Japanese ships known to be east of the Berhala Islands. Yet not a word of this had been passed on to Java-bound ships, nor, it would seem, had it been passed on to Rear Admiral Spooner and Air Vice Marshal Pulford whose *Fairmile* was sunk at the Tochoch Islands by a Japanese destroyer. "Had we on *Mata Hari*," Carston says, "known that the enemy was closing in on Banka Strait there would still have been time to turn round and try our luck through the Malacca Strait."

As things were how could he now avoid these enemy ships which lay ahead of him? To attempt to return to Singapore at this late hour would almost certainly be jumping out of the frying pan into the fire. No "enemy sighting reports" had been intercepted from the other British ships known to be on their way south. It seemed that his only course of action was therefore to proceed at speed until dawn, and have *Mata Hari* under whatever cover the Tochoch Islands offered before Japanese aircraft appeared.

Shortly after eleven o'clock, the southern end of Singkep was abeam and *Mata Hari* was approaching Berhala islet when more flashes were observed on the horizon ahead. Nothing further happened until about one o'clock in the morning, now of Saturday the 14th February, when suddenly, roughly thirteen miles south-east of Berhala, the sound of English voices shouting from the darkness could be heard. The night was very dark and nothing could be seen, so a couple of lifebelts with guiding lights were set afloat. As the ship approached the shouting men, a searchlight was switched on the bridge to be met immediately by frantic cries from the dark sea: "Don't show a light, for God's sake don't show a light!" A boat was lowered, and shortly the passengers crowding the decks saw six men ascend the ladder. They were escorted to the bridge and proved to be two officers and four ratings from H.M.S. *Scorpion*, which had been sunk by a Japanese cruiser. They reckoned they were the only survivors. They had been swimming for six hours and it was just benign providence that they should have seen and hailed the *Mata Hari* quietly steaming her way south on a calm sea.

Scorpion had been a Yangtse River gunboat before becoming part of the Malayan Auxiliary Fleet. She had received considerable damage from bombs in Malaya and had left Singapore a couple of days before *Mata Hari*. Badly in need of repairs, she was limping slowly towards Batavia when, two hours earlier, a Japanese cruiser accompanied by two destroyers was sighted. *Scorpion* immediately engaged the three ships and in the ensuing action was sunk. This information accounted for the flashes which Carston had seen at eleven o'clock. Carston also learnt that H.M.S. *Giang Bee* had been sunk earlier so that the flickerings observed at nine o'clock were probably the gunflashes from the two cruisers and four destroyers which had sunk her. Many women and children were amongst *Giang Bee's* passengers; with a casualty list of two hundred and twenty-three she had only seventy survivors. *Scorpion's* survivors reported that while they were in the water they had seen more flashes further on. This suggested that the Jap ships must have come as far as Berhala, sunk *Giang Bee* there, executed a turn-about, and were now making for the Toehjoch Islands. And here was *Mata Hari* treading on their heels as she followed up behind them.

Nevertheless, Carston now knew exactly where he stood. He



S.S. "Mata Hari"



Japanese parachutists attack on the airfield at Palembang. Their action sealed the fate of many escapees, including Ruth and all her fellow-passengers in the "Mata Hari"

(Copyright the Imperial War Museum)



no longer had grounds for hesitation. The safety of the women and children on board demanded that *Mata Hari* should get away from the neighbourhood as quickly as possible. Yet there were various courses he had to consider before making a final decision. As he says himself—"It might be suggested that after picking up *Scorpion* survivors, I should have turned back to the Indragiri River and tried to get the ship up to Rengat, from which place the passengers could have gone by road to Padang on the other side of Sumatra. As a matter of fact I did consider doing so, but dropped the idea because we had no chart of the river, and my information was that it was not navigable by vessels as large as *Mata Hari*. In any case the Moesi was almost as handy, and as Palembang was the only nearby port which I knew we could enter, it seemed to be the logical place to head for, especially as the enemy's naval irruption might have been merely a hit and run raid."

On the other hand Carston was still wondering whether he should turn back and attempt to pass through the Malacca Straits up the west coast of Malaya and then on to India. Another plan he had in mind was to land his civilian passengers on one of the nearby islands while he made a reconnaissance down the coastline of Sumatra. Alone with his thoughts he stood there on the bridge, yearning for guidance. After some time he decided to head *Mata Hari* for the coast of Sumatra, now some miles away, and to do some real "dog barking" navigation along the edge of the shoal water which extended three miles or so offshore, trusting that luck and Jap prudence would keep the enemy ships sufficiently far out to sea to enable *Mata Hari* to slip by them before dawn. The shoal water was reached without incident, though the Japs had many ships cruising around in the area that night. Once he found that *Mata Hari* was steaming southward as close inshore as he dared go, Carston felt much happier. Not only was there little likelihood of the Japs risking their heavier units in proximity to such shoal water, but as there was now no chance of their light craft being able to come inside *Mata Hari*, Carston's little ship was open to attack from one side only. Furthermore, in the event of an engagement the ship could be run closer inshore and grounded to give passengers a chance of swimming ashore.

About four o'clock Carston called a conference in his cabin. The civilian passengers were represented by a much loved

Singapore consulting engineer called Ritchie. The naval personnel on board were represented by Commander Scott, while Lieut-Colonel Milner attended for the military. Carston told them all he knew, then ran through the different courses that were open to them, and finally outlined what he considered should be done. Everyone agreed that the safety of so many civilian passengers must always be the foremost consideration, and that their interests could best be served by landing them at the first suitable spot down the coast. It was also decided that the Dutch authorities at the point of disembarkation were to be contacted for the purpose of arranging road transport to Palembang, a fair-sized port and town on the Moesi river. At Palembang further arrangements would be made to proceed by train to the southern end of Sumatra, and thence by ferry across to Batavia. Ritchie undertook to make all the arrangements and to sign on behalf of the British Government all bills connected with transport and maintenance incurred on the way. With all the passengers safely out of harm's way, *Mata Hari* would then be able to proceed with unrestricted freedom of action. A neat little plan, they thought at the time, with all the loose ends tidily tucked in.

As daylight was beginning to tinge the eastern sky, *Mata Hari* entered Sakanah Bay, situated about twenty miles northward of the entrance to the Moesi river and roughly seventy miles overland from Palembang. Had there been two more hours of darkness in hand Carston would have gone on to the mouth of the Moesi river and shipped a pilot to take them up the river. But with the threat of hostile warships added to that of enemy planes during daylight hours, he knew he must get under cover before full light, and the bay was conveniently at hand for the dual purpose of sheltering and landing the passengers. Whilst steaming into the bay a small Dutch steamer was observed to be following them in, so in the hope that she would be able to give them information concerning the inner portion of the inlet, Carston stopped and sent a boat across. Just as the boat reached the Dutchman, the roar of aero engines was heard and presently there hove in sight the biggest formation of Japanese aircraft any of them had yet seen.

Flying at a height of only two to three thousand feet the planes were heading straight for *Mata Hari*, the drone of their engines becoming deafening as they drew nearer. With a feeling

of dread Ruth counted eighty-one big bombers and twenty Zero fighters. How flattering to their vanity, she thought, that the Japs should send so formidable an armada to blot out just one 1,000-ton escape ship. She was standing on the boat deck with Christine, Valda and Angela Kong. Many others crowded round them in their sleeping clothes, craning their necks upwards, speechless with surprise, incredulity and horror. Very soon those hundred and one planes were overhead; then came the rattle of machine-gun fire, the usual Jap signal to release bombs, and they saw the splash of bullets around the ship. "This is it!" someone cried, "this time it really is it." No one else uttered a sound, no one moved. They simply waited for the bombs to fall.

But the bombs did not fall. Keeping perfect formation the planes continued majestically on, finally disappearing in a westerly direction over Sumatra. One woman broke down completely and falling upon a bedding roll, covered her head with a cushion and sobbed like a child, but Ruth and Christine, in common with the rest of the passengers, were too mystified to feel anything more than a natural relief that they were still alive and unharmed. Little did any of them know then that the task which those Japanese aircraft had in hand was one destined to play the most vital part of all in the gamble with each of their lives.

Mata Hari proceeded deep into the bay. From Malayan experience Carston knew that where there was a fishing pagar there was enough water, usually, for the ship. The information brought back from the Dutchman however was most disappointing. According to her Master, who claimed to be well acquainted with the locality, there was no beach in the ordinary sense of the word. Instead of solid land with a shingly or sandy foreshore, the whole of the coastline was fringed by a mangrove swamp several miles deep. The Dutchman added that the swamp was quite impassable except where the local fishermen had made narrow tracks across it by laying palm tree trunks end to end. The position of these tracks was known only to the natives. In any case, even if it were possible for the passengers to cross the marsh, there was no settlement on the other side, and there were no roads. This, of course, ruled out the plan of disembarkation in the bay.

Because of the flatness of the coastline and the shallowness of the water close inshore, no real cover from aerial observation

was available at Sakanah Bay. The best anchorage that could be found was amidst a group of pagars, fifty yards or so from the mangrove trees. Immediately after dropping anchor wireless silence was broken to broadcast a coded message to all British ships and wireless stations advising that Japanese ships were active in the waters north of Banka Strait.

In the evening, allowing sufficient time to find their way out of the bay in daylight, they again got under way and *Mata Hari* arrived off the mouth of the Moesi river about eight o'clock. As nothing had been seen of Japanese warships on the way round, and the ship was now inside Banka Strait, Carston thought it was not unreasonable to assume that *Mata Hari* had slipped past them. With Palembang only seventy miles up the river, it began to look as if the passengers' troubles would soon be over, and an air of cheerful anticipation ran through the ship. Alas for this blithe optimism! Unknown to them, up the river at Palembang, a battle was being fought. The air armada which had passed over in the morning had carried paratroops and these had been dropped around the town and oil-refineries. They were in action at this very time.

Carston, of course, knew nothing of this so continued with his purpose to get his passengers safely off the ship, and Palembang appeared to be the logical place to land them. He took *Mata Hari* into the estuary and made the signal for a pilot. Mistaking *Mata Hari* for a Japanese ship the Dutchman manning the signal station made no reply. Puzzled rather than worried by this treatment of his signal, Carston dropped anchor to prevent the ship being set, by the strong tide then running, onto one of the many sandbanks nearby. He assumed that all the pilots must be already engaged and that he would have to wait until one came down the river with an outward-bound vessel.

Shortly after nine o'clock a small Dutch craft came out of the river on the ebb tide, and when hailed, replied that a pilot was on board. At Carston's request she stopped her engines and he sent a boat across, but, on the strong tide both craft disappeared astern in the darkness. Fifteen to twenty minutes passed without a sign of the boat returning and Carston was mentally abusing its crew for their slowness when, suddenly, searchlights and gunfire were observed out in Banka Strait. The number of searchlights being used, and the wide area over which they were scattered, made it obvious that several ships were out there and

that some kind of naval action was taking place. Prudence pointed to the advisability of going up the river Moesi without delay but for this Carston would need a pilot. What had happened to the small Dutch craft and the boat he had sent across to her? An anxious ten minutes followed and then Carston's boat returned. To Carston's dismay the officer in charge reported that the pilot had refused to transfer. He had been bound for Batavia on leave!

In the meantime, the searchlights had been closing in steadily on the river-mouth, and were now switching on and off right across the estuary. If these were the searchlights of the enemy, then *Mata Hari* would be in a tight spot if they came in any closer, but for all Carston knew they might be the lights of either British or Dutch ships. Perplexing though it was there was certainly nothing to be gained in tamely waiting where they were. If the approaching ships were hostile, then it was imperative either to go up the river at once, or, making use of what darkness remained, to place the greatest possible distance between the enemy and themselves before daylight. The river offered escape tantalisingly close at hand, but Carston knew that without a pilot it was a backdoor closed to him. Nothing remained, therefore, but to use the front door and put to sea in an attempt to slip through whomsoever it was out there. Though a moonless night favoured whatever chance there was of success, Carston knew just how slim were the prospects of getting through undetected.

Chapter 20

END OF MATA HARI

So slim, in fact, were those prospects, that Carston knew that he now had to make the most difficult decision of his whole career.

The Captain of any ship, being required, by discipline and custom, to maintain a respectful distance between himself and the remainder of the ship's company is inevitably a lonely man. "Never, however," Carston says of those moments, "have I known a sense of such utter isolation as I felt that night when, standing alone in one corner of the bridge with eyes striving to pierce the darkness to seaward, I sought the solution to my perplexities."

In the early days of active service with the Royal Navy he had pictured meeting the enemy under many circumstances, and he had tried to visualize his reactions to the different emergencies. As the action of those who command His Majesty's Ships in time of war is laid down in Admiralty Instructions and by naval tradition, he had always considered that his duty would be simple and straightforward. He had never imagined that it might be possible for a situation to arise in which he might have any but shameful reasons for hesitation in the presence of the enemy. On this night, however, he realised that circumstances had placed him in just that very situation; that, without having fired a shot, he was considering the surrender of a naval ship. Two utterly incompatible duties were facing him; one, his obligations as a naval officer commanding a King's Ship in the presence of the enemy; the other, his accountability for the safety of his passengers, including one hundred and thirty-two women and children, entrusted to his keeping.

"The testing time had come," he says, "and with a Merchant Service background of saving life instead of destroying it, no Commander could have been placed in a dilemma more cruel than that which was mine as *Mata Hari* prepared to get under way.

"In a few minutes we might be meeting hostile ships in

force, and little imagination was required to visualize the carnage and horror there would be on our crowded decks were we to fight an action — an action to which there could be but one ending."

Training and tradition were calling upon him to uphold the honour of the service in which he served. They were demanding that, at the very least, he should deny the enemy a prize-of-war. Ambition was telling him that this was the only opportunity he would ever be given of realising his aspirations, of proving himself worthy to command a King's Ship. The testing time had come; but could anything vindicate exposure of women and children to the horrors of a naval engagement? Did the lives of these innocent non-combatants count for less than tradition and honour? They had been committed to his care, and he was conscious of the faith and trust which they had placed in him. Now their fate depended on one word of his. He was the sole arbiter of life and death.

"Surrender" is an unpalatable word. Nevertheless, his heart persuaded his head that if *Mata Hari* were to be intercepted she would offer no resistance. He knew that in making this decision he might be failing in his duty as a naval officer, but of the alternatives offered him he felt that the stigma of surrender was infinitely preferable to the awful responsibility of condemning so many women and children to almost certain death.

Under the impression that he would be dealing with a civilized foe, he believed, naïvely, that surrender would involve no undue hardship for the civilians. Thinking that the women at least would be accorded the courtesy that was their due, he anticipated that no more than inconvenience would be suffered by them whilst waiting for the International Red Cross to arrange their repatriation. He could not have made a bigger miscalculation but he should not be blamed for this. As it was, his passengers were to undergo three and a half years of barbaric cruelty, starvation, and endless privation in the foul prison camps of Sumatra and Banka, in which more than half of them were to perish. On the other hand, by his decision to surrender, he did at least give those who survived the prison camps their chance of survival. The records show how pitifully few came through the naval actions fought on the road to Banka Strait.

"I prayed for guidance and inspiration," he says, but having reached his decision not to fight if intercepted, Carston gave

orders to dismiss action stations and to strike *Mata Hari's* White Ensign. When these instructions had been carried out the engines were put to full speed ahead. Only an occasional searchlight and no gunfire was observed once they had started. Soon, however, shadowy shapes dimly perceived, told them that the escape route lay through the midst of a large fleet.

It was a grim and earnest game of Blind Man's Buff they played in Banka Strait that night. All the craft they were trying to avoid were blacked out except when their searchlights pierced the darkness with thin pencils of light. Carston gave every ship he could see as wide a berth as possible. At the same time he was anxious to be well out of the locality before dawn. They were well clear of the estuary and had passed several vessels when, soon after midnight, a searchlight opened squarely on *Mata Hari* from a position out on the port bow. At the same time they heard the report of a gun and presumed a shot had been fired across *Mata Hari's* bows. The engines were stopped and reversed immediately to bring the vessel to a standstill. Carston was most anxious to convey to whoever had stopped them that he had women and children on board, and accordingly he made an effort to communicate by morse lamp. It was Lieut Norman Cleveley of the Royal Signals who sent out that signal from the radio room. When no reply came back Carston asked the women on the decks to stand up so that in the searchlight glare they might be seen.

It is difficult to imagine a situation more tense. Carston knew they were in the midst of a large fleet. But whose ships were they? Lit up by the searchlight as she was, *Mata Hari* must have been standing out in bold relief to every vessel in the neighbourhood, while those who were aboard her, blinded by the dazzling beam, could see nothing beyond their own lit-up decks.

Nothing happened. They waited ten minutes which must have seemed like an age. No one spoke, no one moved. Then the searchlight was switched off. Still they could see nothing. Nor was the slightest indication given of what was required of *Mata Hari*. In the darkness the strain of waiting became more and more acute, until almost anything would come as a welcome break to such suspense. Tentatively the engines were put to slow ahead. The ship began to move. Nothing happened. Why? Was this interceptor after all a friend? Maybe British,

more likely Dutch, possibly American? Full speed ahead! Still no more searchlights, no gunfire! As *Mata Hari* gained way it seemed that they had been quite unnecessarily alarmed, for who but their friends would have let them go on like this?

The incident left Carston completely mystified. If they were in the midst of Allied vessels, why had there been no reply to his morse signal, even though he had not used the Allied Recognition Signals for fear of compromising them?

In fact they were all Japanese vessels. Why then was *Mata Hari* allowed to go on? One explanation could be that the Japs had so many ships of all classes sculling around in the strait that when they sighted *Mata Hari* they mistook her for one of their own lost or straying sheep. Yet Carston and his passengers were completely in the dark as to the nationality of the craft around them and as they continued on their way they were still unsure whether they were friend or foe.

Two hours went by with no sign of interference, and the hopes of everyone on board were rising. By 3 a.m. *Mata Hari* was several miles down the strait itself with, as it seemed, all the other ships astern of her. Surely nothing could stop her now?

But with cruel suddenness this mounting optimism was crushed by the remorseless hand of Fate as another searchlight opened full on them. This time there was no suspense. A morse lamp began to blink. In International Code curt words flashed across the water: "Anchor at once. Show a light. Do not attempt to lower a boat." This was the end of *Mata Hari*.

It was Sunday the 15th of February, and on this day, too, Singapore surrendered unconditionally. The fighting in Malaya was over and a terrible silence fell upon the East.

Chapter 21

THE RISING SUN OF JAPAN

WHEN the anchor had been dropped and the anchor lights switched on, the searchlight was dowsed. In the meantime, a signaller had been kept busy with the morse lamp trying to get a message through to their new interceptor that they were carrying women and children, and to find out who she was. But no reply came back.

Even now Carston and his officers could not be sure who it was who had stopped them, and during the few remaining hours of darkness optimism battled with misgiving.

Alas, morning twilight revealed the Rising Sun at the gaff of a cruiser about a thousand yards away. Dismay, despondency, despair rippled through the ship as it was realized that they were at the mercy of the Japanese. Ruth, caught up in the scramble to the ship's rail to see for herself that it really was true, must have realized that all her prayers and supplications of the past three days and nights had been of no avail. Not till later did she think of what lay ahead, the years of separation.

Meantime Carston, who had already collected all secret documents, confidential books, codes and all such things in anticipation of such a contingency, gave orders for them to be destroyed, and also the more secret parts of *Mata Hari's* asdic apparatus. The Japanese cruiser steamed slowly round them with all guns trained. She completed a circle and was about to send a boat across when one of the British Fairmiles appeared on the scene, her White Ensign trailing out astern as she raced through the water. There was a rush to the ship's rails and *Mata Hari's* passengers crowded the decks to watch. On came this speedy, one-hundred-and-twenty-foot long motor launch, H.M. Motor Launch 311, commanded by Lieut Christmas of the Royal New Zealand Volunteer Reserve. Leaving Singapore on the night of 13th February with a crew of fifteen and fifty-seven service passengers aboard, she too, was bound for Batavia. The cruiser opened fire and two destroyers raced up to join in the fray.



Armed with only one three-pounder gun and three machine guns, *311* was magnificently handled. Twisting and turning like a hare to avoid the salvos as the cruiser fired broadside after broadside, she quickly closed the range to less than one thousand yards in order to bring her little gun into play. On *Mata Hari's* crowded decks Ruth felt an awed silence, as with bated breath she and the other passengers watched this heroic but hopeless action, so in keeping with the finest traditions of the service. Ruth stood side by side with Valda and Angela Kong, too astonished to speak, yet silently praying that the gallant little vessel might escape and that the cruiser's shells should fall wide. But the end came with the twelfth broadside and *311* went down with her colours still flying.

The delay caused by this diversion gave the extra time necessary to dispose of many additional items which might have been of value to the Japanese. The submarine detection apparatus was completely dismantled and dumped, and the oscillator under the ship's bottom was unshipped. Ammunition, machine guns, small arms, binoculars, sextants and so on, were thrown into the sea on the side away from the Japs. Soon after leaving Singapore, a Dutch banker had asked Carston to take a large suitcase into safe keeping, saying that it contained eighty thousand guilders in ten-guilder notes: about thirteen thousand pounds sterling. Now he wanted to know how to dispose of the money. Carston recommended burning the notes in the furnaces, a course which he was bitterly to regret later, for had this money been distributed amongst the passengers, it would have been of inestimable value to them in the prison camps. It is easy to be wise after the event.

After sinking *311* the cruiser returned and sent her boat across. Carston met the boarding party at the head of the accommodation ladder. The officer in charge, a Lieutenant of the Japanese Navy, was courteous and correct in his attitude, which came as a pleasant surprise. As luck would have it he also spoke quite good English. The Japanese ratings scattered over the ship and took charge of the bridge, engine-room and wireless room. Carston then invited the Lieutenant to his cabin to discuss the handing over of *Mata Hari*. As Carston had no sword to offer as a token of surrender he tendered his revolver instead. The Lieutenant waved the gesture aside, politely telling Carston to keep the weapon himself. This courteous action spoke well of

the Japanese Navy and, thought Carston, augured well for the future.

After asking a few formal questions, the officer asked Carston to accompany him on an inspection of the ship. The tour went smoothly until they came to the forward four-inch gun. Here the Japanese sailors had discovered a shell in the breach, left there when action stations had been dismissed a few hours earlier. Carston was now ordered to fire the projectile into the sea, a task he knew to be impossible because the breech-block lock had already been dumped in the sea to render the gun useless.

His rather feeble explanation that the lock had somehow become lost was surprisingly accepted with a rather unbelieving "So." Then they returned once more to his quarters and Carston learnt the true story of the night's activity.

Situated on Banka Island, a short distance inside the Banka Strait, the small port of Muntok lies opposite the common mouth of two Sumatran rivers, the Benjoe Asin and Moesi. Just before midnight Japanese troops had made a sea-borne landing on Muntok beach. An hour later more troops had gone up the Benjoe Asin to assist the paratroopers who had been dropped at Palembang that day. The gun-flashes which *Mata Hari* had seen when at anchor off the Moesi was the bombardment of Muntok in preparation for the assault. Japanese ships had also come into the estuary to dispatch landing craft which carried their troops up the Benjoe Asin. As quite a large number of warships and transports were needed to make one landing, let alone two, it is not difficult to realize that the narrow waters of Banka Strait must have been swarming with Japanese craft that night. In spite of this, *Mata Hari* had managed to slip through the whole armada — until the last ship of all had trapped her. It had been touch and go, and so nearly a tremendous triumph.

. . .

As soon as the Japanese ratings had completed their search of the ship the anchor was hove up, and *Mata Hari* proceeded back to Muntok. The roadstead there was crowded with Japanese transports, amongst which they anchored, only to become part of the target of the first British aircraft any of them had seen for many days. Japanese ack-ack guns opened up and a Jap

Zero fighter set off in pursuit. The British Hudson's tail-gunner fired back. There was a sheet of fire and the Jap Zero dived towards the sea. A terrific splash, and it was all over. No one could say the passengers in *Mata Hari* were not getting their money's worth in the way of spectacle.

As soon as *Mata Hari* anchored, the Japs removed essential parts of the engines and steering-gear, then, taking *Mata Hari's* boats with them, the whole of the boarding party returned to the cruiser, leaving not even one rating to act as a guard. Just before leaving, the Japanese naval Lieutenant instructed one of his men to hoist *Mata Hari's* own Ensign instead of the Rising Sun.

Soon after dawn next morning the boarding party returned, and by way of filling the cup of dejection to overflowing, jubilantly informed Carston that Singapore had fallen the previous day.

Carston now learnt that only sufficient members of the crew to keep essential machinery running were to remain on board. The men were to be landed at once and the women would be taken ashore in the evening. No one would be allowed to land with more luggage than he or she could carry.

Another chivalrous touch from the naval Lieutenant concerned this latter order. Overhearing Carston instruct his Chinese servant to make up a small suitcase of clothes to take ashore, the Japanese officer protested that the limitation of luggage did not apply to him. As Captain of *Mata Hari*, Carston should take *all* his clothes with him — and his servant too !

By eight o'clock all the men to be landed had left the ship, together with the Japanese boarding party as escort. So once again *Mata Hari* found herself without a guard.

Now that the necessity for economy no longer existed, Carston was able to throw open the store-rooms so that those on board could help themselves to whatever they fancied. Throughout the day huge trays of canned sausages were kept frying on the galley stoves, and opened tins of biscuits were placed on the decks.

At four o'clock that afternoon the boats returned to take the women and children ashore. As so few men still remained on board, Carston made a move to go down the ladder in order to assist his passengers into the boats. From the head of the gangway the Japanese Lieutenant called him back, telling him that it was Carston's right and privilege as Captain to be the last

CASUALTIES ON AND AFTER 13th FEBRUARY 1942

			FATE	LOCALITY	SURVIVORS	MISSING
13th FEBRUARY						
"SIANG WO"	...	...	Bombed and beached	Muntok	230	1
"SCORPION"	...	...	Sunk by gunfire	Berhala	36	115
"GIANG BEE"	...	...	Sunk by gunfire	Berhala	70	223
"REDANG" Small unarmed	S/S	...	Sunk by gunfire	Berhala	31	58
14th FEBRUARY						
"VYNER BROOKE"	...	...	Sunk by bombs	Banka Straits	106	135
"LI WO"	...	...	Sunk by gunfire	Banka Straits	8	92
"SHU KWANG"	...	...	Sunk by bombs	Berhala	Unknown	Many
"ST. BREOCK" Unarmed tug	...	...	Sunk by bombs	Berhala	24	1
"DRAGONFLY"	...	...	Sunk by bombs	Sebayer	70	135
"GRASSHOPPER"	...	...	Sunk by bombs	Sebayer	100	165
"KUALA"	...	...	Sunk by bombs	Pompong	Unknown	Many
"TIEN KWANG"	...	...	Sunk by bombs	Pompong	Unknown	???
"KUNG WO"	...	...	Sunk by bombs	Pompong	Unknown	???
15th FEBRUARY						
"MATA HARI"	...	...	Captured	Banka Straits	483	Nil
"FUH WO"	...	...	Beached and blown up	Banka Straits	46	Nil
311	...	...	Sunk by gunfire	Banka Straits	14	58
433	...	...	Sunk by gunfire	Banka Straits	6	71
"PAHLAWAN"	...	...	Captured	Banka Straits	24	2
"BLUMUT" Unarmed tug	...	...	Captured	Banka Straits	29	Nil
"YINGPING" Unarmed tug	...	...	Sunk by gunfire	Banka Straits	15	57
310	...	...	Sunk by gunfire	Tochioch	Unknown	???
"TRANG"	...	...	Scuttled	Singapore	Unknown	???

FATE LOCALITY SURVIVORS MISSING

16th FEBRUARY

"PULO SOEGI" ...	H.M.S.	Banka Straits	25	55
1062	H.M.M/L.	Banka Straits	10	38
"RELAU" Small S/S	...	Banka Straits	7	Nil
"RENTAU" Small S/S	...	Banka Straits	?	Nil
"ELIZABETH" Small tug	...	Banka Straits	2	24
"FANLING" ...	H.M.M/L.	Banka Straits	3	44
36. Unarmed launch	...	Banka Straits	22	1
"MARY ROSE" Unarmed M/L.	...	Banka Straits	13	Nil

17th FEBRUARY

"ROSE MARY" Unarmed M/L.	...	Banka Straits	58	Nil
"EXCISE" Unarmed M/L.	...	Banka Straits	7	Nil
"HONG FATT" Unarmed M/L.	...	Banka Straits	52	1
"TAPAH" ...	H.M.S.	Banka Straits	44	Nil
432	H.M.M/L.	Banka Straits	75	Nil
"DYMAS" ...	H.M.S.	Banka Straits	21	Nil
"TANJONG PINANG" ...	H.M.S.	Banka Straits	3	164

"JARAK" H.M.S. Damaged in engagement with two Cruisers and a Destroyer on 15th, remained in vicinity of Singkep till 18th, then scuttled.

"CHANTEH" H.M.S. Was probably the tug mentioned in "Dragonfly" narrative; no other information.

"MALACCA" H.M.S. Presumed to have reached Rengat on 15th; no other information.

"CECELIA" or "CORELIA." A M/L with Brigadier Paris aboard was seen by "Hong Fatt" at 10.30 on 16th, making for Sumatra.

"FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE." An RAMC launch ferried patients from Singkep to Rengat; lost her propeller on third trip.

"KULIT." This launch left Singapore on 12th with civilian men and women aboard. Was sighted heading south; no further information.

"ANDREW." An APC launch was sighted on 13th, heading for Rengat.

"PENGAIL" H.M.M/L. Left Singapore on 13th; no further informations.

"TINGARRO." Sultan of Johore's yacht, arrived Rengat 15th; no further information.

"HUNG JAO." H.M.M/L. Left Singapore on 13th; no further information.

person to leave his ship. And so, by the courtesy of a chivalrous Japanese officer, only after everyone else had left the ship Carston went down *Mata Hari's* gangway as her commander for the last time.

As he stepped into the boat the White Ensign was slowly lowered and the Rising Sun rose in its place.

PART III

Chapter 22

EARLY DAYS IN CHANGI

THOSE early days in Changi were a nightmare for quite a number of reasons. Something like 40,000 British and Australian officers and men, plus several hundred officers of the Indian Army, were herded into an area of less than one square mile. The peace-time barracks in that area had been built to accommodate 4,000 and many of the buildings had been bombed and machine-gunned during the fighting on the Island. Overcrowding was therefore inevitable and indescribably frightful.

Some of the men of the 18th British Division found themselves sleeping in malaria-ridden sandpits. Some lived in ambulances, some in shacks which they built themselves with attap leaves and corrugated iron, and others made themselves a home by up-turning lorries and old motor cars. Such things presented a dismal spectacle.

We started off on the wrong leg. The enormity of our defeat had its effect on us all. A miserably ungenerous spirit ran through the camp. Instead of becoming united in adversity, bickering and a frantic search for scapegoats tore us apart.

We were certainly a mixed bag. Some had fought their way down the Malayan peninsula from the Thailand border; others, including myself, had covered several hundred miles from Kuantan finishing up with a five-day trek behind the Japanese lines; and others had arrived in time only to participate in the last days of the fighting on the Island. We all felt that we had been let down, and being in a defeatist state of mind we blamed the Government, our leaders and one another.

There were other reasons why those first six months in Changi were a nightmare. It was of course our first taste of hunger and that is an unpleasant experience. They say you can get used to anything, and I suppose we grew accustomed to being starved, but in those early days none of us took kindly to an abrupt

change from normal feeding to a diet of little more than rice and dry biscuits. Those who loved whisky suffered agonies from compulsory abstinence, though many of them very soon found themselves transformed from seedy looking hypochondriacs into comparatively healthy specimens, anyway until beri beri overcame them.

The serious lack of vitamin and protein food made it impossible to prevent deficiency diseases like beri beri. Our doctors fought a magnificent but nevertheless a losing battle, for they had few drugs and no nourishing food. They told us to eat bugs and all those creeping insects we found inside the sacks of rice, because they contained vitamins, and they also made us eat a certain leaf called chicamanis which grew on a long straggly hedge on Temple Hill. We used to parade like horses and as we slowly moved in single file along that hedge we would solemnly pick the leaves and eat them. Very good they were too, so much so that on occasions I used to crawl back on all fours behind the far side of the hedge and join the queue again for a second helping ! I used to think of Sir Gordon Richards on those occasions and I wondered what his thoughts would have been had he been able to see that long line of hungry officers slowly devouring that hedge.

Nevertheless, bugs and chicamanis were not enough to supplement a starvation diet, and as the months went by far too many lives that should have been saved were lost through malnutrition. It is a sad and sorry fact that many hundreds were to die in Changi Camp before the end.

This was through no fault of our heroic doctors who worked themselves to a standstill; some even worked themselves to death. They performed incredible feats of surgery, they healed diseased and ailing bodies in their thousands, they brought encouragement and hope to those who felt they could go on no longer. There was a selfless type of dedication, a devotion to duty quite out of this world, and as a result of it hundreds of lives were still saved. The name of Julian Taylor is now a household word among such men as these, and there were others too, many others.

Every Sunday evening, as though driven by some compelling force, we flocked to worship. In those early days no churches existed, so we stood in the open on Temple Hill while the service was conducted by one of the padres, standing at the top

of the stone steps which led into a vast building. It was almost unbelievable to see how many men turned to religion to help them in adversity. As the months went by, churches of all denominations sprang up all over the camp, built out of next to nothing by volunteers. Some of them, when completed, had a dignity and nobility which endured to the end.

Since the war some of those members of the church who ministered to us in Changi have come in for severe criticism. Some carping words have appeared in the Press. Personally I think such judgment is harsh, and also unfair. It is possible that much too much was expected of our padres as fellow prisoners-of-war simply because they were men of the church. It was therefore expected that they should set a godly example to the rest of us. The truth is that as prisoners they were the same human beings as the rest of us and subject to the same frailties of character. Even so, some behaved magnificently, like the great Padre Duckworth of Cambridge rowing fame; some of the others may have been of lesser quality, but for this they should not be damned.

One thing is certain, we had in Lieut-Colonel Lewis Bryan, the Senior Chaplain, a speaker of rare quality. Sunday after Sunday he would preach his sermon in words so inspiring that I for one would be carried away into an entirely different world. Neither before nor since those days in Changi have I listened to anyone in the church who possessed his gift of oratory. He had the voice and the power to lift us right out of that dismal world, and he did it with nothing more than a flow of well chosen words, emotionally delivered from an imaginary pulpit. It was a masterly performance, and one which I shall never forget.

Because of the bombing during the last days of the fighting, the water supply had been cut off. We were therefore rationed to a sparse ration of water which was barely enough to wash in, and even to acquire this called for continuous water fatigues with heavy containers. We had no electric lighting for the first sixteen months, and after dark we had to make do with hurricane lamps or torches.

After the first two days of wandering around like a lost sheep I found John Parkin, and through him came to live with seven hundred officers in a large concrete building known as Temple Hill. This rather imposing residence had been the Royal Artillery

Officers' Mess which had been built to accommodate roughly forty officers. Our Corps Commander, Lieut-General Sir Lewis Heath, by virtue of his rank, occupied a room to himself, but the rest of us lived hugger-mugger, ten in each single room, twenty in larger rooms, and others on the verandahs. It was my good fortune to bed down on a tiny balcony looking out onto the back premises, which I shared with an Australian officer called "Dusty" Miller.

In the first year of captivity Dusty was to me what the Americans would call a real guy, and we got along famously. He had started his working life with a firm of chartered accountants in Australia and he remained with them for nine years and then turned his hand to journalism on a newspaper in Sydney. In 1934 he came to Malaya with Anglo-Oriental (Malaya) Ltd and when war broke out he joined up in the 2nd Selangor Battalion of the Federated Malay States Volunteer Force Regiment, and was commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant at once. In the fighting on the Island he had been posted to John Parkin's battalion, and had come into Changi with the other surviving British officers of that battalion.

I learnt a great deal about Australia from Dusty, and quite a lot about Malaya too. I tried to teach him a thing or two about keeping our little balcony clean and tidy, about England and about India too. Dusty was generous and co-operative, and we shared what little we had in the way of the bare necessities of life. He smoked a pipe so I used to help him collect cigarette stubs in lieu of non-existent pipe tobacco. Little things took on an enormous importance, and I recall that I somehow managed to get hold of a tin of condensed milk and together we slipped out after darkness one night to eat it behind the cookhouse. At a time when we were always hungry this was probably the most satisfying indulgence I have ever known. Another pleasant recollection of those times is munching peanuts on our beds at night. Peanuts served us well; they helped to induce sleep.

To begin with we had no beds, and in my case no bedding either. Someone gave me a mosquito net and this I used as a blanket. When no one important was looking, I removed a wooden door from one of the out-buildings and used this as a bed: it was hard but it was cleaner and less cold than the tiled floor. Later, with Dusty's help I made a peculiar shaped bed which raised me at least a foot off the floor. In the mornings we

would burn the bugs out of the woodwork with an improvised blow lamp.

Most of us had very few clothes, but fortunately the sun shines nearly every day in Malaya and the climate is delightful, so we wore nothing above the waist all day, and thus were able to keep our one and only set of bush shirt and trousers for the evenings.

By day we had to work at different chores to keep camp life ticking over. Quite the most soul destroying chore of all for me was rice grinding and even with a good book in one hand that hour of turning a handle was a dismal experience. One felt like an organ grinder but without the embellishment of music to encourage one's efforts. Digging bore-holes for latrines was infinitely preferable, so too were sawing and chopping wood. Best of all were the wood trailer parties when we had to push and pull an MT chasis in a chain gang, two or three miles outside the camp, and return with it laden with tree trunks. In a prison camp a man is a beast of burden. We knew all about the "cash and carry" system; ours was a case of "push or carry."

We were lucky in finding a well-stocked library in Temple Hill for I found that starvation tended to open wide the magic casements of the mind and I soon became avid in my thirst for knowledge. I found several of Sir Winston Churchill's books, including *My Early Life*, the story of that great man's life up to the age of twenty-six, by which time he had already done and achieved far more than most men do in a lifetime.

In those early days I knew I must occupy myself every moment of the day, so I decided to write the full story of the Malayan campaign so far as it concerned the 22nd Indian Brigade, my regiment and Ruth and myself. Later on I bought a second-hand typewriter for four pounds of peanuts and a packet of loathsome cheroots, and for a coconut I acquired a copy of Pitman's typing course with which I was able to teach myself to touch-type. As a result sometime during 1943 I was able to type that detailed story of the campaign in duplicate. One copy I wrapped in a waterproof bag which I placed in a sealed tin box and buried under the ground; the other copy I concealed in my pack beneath a false bottom, and finally brought home to England when the war was over.

No one could grumble about the entertainment in the camp and there was certainly no dearth of performers, of talent or of

skilled technicians. The latter constructed a theatre with all the normal props and lighting, and artists like Ronald Searle got to work on the scenic effects. The actual production of a very wide variety of plays and revues was also in the capable hands of such men as Osmond Daltry, Freddie Bradshaw and Alan Bush. As for the actors there were many who were outstandingly good, but any Oscar must go to John Wood who led that brilliant Australian Concert Party which gave so much pleasure to so many on so little throughout those three and a half years.

Will any of us ever forget "Appy Arry" Smith giving his famous cry, often on stilts, "You'll never get off this island"? Or Frank Rich and Jack Geoghegan singing "Swingaroo"? Or Sid Piddington's skill as a conjuror combined with his out-of-this-world thought-reading act (something which has since brought him fame and fortune)? These were the men — a round dozen of them — who made our lives worth living. They not only produced a different play or revue every fortnight, but they also wrote the words and lyrics, and composed the music as well. By day you would find them pulling heavy trailers through the camp, and sawing and chopping wood. We should all raise our glasses to those Australians.

There were no prizes for prisoners of war, but if any individual prize were to be given there is no doubt in my mind that it should go to Major Osmond Daltry, a war-time gunner officer of the best type who in the last days of the fighting was hit by a Japanese shell and lost an eye and a leg. After months of languishing in our bombed and bullet-scarred hospital building in Changi, with inadequate food, drugs and medicines, appalling overcrowding and nauseating stenches, he came out to join his regiment just like any other prisoner of war. He could have sat back and done nothing more than turn the handle of a rice grinding machine for one hour a day. Instead he joined those wood trailer parties as the driver of one of our trucks, and while we were sawing down trees and digging out the trunks, he would come along too and lend a hand. But there was much more to "Ossy" Daltry than just this. He was the Noel Coward in our world of entertainment. Always keenly interested in the theatre he hurled himself wholeheartedly into writing, producing and acting, and he did all three quite brilliantly. Perhaps his greatest triumph was his production of "Hay Fever" but he did so much that it is difficult to say. Certainly he gave a lot to all of us in

Changi. There are quite a few hats which should be raised to Major "Ossy" Daltry, even twenty years after.

Chapter 23

A VERY IMPORTANT MISSION

WORSE than any material lack and physical suffering was the frustration of a dreadful curtain that had been clamped down between us and the free world outside. We all had our individual fears for the safety of relatives and friends, and we all knew, too, that they and those at home would be anxious about us. There seemed no way of breaking that terrible silence which had settled on the East. Towards the end of March (1942), however, a soldier of the Royal Signals had made a wireless set in a water bottle, and it was through him that I heard of the safe arrival at Liverpool of the *Duchess of Bedford*. So one of my anxieties was ended.

Very different was the news in the East, news of sinkings in the Banka Straits, of women and children clinging to rafts, of machine gunning, bombing and gun fire. It all added up to a frightening picture. Then one or two survivors of the carnage along that "bloody road to Banka" were brought back to other camps on the Island, and a trickle of messages began to reach us. We heard that more than sixty ships had been sunk between Singapore and Muntok. The stories that were told had a sickening as well as a saddening effect. Just how awful it was I shall never forget.

It was not until some time in May that I first had news of Ruth. I vividly remember being summoned to the block where dozens of the big Generals were living, and Major-General Keith-Simmons showing me a letter which had been brought into the camp by some mysterious means. It was written by an Indian Officer who had been captured in the Banka Straits, and who was now in another camp on the Island. The writer asked the General to tell me that he had seen Ruth in Palembang, that she was alive and well.

I suppose it is true to say that this news removed a vast load of anxiety from my mind. Being a born optimist, I had pictured Ruth getting through all dangers, and therefore to be told that

she was now in the hands of the Japanese should have had the opposite effect. But since I had heard of all those sinkings along the way to Banka, to be told that she was alive and well gave me a feeling of relief rather than despair.

Sometime in July we were allowed to send a postcard of twenty-five words to our next of kin in England. This long-overdue gesture on the part of the Japs was at least a step in the right direction, and I remember a little ripple of relief trickling through the camp. Although I was as anxious as anyone to let my family know that I was at least alive, to me it was far more important that Ruth should learn that Lynette had got safely back to England, and at the same time that I was alive and well in Changi. I therefore went across to Camp H.Q. to put my case to be allowed to address my postcard to my wife at Palembang in Sumatra, she being my next of kin. At Camp H.Q. I was passed from one staff officer to another until finally I found myself talking it over with a tall brigadier. The answer was No. The Japs, I was informed, would not allow any communication between prisoners of war, and that was that.

I have never been able to tolerate injustice, and this order depriving me of the right to send news of my survival to Ruth was to me unjust. It gave me a feeling of frustration and utter impotence. It was as though I could myself feel what she must have been feeling, that fearful dread of what might be, not only concerning me but Lynette too, and I could not bear to think of it. There must be some way round such injustice.

Somewhat naively I told myself that if only I could be given the chance to state my case to the Japanese Commandant himself, all would be well. Twelve years in the Army had taught me that putting up a case through the normal channels invariably got stuck half way. The only way to get what you wanted was to go to the top in the first place.

The Japanese Commandant was known to live in the end house of a row of houses facing one wall of Changi jail, about two miles from our military camp. At each of the exits to our camp was a small guard, to get past which it was necessary to produce a large white flag with a circular red blob in the middle—the red rising sun of Japan. These flags were very carefully guarded in the various headquarters of the camp areas, and were only handed out to officers whose duties made it necessary for them to proceed outside the camp. Such people were termed

V.I.P.'s, and the flags became known as V.I.P. flags. I saw no reason why for the first time in my life I should not be a V.I.P. on a Very Important Mission.

Luck plays a big part in most people's lives. In my own it is a commodity I have found to be quite indispensable. In fact, without it I have never been able to balance my budget. Luck was on my side that day. Normally it would have been impossible for me to have acquired a V.I.P. flag, but just as I was about to return to Temple Hill, I noticed that the window of a small storeroom in the Camp H.Q. building had been left unlocked, and on peering inside I saw two of those V.I.P. flags. I arrived back at Temple Hill with one of them.

The next thing was to procure a bicycle. This was simple, because for some weeks now I had noticed a rather handsome green bicycle standing against the wall in one of the main passages of the Temple Hill building. It was just what I wanted.

Approaching the main exit to the camp I allowed the V.I.P. flag to become unfurled, and trying to look important, I rode through the opening unchallenged. Immediately turning right, I found myself cycling on the tarmac roadway which runs to Singapore. I felt almost free again as I pedalled away along that road, the wind whistling past my ears and almost blowing that vital flag out of my hand. A little further on I came to quite a steep incline and at this point I must have been travelling at considerable speed. This was fortunate, because I suddenly came face to face with a party of three Japanese soldiers marching under the orders of an N.C.O. I just had time to see the look of astonishment on that N.C.O.'s face, and I instinctively felt him turn menacingly round as though to halt me. But I was going far too fast, and even if he had hailed me, the brakes on that bicycle would never have acted in time.

The last part of my ride was uphill, so here I dismounted and pushed my bicycle on foot. At the top of that incline a lesser roadway joined the main road just opposite the entrance to Kurran Camp. Sixty yards along this roadway a row of two-storied houses faced the jail wall. I had been told the first house of all was the Commandant's.

I left my bicycle and started to walk towards the house. At this stage I began to feel a definite sinking feeling in the pit of the stomach, and I wondered if perhaps I had been a little bit impulsive in setting out on such a mission. It was too late to

turn back now, but I was annoyed with myself for failing to ask whether I was likely to be confronted by a sentry on the front doorstep. Just in case this were to be so, I decided to knock at the back door. In any case, as a P.O.W., I began to think it might be more prudent to appear at the tradesmen's entrance rather than at the front door. So I started to walk along the side of the house and, being curious, I stood on tip toe to look through a small window, and what I saw I am never likely to forget. The window looked into a small bathroom, the inside door of which was wide open. Sitting on a single bed in the room beyond, the Japanese Commandant, clad only in a dirty white vest, was in the process of having his breeches pulled off by a gorilla-like Japanese batman. I guess I couldn't have chosen a worse moment to show my face. Before I could withdraw, I heard the familiar Japanese grunt and then a stream of words, obviously addressed to me. There was nothing for it but to go ahead, so I walked round to the front verandah and through an open doorway. When I entered the Commandant's bedroom I was pleasantly surprised to find a rather negative Japanese officer, thin, short and unimposing, who stared at me in blank astonishment. He had pulled up his breeches and was having his feet massaged by his batman, the latter quite easily the nastiest bit of work I had seen in years.

Rather naively, I asked: "Excuse me, but do you speak English?"

After a short pause he answered "Yes" — just like that — and as an afterthought, "a little."

"Good," I said, and then wondered how I was going to state my case. Before I could say another word, however, he rose to his feet, buttoned up the top buttons of his breeches and beckoned to me to follow him into a room across the hall. His batman, still crouching on the floor, looked at me as though he wanted to carve me up into small pieces, a look I returned with considerable interest, feeling moderately secure in the hands of the boss. In the room across the hall the Commandant sat down at a table against the wall, with me standing, not in front of him but behind him. Staring at a biscuit-coloured blank wall, he asked, "Why have you come?"

"You give order all British prisoners write postcards to England — yes?" I said in pidgin English, addressing the back of his crew-cut head.

"Yes."

"Well, my wife not in England, my wife in Sumatra. She prisoner also. I want to write Sumatra, not England."

"You must write England, no write Sumatra."

"But I must write Sumatra, my wife in Sumatra."

"You no can write Sumatra, you write England" — and then, after a long pause during which I thought perhaps a brainwave had come to his unattractive head, "England can write Sumatra."

"But that would take long long time, too much long time, many many weeks postcards go Singapore to England, many many weeks more time England to Sumatra, too much long time."

"No too much long time."

"But yes," I almost whined, "much too much long time."

"Not too much."

"Yes, too much."

"No."

"Yes."

Long pause and I began to wonder why he remained so placid. Most Japs would have been ranting and roaring by this time, but not this chap. He did, however, half turn away from the wall, thereby offering me his profile to address rather than an unappetising bulge.

"You go to Sumatra sometimes — yes?" I asked the profile, thinking perhaps a brilliant idea had flown to my brain.

"No — I no go Sumatra," he answered abruptly, thereby killing the brilliant idea in a flash.

"Other Japanese officers — they go Sumatra, yes?"

"No — Japanese officers no go Sumatra," and then, facing me at last, full blast, he repeated, "You must write England, and England write Sumatra."

"How long postcards take to go England?" I ventured as a last desperate throw.

"Not too long."

"Yes, but how long?"

"Not too long — you write England, England write Sumatra."

We were back where we started. It was clear that he wasn't going to give a single inch, and not wishing to push my luck any further, I said "O.K.," and walked towards the door. He looked me up and down before replying with a final "O.K." himself, which I took to be his way of telling me that the interview was

over. Instinct told me it was time I called it a day and bicycled back to camp.

When I arrived back at Temple Hill I was told that I was to report at once to the Corps Commander. As I approached his room someone warned me that I was for the high jump because it was the Corps Commander's bicycle I had taken from the passageway in Temple Hill.

It was therefore with a little apprehension that I knocked on the General's door. I need not have worried, because when he called to me to come in, I was met with a disarming smile. General "Piggy" Heath had, in fact, one of the most charming smiles of any man I know, and it was not for nothing that he should have been one of the best-loved officers of the Indian Army. When I started to apologise for taking his bicycle, he waved my words aside and asked me to tell him all about my visit to the Commandant's house, about which he had already heard some of the details. So in the rare quietness of his room I told him the whole story from beginning to end.

Before I rose to leave, he told me how sorry he was that I was not allowed to write to Ruth. He meant what he said, too, because he himself was in much the same boat, Lady Heath being a prisoner in the women's portion of the jail at Changi. So we shared the same problem, and this very fact seemed to communicate itself to each of us as we talked. For my part, I felt a great warmth and sympathy for this man, whose life as a P.O.W., in his position and at his age, must have been so much harder to bear than my own.

Nearly three years after the war I was invited to stay with General "Piggy" Heath and his charming wife at their home in Limuru, about ten miles outside Nairobi. It was a large house, built in the shape of a U, with an attractive garden and about twenty acres of rather wild looking land all round. Lady Heath appeared to have shaken off the worst effects of those three and a half years on a rice diet, and apart from looking well and happy, was the proud mother of Christopher, then fifteen months old.

While I changed for dinner on my last night, the General came and sat in my room on a sofa and talked. He told me a great deal about his experiences in Formosa and Manchuria as a prisoner of war, and expressed his admiration for General Carton de Wiart who was in Chungking at the end, of the latter's attemp-

ted but unsuccessful escape as a prisoner himself in Italy with Generals Neame and O'Connor, and of many other things besides. After dinner he talked about the war in Malaya, and how eloquent and interesting he became. We sat up into the late hours, and being interested in certain aspects of that great drama I made copious notes which I have with me to-day.

Only a few years later General "Piggy" Heath died at his newly-acquired home in Cornwall. His death was felt by that large band of officers who had served with him and under him in India. But there was something infinitely more tragic to those of us who shared those days with him as prisoners in the Far East, because there can be no doubt that his death was precipitated by all that he had suffered under the Japs.

Chapter 24

WOMEN IN ADVERSITY

RETURNING to mid-February (1942) and the Banka Straits, we find Ruth and Christine making their weary way along Muntok's concrete pier. Carrying all their worldly possessions, they formed part of a long line of struggling people. With them walked the Italian-born manager of the Singapore Harbour Board, Grixoni, whose wife, Mary, had left for South Africa in January with their two children.

They spent that night huddled in heaps on the pier itself. Ruth had her navy and fawn coloured rug which had been a wedding present eight years earlier, and also her camel-hair overcoat. Before bedding down, Christine produced one of the tins which Carston had distributed to his passengers earlier in the day. It was a tin of sardines which, with dry biscuits as a foundation, they ate with relish. During the night Japanese soldiers walked among them, jeering and laughing at their plight. One of them attempted to get fresh with a Chinese girl, but an elderly English missionary woman fearlessly struck him with an umbrella and he made off sheepishly. At the sea end of the pier Air Commodore Modin, as senior officer, did his best to create some form of organization out of chaos. No drinking water was available and only the most primitive arrangements were permitted to be made concerning sanitation. Nevertheless, like most bad things, the night passed and the dawn awakened hope of slightly better things to come.

That hope took them on a long and weary march through the streets of Muntok, and far beyond to a Coolie Assembly Station where they were to be temporarily housed. This formidable-looking Coolie Station consisted of a concrete quadrangle with an iron roof and several long dormitories on every side. Here Ruth and Christine first met with the survivors of some of the sixty ships which had been sunk while approaching the Banka Straits. And what a spectacle these desperate souls presented, among whom was a party of Australian nurses from *Vyner*

Brooke; two of their number had been swimming in the water for twenty-eight hours and now had their hands and legs covered in bandages. The others had landed at various places along the beach and had walked into Muntok to give themselves up. They had lost everything; one girl had walked in dressed only in her corsets and a borrowed overcoat. Ruth realised now how lucky she had been to have survived the hazards of the voyage from Singapore.

They slept side by side on concrete slabs which they called "Macfisheries." Twenty-five lay on each slab on either side of the dormitory. Though they had a rug each and a lifebelt for a pillow, the hardness of concrete cannot be mastered in a night.

Christine, having been a V.A.D. officer and a trained nurse, worked with the regular nurses and doctors in a clinic which had been set up to deal with the sick and wounded. Ruth, unfortunately, knew nothing about nursing, but, wishing to occupy herself profitably, she took on the job of washing bandages and other such menial tasks under Christine's supervision. The Japs dished out handfuls of rice twice a day and an Oriental version of stew accompanied the second issue. There must have been two hundred and fifty women and children in that Coolie Assembly Centre, while at least three hundred men were accommodated in the dormitories on the opposite side of the quadrangle.

One evening in walked four English nursing sisters who had been at sea on rafts for five days. They arrived in a sorry state, sunburnt, blistered and shocked. Then after nearly a week, one Australian sister walked into the building by herself and joined up at once with the other Australian girls. Her arrival was somewhat mysterious and few knew her story. In fact, for the next three and a half years her story remained a secret known only to those few. There was a reason for this.

This girl was Vivian Bullwinkel. With twenty-one other Australian Army Nursing Service Sisters, twenty civilian men and women, and twelve of the ship's officers and men, she had survived the sinking of *Vyner Brooke*. The women of this party had been crammed into one of two serviceable lifeboats while the men swam alongside. After many hours at sea they had reached a sandy stretch of beach three miles north of Muntok on Banka Island and there joined up with ten men and women from another sunken ship. At daylight a Japanese patrol



**Vivian Bullwinkel. She alone survived that dastardly massacre
on Banka Island**

arrived on the beach and the party of castaways surrendered. After a furtive discussion among themselves, the Japs took the men prisoners round a small cape and lined them up at the water's edge, facing the sea. The Japs then opened fire with tommy-guns, mowing the party down in the water. Two of the prisoners plunged into the sea; one was killed while swimming, but the other, Stoker Lloyd, although wounded, managed to get away.

The Japs then returned round the cape to the women prisoners, where the same terrible story was repeated. Sister Bullwinkel describes this dastardly outrage in these words: "The Japs set up a machine-gun on the beach behind us, then with their tommy-guns at the ready they opened fire, mowing us down. I was hit under the ribs on the left side and soon lost consciousness. Then I found I was lying on the beach. Bodies were all around me. I lay there as though I were dead because something told me I would be killed if I moved. I again lost consciousness. On waking I dragged myself into the jungle and there I fainted again from loss of blood and remained unconscious for three days."

When she came round a Japanese patrol was passing along the pathway within a few feet of her. She could see their faces and their bayonets through the foliage from where she lay. Vivian Bullwinkel was later found by Stoker Lloyd and a handful of survivors from another ship. The latter tended her as best they could. The need, however, for food and medical attention forced the party to give themselves up ten days later. They started to walk towards Muntok and happily for them a Japanese naval officer soon picked them up in a car. After questioning them at Naval Headquarters, the Japs brought them to the Coolie Assembly Centre. When Vivian limped into that Coolie Centre at Muntok she was wearing a water bottle slung across her shoulder. It covered a bullet hole in her uniform. Had the Japs ever suspected that she was the lone survivor of that dastardly massacre on the sandy beach near Muntok, her life would have been worthless. The secret was kept and Vivian Bullwinkel came through.

On the 2nd March the main party of women and children were taken across the Banka Straits and sixty miles up the Moesi river to Palembang in Sumatra. The doctors asked Christine to stay behind to continue to nurse the sick, and since Ruth did not

want to become separated from her, it was arranged that she too should remain behind to help in the clinic.

But the dreaded day dawned some six weeks later, when they too were ordered to leave for Palembang to join the main party of women. They left with the rear party, and as they walked through that drab and friendless town, carrying their possessions, they must have presented a pitiful spectacle. A long wait on the pier was made bearable by the beauty of the sunrise, which was rendered all the more striking by a double rainbow. They were taken out in a launch to a rough and ready tramp steamer.

The internment camp in Palembang consisted of some fifteen small artisan-type houses which had been built along either side of two streets which ran at right angles to one another. Barbed wire had been erected around the outer perimeter of the camp. Each house contained two or three bedrooms in addition to a living-room and dining-room, and outside was a garage. Since about a hundred Dutch women had now joined the party there were approximately three hundred and fifty people to be housed. Roughly twenty-five were therefore allotted to each house.

Ruth and Christine slept on the hard concrete floor, protected by Ruth's navy and fawn coloured rug and covered by Christine's Aertex blanket. As the days passed they set to making half-length mattresses from rice sacks which they filled with grass. But mosquitoes made sleeping impossible, so that finally they were forced to make sleeping-bags from material they were able to buy from an Indian merchant who was allowed into the camp once a week.

Christine was a good friend to Ruth. She was far better equipped than Ruth to face up to the kind of life in which they now found themselves, since Christine was essentially practical, capable and proficient, while Ruth's life in India and the Far East had hardly trained her to become self-sufficient. So Christine took her in hand, and taught her to knit and to cook, and she even cut her hair. In return Ruth gave her friendship, gaiety and affection. They could talk together because the timbre of Christine's voice came through to Ruth so well, and this was something for which she felt grateful at a time when her deafness was often a troubling defect. The two of them shared a relationship which endured to the end.

Rations came in daily on a truck, the rice crawling with bugs

and insects, but spinach, bringals and long beans made it possible to cook one vegetable stew every day. Like us in Changi, the girls soon learnt how to make porridge by grinding the rice. They also made what they liked to call cakes and puddings with rice flour, peanuts, palm oil, and odd pineapples, bananas and a sparse ration of sugar.

The supply of wood for cooking provided a big headache. In the early days, various doors were taken off their hinges and chopped into firewood. The first British Commandant, Dr Jean McDowell, protested to the Japs in the most courageous way, and it was due to her energy and her fearless manner with the Japanese officers that conditions in the camp improved as much as they did. Apart from her responsibilities as the British Commandant she also did a great job as a medical officer. On this occasion her outspoken protestations produced instant results, and a truck was driven into the camp laden with wood in fifteen-foot lengths. This supply then came in twice every day for a week until no one knew quite where to put it. As it all had to be chopped up and as there were only two axes in the camp, the women worked in relays throughout the day. For the first year Ruth and Christine were two of the regulars on this particular chore.

Another headache was lack of soap. The same shortage applied to us in Changi, where the Jap ration of soap was scarcely enough for us to keep ourselves clean. As we also had to do all our own laundry, we eventually fell to manufacturing our own. But in Sumatra, these poor women could not cope with such a shortage and their need was greater than ours. Happily many of the Dutch women were generously inclined, and a little later one or two local tradesmen were allowed into the camp to sell such things.

Ruth had left Singapore with at least \$100 in her purse and was therefore one of the more fortunate ones in this respect. It was practically impossible, however, to replenish stocks of lipstick and cosmetics. On the other hand, one or two of the internees like Christine displayed a natural aptitude for hair cutting, which they did for a small charge and with a skill which appeared to satisfy their customers.

Clothes were, of course, in desperately short supply. Hardly anyone had a hat of any kind, and under a hot sun this was a troublesome deficiency, and shoes were also in short supply.

Nearly everyone wore native clogs, but some were content to grow accustomed to walking barefoot. Those with money could buy a length of cloth from the native tradesman and make up a dress themselves. Even patched mosquito nets became a feature of their efforts. Fortunately, a fine communal spirit looked after those in need.

Camp life soon became organized and everyone had to work hard to keep it ticking over. In every house individuals were detailed off for sweeping, washing and cleaning duties, and these embraced the constant clearing of drains both inside and immediately outside the camp.

In House No. 7 the presence of a piano proved a tremendous boon, for the camp bristled with musicians and music-lovers. No. 7 was occupied by the Australian girls, and early on they held sing-song evenings which became so popular that it was found impossible to accommodate all who wanted to come. This in turn led to full-scale concerts, which went on improving from week to week and would often include a short play on certain aspects of camp life which invariably roused uproarious laughter.

Church service was held every Sunday in one of the garages and was so well attended that most of the congregation sat outside in the street. The service was taken by one of the English missionaries, and there was always a choir of five.

The evenings seemed long because there was not enough to do. Some of the women made their own playing cards for bridge, and others made complete sets of Mah Jong. But even with the English books which the Dutch brought in with them, there was insufficient to read. Copies of the local Japanese newspaper were allowed in the camp, but as this was Jap-controlled, its contents consisted of fantastic claims in sea battles in the Pacific and little else. French classes were arranged for those who wanted to learn, and the presence in the camp of a number of trained teachers enabled regular educational classes to be held for the children.

When food became scarce, boldness was their friend. Boldness, in fact, possesses even the frailest when hunger sets in. A chance conversation in Malay between Christine and a Chinese across the wire brought the promise of food one night after dark. It was fortunate that House No. 6 backed on to a wood on the far side of the barbed wire fence, so that by keeping a wary eye

on the Jap guard they were able to crawl through the wire while he was patrolling the opposite end of the camp. That clandestine meeting took place in a Chinese graveyard. Though the price in money was high, they returned to camp with two well-stocked bundles of food.

So successful was that venture that they boldly repeated the meeting several times with the same result — a good feed. But then they chose the wrong night, when the moon was against them, and they were caught. The face-slapping they expected; it was the interview before Captain Seki on the following day which gave them some concern. Of this Christine glibly writes: "We took our Jap interview very calmly, we had come to learn that they were afraid of tall women."

In August one native tradesman was allowed in the camp on Sundays. He used to bring a mobile shop with him, mounted on a bullock cart, and in rows of boxes he would display pineapples, coconuts, limes and bananas. In other boxes he would have tea, coffee and sugar. Sometimes he would bring sandals and lengths of cloth in his cart. This was *Gho Leng*.

They also got to know an Indian tailor called *Milwani*, whom the Japs allowed to come to the Guard House outside the camp from time to time. He brought lengths of materials, cottons and sewing materials, which he sold at a price usually too high for the many who had little money. Only two women at a time were allowed to go outside the wire to buy from *Milwani*, so his occasional visits lasted most of the day.

About this time, too the Japs became tired of guard duties, so they sent for Javanese policemen and armed them with revolvers. These police boys were dark-skinned natives whom the Japs called *Hei Hoe's*. They were particularly fond of children, they disliked the Japs, and they invariably went to sleep in their sentry boxes when on guard duty. This delegation of duty proved very popular in the camp and made things considerably easier.

Towards the end of 1942 another hundred and fifty Dutch women arrived in the camp, and this meant further overcrowding in every house and garage. Many of these women were the wives and daughters of Dutchmen who were in the highest social and financial circles in Holland before the war. Accustomed to a gracious way of living, they now found themselves crowded into verminous quarters and forced to work as manual labour-

ers. This, of course, applied equally to a large number of British women already in the camp, but adversity is a great leveller. The new party of Dutch people soon settled into the life of the camp just as the original party had done, and many of them made notable contributions to the welfare of their fellow prisoners.

Most of us know what it is to feel anxiety for someone one loves. That constant dread, an aching pain inside eats away into your system until you wonder if such things will not ultimately destroy you. Certainly in the war against Japan this aspect of life played a sinister, nauseating role, for the Japs cared nothing for the normal feelings of humanity, and we were therefore starved of news of those we loved, and, just as important, we were denied for nearly two years the means to send them news of ourselves. In Changi we experienced all these things, yet our lot was infinitely lighter than that of our womenfolk who were interned in Sumatra and Java. In Changi we were never without secret wireless sets through which we were able to keep in touch with events in the outside world. But with Ruth and her companions there was nothing. A curtain of silence had fallen between them and the rest of the world, through which not even the smallest ray of hope could travel. And this agony of silence remained with them throughout. We who think we suffered in Changi should remember this and be grateful.

Nor did the Japs make any attempt to allow women prisoners to send a post-card to their next of kin until thirteen months after capture. Two and a half years were to pass before Ruth received news of Lynette.

Nevertheless these women in adversity showed a remarkable degree of resilience, and neither Ruth nor her fellow prisoners were going to be completely deprived of news of the outside world. Up to this time little messages of hope and encouragement had been concealed in the ration truck which used to visit the civilian prisoners in the jail before coming on the women's camp. This bit of luck made it possible for the men to send extra rations to the women by wrapping them up carefully and hiding them in certain places in the truck. Several tins of foodstuffs were sent to Ruth and her closest friends by a young naval officer she had known in Singapore, and with such things were several notes of news from various friends who had known her in those better days before the war.

Later, at the beginning of 1943, the men in the service camp at Mulo School badgered the Japs about cutting wood for the women's camp, and eventually won their point. This meant that a second truck came into the camp every day with a supply of firewood for the cookhouses, and a system of concealing notes in specially marked blocks of wood was soon working smoothly. Gradually a complete source of news, local as well as international, was built up over the days and weeks which followed, and in this way that dreadful silence of the East was pierced here and there for our womenfolk in Sumatra.

But in the first few months of captivity in 1942 Ruth was busy working out some scheme to get a letter to me in Changi in the belief that I had survived the last three days of fighting on the Island. When Gho Leng came into the camp on Sundays she would converse with him in a low voice on the chances of getting a letter taken to Singapore. Though she did not trust Gho Leng she was prepared to use him for her purpose. Gho Leng knew a Chinese whose name, he said, was Ah Wong. This man sailed a junk to Singapore once a month, but to contact him under present circumstances was something Gho Leng was not prepared to do. In any case, he said, Ah Wong was suffering from a poisoned foot and was attending hospital every week for treatment. She asked him which hospital and Gho Leng told her.

Charitas Hospital, some three miles away in Palembang, was run by Dutch nuns and Dutch doctors. This was quite a small hospital, and though the patients slept on mattresses placed on wooden benches and had pillows for their weary heads, lack of ventilation, mosquitos and suspicious Japanese guards made it a nightmare to be sent there for any length of time. Sick prisoners from all the different camps were nursed in Charitas Hospital. Servicemen from Mulo School camp, civilian prisoners from the jail, and women from the Women's Internment Camp were all sent to Charitas Hospital. On arrival there they were separated into three groups and were under the strictest surveillance by Japanese guards. The latter patrolled the passages between the wards day and night to see that there was no communication between patients of different groups.

Once a week on Wednesdays it seemed that almost anyone could visit the hospital as an out-patient. It was Wednesdays too that the sick from Ruth's camp were taken to this hospital in a one-time British ambulance, together with those who merely

wanted treatment for lesser troubles and who were returned to camp later in the day in the same ambulance. Toothache and eye trouble were the most popular excuses for inclusion in Wednesday's ambulance parties, and those who returned were expected to come back with a store of messages from the men prisoners, hidden in their clothing.

So Ruth decided to develop toothache for the purpose of seeing for herself the set-up in this hospital. Her plan was to find Ah Wong, but if she failed to do this, to persuade some other native to ask Ah Wong to be at the hospital the following week. When the ambulance arrived on the Wednesday she found that she was one of twenty-three travelling to the hospital. When the sick had been officially admitted and put to bed, Ruth found herself waiting with six others in a passage for the Dutch dentist to arrive. Jap guards seemed to be everywhere and she soon realised that to make contact with anyone even inside the hospital was going to be difficult enough, and the man she wanted was more likely to be waiting in the queue outside. Nevertheless, by engaging the Japanese sentry in pidgin-English conversation at one end of the passage, Ruth found that it was possible for one of the party to slip away to the one solitary lavatory at the far end of the building.

This unromantic location proved to be unguarded and as such became a meeting place for husbands and wives. It also provided the means of passing notes and written messages between the camps. At the same time a master plan became necessary whereby all Japanese sentries in the passages were kept in earnest pidgin-English conversation while that one lavatory was thus employed. In this way Wednesday visits to Charitas Hospital added a certain spice to life for those who had some share in that master plan. Even on returning to camp the excitement among the children when the "am-ba-lans" drove in was a tonic for all to see, for the contents of those messages invariably provided gossip for several days to come.

But Ruth made a different kind of discovery in that lavatory. She found that by standing on the seat and opening a little glass window high up on the back wall, she overlooked the line of outside patients who were standing in the shade outside. Having once attracted their attention she took comfort in their friendly smiles and beckoned to them to move closer to the window. She enquired about Ah Wong and was told that his

foot had healed and that he was no longer visiting the hospital. She spoke to these simple people of her desire to get a letter through to Changi camp in Singapore. She asked them if they could find Ah Wong and they told her they would try. She would be back next Wednesday.

But it was not until her third visit that she was able to speak to Ah Wong from that window. An oldish man, a Chinese with more than the usual number of gold teeth, Ah Wong had a definite limp. Like most Chinese he had a broad serene smile when he spoke. He told Ruth that he would not be leaving for Singapore for several weeks but he would take her letter when he went. He said he would have to give it to a British soldier in Singapore who would take it out to Changi. There were many British soldiers who came every day from Changi to work in the docks. He would meet her at the hospital next week when she would bring the letter.

In the last week of May 1942 Ah Wong set sail for Singapore taking Ruth's letter with him.

Chapter 25

TRIUMPH OF THE HUMAN SPIRIT

For the first few months of 1943 the civilian prisoners in the Palembang jail had been building a hutted camp less than a mile from the women's camp in Palembang. When it was completed the builders themselves were transferred to it from the jail, and here they existed for the next six months. On the 17th September 1943 they evacuated this camp at short notice, and the following day the women prisoners were ordered to move in.

The Japs were never helpful concerning moves and their lack of co-operation on this occasion ran true to form. Only three or four native trucks were allowed to assist with the move of those five hundred women and children and all their possessions of pots and tins, firewood, bundles of rags and clothes. Those who were unable to walk had to ride with the baggage as best they could.

The camp had been constructed on swampy soil and was in fact below sea level, making it cold and damp at night. Due to the fact that the men prisoners had been under the impression that the Japs themselves were to take it over, they had purposely left it in a filthy state, and for the first six days of occupation the new inmates were forced to work harder than ever before, to introduce some semblance of cleanliness. The area of the entire camp was little more than one hundred yards long by forty yards wide, and into this confined space the crudest form of living amenities for more than five hundred souls had been crammed. Attap-roofed huts had been built along three sides of the rectangular shaped area with a Guard House at the entrance to the camp. On one side of the entrance the camp hospital had been set up while the hut on the opposite side was occupied by fifty Dutch nuns. At one end of the camp both British and Dutch kitchens were established side by side. Two bathrooms for the entire camp consisted of large cement troughs designed for the storage of water. The two lavatories, long cement drains, were merely an extension of the bathrooms.

Sixty to each hut was the best that such accommodation would allow and even this meant lying on a narrow sleeping mat two feet from the ground, side by side like sardines. Personal possessions had to be crowded onto a shelf above each person's bed space. The huts were not only filthy but vermin-infested too and the Japs provided nothing for the extermination of such vermin. Then the attap roofs leaked and a storm would lift the old and rotten attap so that the rain dripped through, causing women and children to sleep on wet boards. After a violent gale it was left to the women to climb on to the roofs of the huts to repair the damage. Then too the sanitary conditions of this camp were deplorably primitive. The services of coolies to clean and empty the tanks and trenches were refused so again these tasks fell upon the inmates.

And when the food became worse work became even heavier. With the departure of the men's camp, the daily truck of firewood ceased to arrive, and this called for a non-stop roster by day for wood chopping. At this time only one blunt axe was available, the other axe having been declared too dangerous as a result of accidents caused by the head repeatedly flying off the handle.

At the camp elections in July Mrs Hinch was elected Camp Commandant of the British internees and The Reverend Mother Laurentia became the Dutch Commandant. Here were two outstanding people who were to prove themselves worthy of their responsible office over and over again. Mrs Hinch had been a passenger in *Giang Bee* when it had been sunk in the Banka Straits and was one of those who had arrived with only the clothes she was wearing. An American by birth but married to an Englishman, she had spent the last twenty years in Malaya where her husband had been Principal of an Anglo-Chinese school of the Methodist Church in Singapore. He was at this time a prisoner himself in the civilian camp in Changi. Now in captivity she was the ideal person to deal with the Japs, for with her placid temperament, her quiet dignity and her serene manner, she was admirably equipped to stand up to the bullying tactics of her sadistic overlords. Whenever she found herself called to task over some petty matter which her masters found so infuriating, it was her smile which carried the day. If there was nothing she could reply to their ranting, she would simply smile, and to that charming smile of hers the Japs could

find no answer. Here was someone who richly earned the affection and respect of those she championed right through to the end.

Mother Laurentia was another fine character who, despite only a scant knowledge of English soon made herself known among the British internees as well as the Dutch. Tall and upright, dignified, but never forbidding, she also had an enchanting smile.

The Almighty had blessed these two women with an abundant store of common sense, which served them well; it helped them to cope with the many difficult problems which arose from day to day, and to work for the good of everyone in the camp.

Then when the Japs fell to making speeches about the scarcity of food, it was necessary to grow more and more vegetables, not only outside the camp but in every little corner inside as well. The vicious circle of less food demanding more work in order to procure even some food was more than some could stand. Many died and all grew weaker. The money in the camp fund was nearly exhausted and it was hard to buy even little items of food on the black market. Only the Javanese "Hey-hoes" who wanted to be helpful, brought food into the camp at night. With their aid a store of gula malacca was built up in place of sugar. They also brought in eggs, fruit, biscuits and dried fish, but even the "Hey-hoes" wanted payment.

When this sort of situation arises there is only one thing to do, for food is more important than even the most priceless possession. You must sell anything and everything you have, to get money with which to buy food. If you don't do this you become ill and you die. It is as simple as that.

So now it was jewellery which kept the wolf from the door. Rings, watches, brooches, pearls, bracelets, little clocks, each with its secret sentimental story, were passed across the wire in the darkness of the night. The "Hey-hoes" acted as the middlemen and they of course took their cut. There were no lack of buyers from outside: even some of the Jap guards themselves fell for the glitter of a jewel. Ruth had a pair of ear rings which I had given her at the time of our marriage, an engagement ring, a bracelet of lucky charms and a second-hand diamond wrist watch. One by one they found their way over the wire until only a three banded emerald ruby and diamond eternity

ring, my wedding present to her, was left, and this she meant to keep at all costs.

Valda Godley was one of the first to get ill, and being unable to digest rice, she quickly grew weaker. Her death, though not unexpected, came to Ruth as a great shock, for she had liked and admired Valda and they had always been friends. What had been so painful to Ruth was the realisation that with medicines and food Valda's life could so easily have been saved. She had watched her growing weaker knowing that she was powerless to help her.

Yet life and laughter still prevailed amongst such things. A certain dogged spirit which refuses to accept defeat under any circumstances invariably comes to the fore in times like these. It may be that people in such straits are spiritually strengthened by some unseen hand of which they are unaware. Whatever it may be, the fact remains that this hapless camp of women refused to be beaten by adversity. Rather did they hurl back defiance proudly and bravely, and seek to sustain their spirit against all misfortune.

So they took refuge in music. It was Norah Chambers who first gathered round her those with singing voices and practised them in the Dutch kitchen at night. They had no musical instruments, only voices. Gradually Norah built up an orchestra of women's voices until thirty women of many nationalities were taking part and Ruth was one of these. The effect of an orchestra was created by humming the four parts of soprano, second soprano, contralto and second contralto representing the four instruments of strings i.e. violin, viola, cello and double bass.

Betty Jeffrey, the Australian nursing sister who wrote *White Coolies*, writes:

"I have been a keen listener for a long time, but now I am a member of the orchestra. It is absolutely marvellous, the most fascinating thing that has happened in this camp so far. None of us has ever heard women's voices anywhere better than this orchestra. The music is written out on any kind of paper obtainable; each person has her own copy, all being copies from Miss Dryburgh's hand-made original.

To sit on logs or stools or tables in the crude old attap-roofed kitchen, with only one light, and then be lifted right out of that atmosphere with this music is sheer joy. It makes it easy to forget one is a prisoner.

The first concert the orchestra gave they did the 'Largo,' 'Andante Cantabile,' Mendelssohn's 'Song Without Words,' a Brahms Waltz, 'Londonderry Air,' Debussy's 'Reverie,' Beethoven's 'Minuet' and 'To a Wild Rose.' Mrs. Murray, with her glorious soprano voice, sang the Fairy Song from 'The Immortal Hour.' It was a glorious concert, we had never heard anything like it before."

Perhaps in this we can see the triumph of the human spirit over all the vileness of those terrible times.

Not only with music did they fight adversity. Life went on in other ways too, with religious discussions, prayer meetings and lectures. Birthdays were remembered in a simple but touching way. The children's classes still went on, and so did the constant war on bugs. Even "Midnight," the black cat who had no tail, strove hard to keep the rats from knocking bottles off the shelf above the bed mats. Somehow the heart of the camp continued to beat.

Towards the latter half of 1944 one or two rays of sunshine came peeping through the gloom. First a batch of letters from the outside world brought Ruth the news of Lynette's safe arrival in England. On the same day one British plane dived over the town of Palembang before climbing up again into the clouds. The significance of that visit was not lost among those who had prayed for so long.

Then followed American Red Cross boxes which arrived from apparently nowhere. All through a hot afternoon, while taking her turn in the cookhouse, Ruth watched the Japs and "Hey-hoes" unwrapping packets of Chesterfield and Camel cigarettes, tins of foodstuffs and packets of this and that. In the evening opened boxes were brought into the camp so that the Canteen Committee could distribute their contents. When you have been starving for a long time such unaccustomed joys as meat, jam, butter and condensed milk seem like manna from Heaven, even though their distribution may leave so small a portion with the individual. The share-out completed each prisoner found herself blessed with twenty-two cigarettes, one inch of chocolate, four lumps of sugar, and a spoonful of butter. The prospect of a share with fourteen others in a half pound tin of jam gave each of them further cause to smile.

At the beginning of October 1944 the Japs ordered the entire camp to move back to Muntok. Though no-one could feel sorry

about leaving that sordid camp in Palembang, they all knew that there could be no certainty that the future would hold better things in store.

They left on a hot and sticky day with no protection on deck from the burning rays of the sun. Later the rain came down in buckets so that everyone was soon drenched to the skin. A one-hour wait on the wharf at Muntok in wet clothes did nothing to alleviate their plight. Hungry, cold and tired, they were then herded into open trucks and driven at breakneck speed to their new camp outside the town.

Thirty-one months had gone by since they had last passed through the streets of Muntok. How many more lay ahead?

Chapter 26

THE SELERANG INCIDENT

BACK with us in Changi the Japs proved to be touchy masters, immensely sensitive to any suspected affront, and because of this many of us came in for face slapping, and worse. The first real trouble, however, occurred in September, after officers of the rank of full Colonel and above had been shipped away to Formosa. The Japs produced a certificate which every prisoner was ordered to sign, promising not to escape under any circumstances. Lieut-Colonel E. B. Holmes of the Manchester Regiment, who was then in command of the camp, refused to do so, pointing out that it was against British Military Law to make any such promise; in fact to escape was a duty if it appeared in any way feasible. After various arguments had been put forward by each side, the Japanese ordered every prisoner in the camp, except those in hospital, to move onto Selarang Square, the barracks occupied in more cheerful times by the 2nd Gordon Highlanders. At that time there were just over 15,000 of us in Changi, excluding the best part of two thousand in hospital. The seven three-storied barrack blocks on Selarang Square had originally been designed to accommodate about eight hundred men. The area of the square measured 250 by 150 yards, which worked out at three square yards per man for all purposes, that is eating, sleeping, cooking and sanitation. From this, of course, there had to be deducted space for storage, for latrines and for a temporary hospital.

The move to Selarang provided a fantastic spectacle. From all over the eastern tip of Singapore Island prisoners could be seen converging on the Square, struggling under loads of furniture and bedding, pots and pans, and heaven knows what else besides. The mania for the acquisition and hoarding of useless junk is a curious feature of POW psychology, and on this occasion it was apparent for all to see. We were each given a jar of marmite which was only to be opened under special orders. We also ate a chappati (Indian pancake) with a cup of tea less milk

and sugar, before setting out. Having seen General "Piggy" Heath leave the building on foot with two or three of his former staff officers helping him with his kit, I thought it moderately prudent to pinch his cycle once again. Alas, this time the back tyre was flat and I couldn't find a pump anywhere. Nevertheless, having loaded it with such things as a hurricane lamp, a tin basin, my pack and haversack, I set out to ride over to Selarang.

The road was packed with human bodies on the move, numerous trailers hand-drawn, handcarts and every sort of improvised vehicle. There was something of the Derby Day atmosphere about the whole spectacle. As always the irrefragable cheerfulness of the British soldier was evident throughout that trek, gems of wisecracks rolling off his tongue to fit the occasion.

The Square presented a fantastic sight with just a seething mass of men dragging trailers and handcarts and struggling to settle themselves with their units in their allotted areas. The whole of our seven hundred officers from Temple Hill were to be quartered on the ground floor of the barrack block nearest to what used to be the Officers' Mess of the Gordon Highlanders. The normal peace time allotment in this barrack room was forty men. I took one look inside and saw chaos reigning supreme. Only about twenty officers had dragged their beds to the Square; the rest of us had brought only our few possessions. Suitcases, packs, haversacks, water bottles and bedding rolls littered the floor from end to end. One or two individuals were laid out on beds, either in a state of exhaustion or as a result of sickness. There were numerous cases of beri beri, some poor devils looking as if they had mumps. All my own buddies were allotted two feet of space per man on the verandah facing the Square, and I was told to park with them. I looked at Dusty Miller and we both agreed that this was no place for us. So we wandered off onto the Square to look for a place on the patch of grass just below the Jap Guard Room, and be damned to the weather.

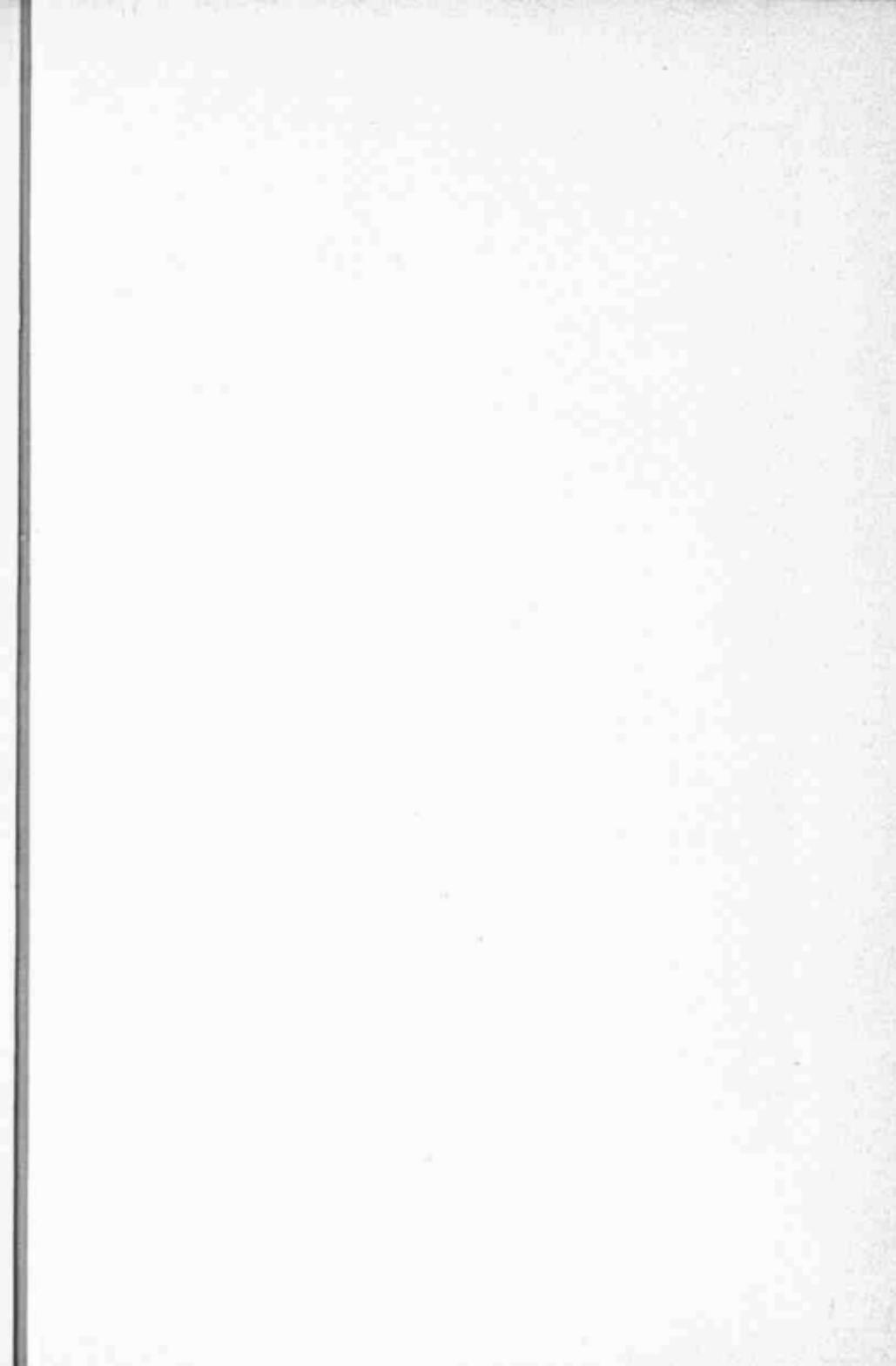
In the meantime the Australians were busy digging latrines in the centre of the Square, with freshly issued picks and shovels, a process that went on all through the night. We all had to take our turn digging those latrines. We heard that there were already two cases of diphtheria and twenty cases of dysentery

in a rough-and-ready-made hospital. The isolation part was somewhere in the open, in the middle of the Square.

The Japs had by this time placed machine guns at the Guard Room and at each corner of the Square. We were told that if we went beyond the drains marking the boundaries we were liable to be shot. An officer of the 22nd Mountain Regiment, Tony Willis, did just that very thing but lived to talk about it.

That evening our own cook-house staff somehow managed to produce a meal of vegetable stew and unsweetened tea, a truly heroic example of improvisation and industry. Dusty and I then retired to our patch on the grass where we intended to spend the night and chance the weather. Between us we had half a ragged groundsheet, a single blanket and a cape. Although we might be cold, we reckoned we would be far more comfortable than in the crowded barrack blocks where the sleepers would be packed like sardines almost on top of one another. So we lay down within two yards of the edge of the grass with a Japanese sentry marching up and down beside us. This was scarcely diplomatic but it was the only space we could secure. When darkness fell I lit my hurricane lamp and settled down to read. The book I had with me at that time was Winston Churchill's *World Crisis*, Volume III, possibly a strange choice for the occasion. In any case I was not allowed to read for long because that nasty little sentry was soon hissing at me like a rattlesnake to put out my lamp. So I talked in whispers to Dusty instead, and later, when he had fallen asleep, I fell to ruminating on a rather sumptuous doll's house I had in mind to construct for Lynette when all this nonsense was over. I fell asleep to the steady rhythm of pick-axes rising and falling on the hard surface of the Square.

Morning showed us long queues of haggard, unwashed and unshaven men lining up for water fatigues. Dusty came with me to join one queue in order to be given one gallon each for the entire day and for all purposes. After a fairly miserable night in the open Dusty decided that he would find a pitch under cover, so I looked around for somewhere to bed down myself. Eventually I found two soldiers of the Royal Engineers who looked very snug underneath a little hand-cart. They invited me to join them and allotted me the space beneath the rear portion. Here I lay all the morning, reading and ruminating, while the life of the Square went on buzzing around me.

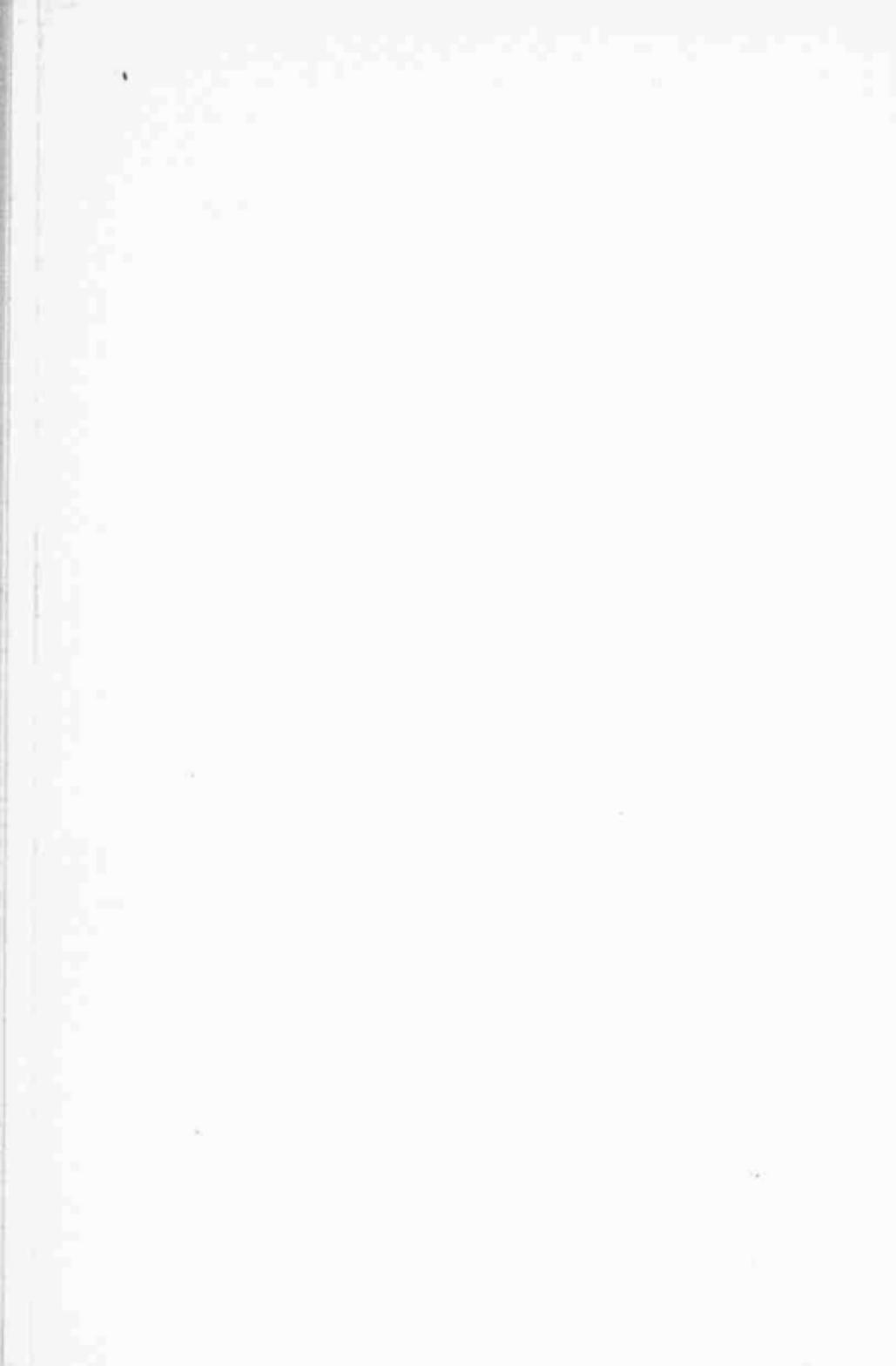




Selerang Barracks and Square during those days of September 1942



When 15,019 men, four goats and a pig were incarcerated



The Japs made no issue of rations so our meals were smaller and less edible than ever. I walked across to see my old friends in the 22nd Mountain Regiment and found Tony Willis and several others in good heart. Ronald Colman, Freddy Cross and Edward Sawyer rose to unbelievable heights of hospitality in offering me a cup of hot tea with a spoonful of condensed milk, and a Chinese cigarette as well. This was hospitality with a capital H. Rawl Knox, Tony Chenevix-Trench and Ronald Searle then joined us and with them I spent a very pleasant hour discussing the possibilities which lay ahead before we could hope to get out of this rather uncomfortable impasse. They told me that the British battalion had smuggled four stolen goats onto the Square without the Japs spotting them, and had locked them up in what had been in peacetime a Company storeroom on the ground floor of one of the blocks. Even more fascinating was the story of the pig which this Mountain Regiment had brought across from their previous quarters. He had been taken up three flights of stairs and was now up on the roof above us. They had wrapped him up in a football jersey of the Gordon Highlanders to protect him from the burning sunshine. A little later it had begun to rain so Tony and Ronald had rushed up the stairs onto the roof and covered him in a waterproof cape. Thinking it over now I guess that little pig probably had as good a time as any of us. He certainly had more space.

While we were "living it up" with tea, condensed milk and a packet of revolting Chinese cigarettes, a popular figure of the 2/2 Gurkha Rifles popped his head round the corner. This attractive character, an Australian by birth, was Bob Skene, one of the finest polo players in the world, with a handicap of ten. Having survived that long retreat from the Siamese border, Bob was about to make a further name for himself as the leader of our camp forestry squad. Here was one of the great characters of those times, good looking, well built, always good company and good fun, definitely someone to remember with genuine pleasure.

Bob had come to tell us about two British soldiers who were "having words" with a Japanese sentry outside the building and thought we would like to join in the fun. The offer of a spoon of condensed milk in a hot cup of tea, however, persuaded him to join our cosy little circle. Looking back it gives me quite a kick

to think of that occasion among so many well known figures of to-day.

The next day we were surprised to hear that Holmes had been persuaded by other senior officers to capitulate to the Japanese demands because of the serious outbreak of disease, which the medical officers said would increase rapidly. All C.O's were therefore summoned to a meeting at which they were instructed to get the opinion of their officers on the subject. Quite a lot of officers were worried about what people would say at home in England if they agreed to sign that non-escape form. Personally I was quite prepared to sign it, and then break it, if the opportunity to escape ever presented itself, for it would be a case of signing under duress. If we did not sign then it meant death to hundreds, an epidemic and probable starvation. Was it not more important to remain alive, perhaps even to fight again, rather than to die *en masse* for the sake of a point of honour? In any case, it wasn't very easy to escape from Singapore with the Japs occupying Malaya, Thailand, Burma, Sumatra, Java, the Phillippines, the Bismarck Archipelago, and, at the same time knocking at the door of Australia and India.

So we decided to sign on one condition — that the sick were removed at once to the Camp Hospital in Roberts Barracks. Having made our decision there was nothing more we could do until the Japs made the next move. I went to bed under my hand-cart with a great yearning for Home Sweet Home.

The next day four British soldiers were shot for attempting to escape. It was a horribly brutal affair. Several British senior officers were forced to witness the killing. The details are best omitted. We all felt sick.

Towards evening the rumour went round that the Japanese were not only prepared to negotiate but had agreed to a suggestion put forward by Holmes. This took the form of persuading the Japs to *order* us to sign the parole forms and not to leave us to decide whether we should or should not sign of our own free will. By this time we had nine cases of diphtheria, forty-two cases of dysentery and one case of appendicitis.

Then the worst happened. The rain came down abruptly, and in a pitiless deluge. It caught us completely unprepared. Those who could scramble into the barrack block in time did so taking their kit with them. The room on the ground floor of our barrack block soon became so congested that officers were lying on

top of each other. The place smelt of unwashed, rain-soaked bodies. After spending half an hour in this sweaty atmosphere I returned to my hand-cart where my two soldier friends were wrapped up in a waterproof cape like babes in the wood. The rain was blowing in through the spokes of the wheel on the windward side and my small amount of kit was starting to get wet. However, it was warm and snug, and compared with most lodgings on that now famous Square, it was almost luxurious.

Late in the afternoon we heard that the Japs had decided to release us from the Square on the terms put forward by our own Commandant. We were given two forms to sign and I scribbled an outrageous imitation of my long-winded name on each. What a lot of ballyhoo it all was.

Nevertheless it gave us an excuse to celebrate, and that night, the eve of release, we put on a grand Camp Concert. A stage was somehow made out of two or three trailers parked together; lights, curtains and props were organised, and when the curtain went up, there must have been nearly fifteen thousand pairs of eyes riveted on that stage. All the stars of the Southern Area Concert Party were in their best form, ably supported by Bill Middleton and his orchestra. And when Bobby Spang came on magnificently dressed as a woman, the roar that went up from that Square must have been heard all over the Island.

The Japs on their Guard Room balcony looked on amazed, their eyes surely popping out of their heads. They had hoped to revel in our misery but instead they saw only an indomitable spirit amongst all ranks, a spirit which I believe is typical of the British character in adversity. On the balcony we could see them strutting about like little turkey cocks, officers with swords at their side, and in their midst a full blown General with a pornographic name and a fat stomach, no doubt full of rice, protruding above his breeches. What was he thinking?

He was thinking what an incredible race the British are. He was astonished that we should achieve such order out of chaos, that cookhouses should spring into existence with such speed, and no doubt he was thinking many other things besides. Above all, he could not understand our cheerfulness and singing and cheering under such conditions.

The Japs had thought they would destroy us. Instead they had drawn us together to show a united front against the common enemy as nothing else had. They had helped to

cement a closer and finer bond of feeling between officers and men. They had made the world's biggest miscalculation. A seed had been sown that night which was to carry us through to the end.

When the concert had ended we stood to attention and sang *God Save the King*. The few lights on the Square had gone out and we stood in the darkness facing the Japanese on the Guard Room balcony. We sang as we had never sung before, with the orchestra seeming to encourage us to even louder and greater efforts. This was a truly wonderful act of defiance, directed upwards at those figures on the balcony from the throats of fifteen thousand men, a defiance which had all the epic quality that is traditional in the history of the British soldier. There were few fine moments in the life of a prisoner of war of the Japanese, but to me this was a fine moment, the finest of them all.

And after it was all over I walked back to my little hand-cart on the Square with a feeling of gratitude that back in England we should have had a King who could inspire us to sing and feel like that.

Chapter 27

LATER DAYS IN CHANGI

AFTER the Selarang incident camp life at Changi soon returned to normal. Educational classes eventually developed into a grandiose scheme known as Changi University. Pay and canteen facilities made life a little less spartan and checked the black marketing that had flourished in the early days. The diet was still very poor, rice and a twice weekly issue of whitebait forming what might be described as our basic nourishment. Vitamin and protein foods were seriously lacking in the rations, and as soon as the Japs began to issue pay, deductions were made from officers and men for a camp messing fund with which to provide such foods. Nevertheless, it was impossible to prevent deficiency diseases, beriberi and others, and the arrival of Red Cross stores in September was more than welcome, even though we each received so little and they lasted so short a time.

Two days before Christmas (1942) several written notes and messages mysteriously found their way into the camp. It appeared that these had originated from relatives and close friends in other camps on the Island and were addressed to various prisoners at Changi. Some had come from camps up country in Malaya and one or two from camps across the seas in Java and Sumatra. So neither the Japs nor the high seas could prevent the normal feelings of humanity expressing themselves in this miraculous way. What a triumph for the human spirit!

Thus it was that Ruth's letter from Palembang reached me seven months after she had despatched it. I was standing with Charles Charlton within five yards of what remained of one of our 15-inch guns when someone thrust a soiled and crumpled envelope into my hand. Only my name in pencil had been written on the envelope, but the writing was unmistakable. I quickly took out a single sheet of white paper on both sides of which she had written in pencil. "I am safe and well," she began. "I lost everything except my life, but no matter!"

She gave me a brief but moving account of her life as a prisoner. "I work hard here, cooking, scrubbing, cleaning, and I used to chop wood, but have had to give that up as it was too much for me . . ." She showed obvious concern for me and even went to the trouble of telling me how to avoid beriberi. "I live solely on the thought of being reunited with you and Lynette," and then one final sentence: "Look after yourself, darling, don't worry about me, I can take it, Ruth."

Just below her name she had scribbled in obvious haste: "Must take this now to a Chinese who is going to Singapore. Hope you will get it."

Sensing a certain degree of emotion, Charles took himself off and I found myself standing alone. Here, I thought, was a timely Christmas present for which I should be grateful. Yet the very wonder of its coming produced in me a feeling of frustration that I should have been so helpless to get a letter through to her in return. Perhaps time would find a way.

We were moved from one part of the camp to another several times. This was due to Japanese requirements of accommodation for their own troops, and also to the decision by the Japanese Air Force to construct an airdrome between our camp and the sea.

In the early days of 1943 I spent a lot of my time with Charles Charlton, who had been Moorhead's adjutant in the 3/16 Punjab Regiment. Before the war Charles had been a journalist with *The Statesman* in India; he had a genuine love for India and for the Indian. I found in him very much of a kindred spirit in the way we both felt about the Malayan campaign. His own part in the story had been a notable one, having come through every battle from the Thailand frontier to Singapore, and yet he spoke only of his commanding officer and the men of that gallant regiment. Charles was one of the few who were prepared to see the other man's point of view. In the interminable bickering that went on during the early days in Changi he always had a good word to say for the scapegoat of the moment, showing himself to be a realist as well as a man of unusually superior intellect. I admired the obvious modesty in his character, his passionate defence of the underdog, his great human understanding and also his well-developed sense of humour. I have heard it said that "the true standard of quality is seated in the mind; those who think

noble are noble." There was a degree of nobility in Charles, but because of his modest demeanour it took a bit of finding. To me he was a friend who helped me tremendously as a prisoner of war, and I am glad to say that we are still in touch with one another to-day.

We all did our turns at the various chores. The most arduous and most unpopular was working in the cookhouse, which we each did for a month. My turn came round in the early days of 1943, and as my two assistants — for tapioca peeling and washing up, among other duties — I had two very young Australian officers. We started early in the morning lighting the fires and getting the rice on the boil, and we worked until late in the evening. Cooking two rice rissoles for each of thirty-two officers every evening was a long and smoky task, so smoky in fact that we had to wear a form of eye shield. It was also so dirty that I for one shaved off all my hair. Then one day the Japs called for three thousand prisoners to be ready to move at once to Thailand as Force "H", to work on the Burma-Thailand railway. Everyone had to be medical category "A", and most of my friends were put on the list to go. The previous day I had dropped one of those sixty-four rice rissoles into the burning oil a little too casually, and the oil had splashed onto my finger, burning the skin badly enough to send me running down to the medical inspection room for it to be treated. Thus it was that for the only occasion in the whole of those three and a half years as a prisoner I found myself listed as medical category "B", because of that burnt finger. It is now well known that thousands died on that railway, so maybe that rissole saved my life.

Derek Robertson, who had commanded a Gurkha battalion in the final stages of the campaign then became my closest friend. Derek had a delicious sense of humour and such a sound balanced outlook as a prisoner that I found in him one to whom I gave my confidence unreservedly. Also in that mess with us, apart from old friends like John Parkin and Baja Brown, was John Stephens, also a Gurkha officer who, like Derek, lived for his regiment and for everything connected with Nepal and Gurkhas. They both had more than just pride in all that the Gurkhas stood for, they had a great love for those magnificent little men. John had a literary flair and spent much of his time writing, not only stories but poetry too. When I had done my

tour of adjutant of that little mess over a period of four months it was John who succeeded me. Looking back, these were better days than most. Even our rations improved to the extent that we were given sago flour and rice flour in addition to just rice, as well as pineapples, bananas and peanuts. We worked hard by day, pulling those heavy trailers in chain gangs, sometimes several miles outside the camp, and returning them loaded with tree trunks, before cutting up the latter for cookhouse fires. In the evenings there was chess and Mah Jong, reading, writing and chatting.

In April 1943 I started to work on the airdrome which the Japs decided to build between our present camp and the sea. At that time, the whole of the area which lay along the coastline from Changi village to Changi Jail was made up of jungle and swamp. They planned to make the main runway three thousand yards long. There was also to be a second runway at right angles to the main one and crossing it in the middle. In addition to this we were later to be called upon to build fifteen large bays which would conceal Japanese aircraft during British and American bombing raids. It was quite an undertaking and we wondered at the start whether they were capable of organising the work and whether we would ever complete it. A shrewd bookmaker would have made an interesting book on the result. Surprisingly to us the Japs produced bulldozers which went through the jungle like steamrollers, uprooting trees as though they were seedlings. It was our job to load what was once jungle into small man-handled trucks on railway tracks. Later on our main task was to level the surface of the airfield by transporting vast mounds of sand from one part of the area to others, and for this the Japs produced half a dozen trains to pull scores of little rail trucks all over that spacious area.

There were about two thousand of us on that airfield. We worked in parties of one hundred men with an officer in command of each party. The officer was not required to do any manual work, but he was the go-between who had to try to understand what the Japs wanted and then instruct the men accordingly. From our point of view his main job was to see that the men did not get beaten up too badly for idling instead of working, or for disappearing into the jungle for one purpose or another without permission. On the other hand the slower the men worked the longer it would take to complete the airfield.

It thus became a game of cat and mouse in which the business of keeping the Japs happy had to be weighed against a sort of go-slow technique to delay the completion of the airfield. This was quite a challenge. It was also healthy out there in the hot sunshine.

We worked in shifts, either from 7 a.m. to 2 p.m. or from 2 p.m. to 9 p.m. During the early morning shift we had a meal called vegetable stew. We supplied the vegetables and the tapioca which we grew ourselves in the camp gardens. We also supplied the cooking utensils which were made by our own men in one of the camp "factories." The Japs supplied the water and we boiled it. The irony of this can be better understood if the reader realises that at the end of the war we were each debited £500* on our military pay account for "board and lodging." The water for those lunches, I guess, was part of the "board."

By August 1944, the main runway of the airdrome had been partially completed, and it now remained to construct the second runway. In order to make way for additional Japanese troops and airdrome specialists, we were ordered to move into Changi Jail, following the evacuation of the civilian prisoners, male and female, to a camp at Sime Road in Singapore.

When we first arrived in the new area, the Japs ordered officers and men to be separated. Six thousand troops were therefore accommodated in a jail which had been built to house eight hundred, while all the officers were housed in attap roofed huts and coolie quarters close to the southern wall of the jail. The hospital and several thousand more troops were also accommodated outside the jail walls in huts which we had to build ourselves.

About this time I joined the select little group which called itself the Food and Wine Club. Although we were by this time weak from lack of vitamins and proteins, and always hungry, yet we became absorbed in writing out imaginary menus on the grand scale for lunches and dinners, and we would then select a wine with infinite care to go with each course. In this we were helped by a most informative book called *Stay me with Flagons* as well as a pre-war edition of *Mrs Beeton's Cookery Book* which had found its way into the camp. The most knowledge-

* NOTE: We were refunded that £500 after six months fighting at the highest level.

able member of our Food and Wine Club was not surprisingly a Frenchman: we used to think of him as Andre Simon. Some of the menus we made out in those times I have with me to-day.

Some time after the Italian capitulation, two complete Italian submarine crews were rounded up in Singapore and brought to Changi. They came out with several suitcases of beautiful white tropical uniform, pyjamas, shirts, underwear, shoes and even handkerchiefs—things we hadn't seen for years. They expected us to be tough with them and to treat them with contempt, but instead we induced them to hold Italian classes and to lecture to us in the evenings about their war experiences.

Their naval commander lectured well, though the casual manner in which he claimed to have sunk certain British warships earlier in the war, we found somewhat galling. By way of contrast an officer in the Suffolk Regiment, Harwood Harrison, gave us an enthralling talk on the life (to 1940) of the then Mr Winston Churchill. I remember how impressed I was by the eloquence of the speaker on that occasion, and afterwards made a bet in Hut G that Harwood would become an M.P. after the war. It took time to win that bet, but I did win it comfortably in the end. Three years ago Colonel Sir Harwood Harrison, Bt., T.D., M.P., was Controller of Her Majesty's Household.

At this time, too, we built a theatre that must have been without equal for magnificence in any prisoner of war camp. It even had dressing rooms in the roof! It was opened with great eclat but closed by the Japs after a few spectacular productions because of evil thoughts they detected behind one of the ballets!

It was, in fact, during the last year that the excellence of our theatrical entertainment reached its peak.

Sea bathing was a delightful privilege which was stopped on the slightest pretext, but it would be ungracious not to recognise that in Captain Takahashi the camp had a humanitarian Commandant with a refreshingly cynical sense of humour. His reported description of his General, "O.K. for Mah Jong" is only one of the excellent stories about him.

Canteen prices rose as the rations declined. Coconuts, five cents each after the capitulation, were \$3.50 in 1945, and this is typical of how prices soared generally. The Chinese were anxious to put their vast store of useless notes into something more reliable. We wanted to convert our valuables into food and tobacco. There were plenty of middlemen ready to oblige at a

handsome profit. A by-product of this trade was the nastier one of cashing post-war cheques at usurious rates. Hungry men, men craving for nicotine, wrote out cheques at two dollars or even less to the £ when the purchasing power of the dollar was about equal to the pre-war cent. Beyond the wire in neighbouring Kampongs, a lively black market at fantastic prices opened up with the connivance of the Korean guards. Sooner or later we all became involved. It was the only way to survive.

Chapter 28

SPORTING DAYS ON THE AIRSTRIP

THOSE days on the airdrome were far and away the most rewarding of all. When we first started to work on this vast undertaking most of us were switched from party to party as commanders, working a few weeks only with each. The quality and morale of the men varied considerably. In the early months of 1944 I was lucky enough to command a party of naval men and merchant seamen. Some of these were survivors of *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*, and others had survived the sinking of *Exeter* in the Java Straits after the fall of Singapore. Every bit as interesting was a noble band of merchant seamen who had been torpedoed in the Atlantic by one or other of the German pocket battleships, and had later been transferred to a Japanese depot ship somewhere in the southern reaches of the Indian Ocean.

Many of these men wore beards. They had very much the rugged seamen's air about them, dour in some cases, colourful in others, but all solid, sound and captivating. I found their individual stories fascinating, stories which they told modestly and yet with pride. A stoker who had been in *Prince of Wales* told me of the air attacks by hundreds of Japanese bombers, including torpedo bomber attacks, which had sunk them on the third day of war. I listened to such tales with a personal interest of my own since it had been opposite us at Kuantan that the disaster had taken place. It seemed almost that we ourselves had been involved for was it not a signal from one of our military outposts on the beaches at Kuantan which had somehow been picked up or passed on to Admiral Sir Tom Phillips in *Prince of Wales*? Others told me how their ship had been sunk in the cold Atlantic, how they had been picked up and placed under lock and key in the prison apartment of a German depot ship. There were also their own personal stories to listen to, stories of their lives, their families and their jobs before the war. One sailor had been a butler in the stately home of a well-known

titled industrialist. It seemed strange to see him now shovelling sand into rail trucks, clad only in a loin cloth and rubber chaplies on his feet.

Those naval boys were simply splendid at scrounging food and because of this we were often in trouble. All round the airdrome stood tall coconut trees like statuesque giraffes, the gentle breeze provocatively swaying those large brown husks for all to see. Small wonder that when the Japanese airdrome officials ordered a surprise roll call, as they did from time to time, we should have been four short of the required one hundred. The fact was straight forward, two of them would be at the top of two coconut trees, shaking the branches violently. And where were the other two? At the foot of the trees, waiting for the fall. The explanation was less straight forward and often failed miserably, not only because of the language difficulty but through lack of imagination on my part. Then we had fireworks.

One of these splendid men concentrated on snails. The latter make good eating if you cook sufficient of them. When you are really hungry you begin to think you are eating oysters. This young man had the air of a Billy Budd, smiling innocence his charm for all to see. He too was often found to be wandering far from his party's working area with a haversack at his hip, and then too there would be trouble, a bashing or worse.

In September I was transferred to the command of a party of men from the Norfolk and Suffolk battalions, and I soon discovered what quality of character there was in these young men of farming stock from the country villages of East Anglia. This time we worked on the late shift returning to camp in darkness.

I am grateful indeed for that short contact with the Royal Navy and the Royal Merchant Navy. My father would have liked me to have gone into the Navy, but as a child I was always sick even in trains and cars. As for the sea my stomach used to churn at the very thought of it. It is much the same today. So it had to be on dry land, on an empty stomach and in extreme adversity that such contact should have been made. It is well known that the British soldier is magnificent in adversity. I learnt on that airstrip that the seamen of both our Navy and Merchant Navy are no less magnificent.

Of course we had a language difficulty. It might, in fact, be true to say that we had exactly one word in common. This was "O.K.", perhaps the one word which is known in every country

throughout the world. But, surprising as it may seem, this one word accompanied by a great deal of gesticulation on both sides proved to be sufficient to get us through two and a half years of toil on the Changi airdrome. It was indeed an astonishing performance, but it worked.

It even had its advantages. Every now and again each party commander used to be asked to give his men a pep talk. Japanese patience had reached breaking point concerning the idleness or lack of discipline on the part of the men of that party. It was essential that the British "Shoko" should address his men in suitable words and in a suitable rage.

This was great fun for the very reason that the Japs would not understand one word that we spoke. All that was necessary was that we should look angry while we were addressing our men. First prize for this sort of nonsense must surely go to a young officer whose name, alas, I have forgotten. Looking his men squarely in the face as though he were about to eat them, he raised his fist threateningly and shouted—

"Mary had a little bear
To which she was so kind
And everywhere that Mary went
She had a bear behind."

So aptly did he shake his fist at them and so sternly were his words spoken that such an address usually had the Japs very nearly clapping in appreciation. "Very good, very good Shoko" they would say. And then would follow sterner versions of Humpty Dumpty, Little Jack Horner and not forgetting dear Old Mother Hubbard. It was all part of the game, and the men played their part by looking on the ground, apparently hang-dog and shame-faced, but in fact in order to conceal their guffaws of delight.

Nevertheless, a great deal of the time we spent on that airstrip was tedious. It was essential to have some interest outside the business of building an airdrome for the enemy, so I decided to find one by hook or by crook.

In the camp I discovered an Australian called Ron Harris who had been runner-up in one of the Australian professional golf championships before the war. Ron liked smoking, so in exchange for my weekly tobacco ration he was prepared to give



Captain Ben Barnett. "It was his conjuring trick that saved me from the horrors of Outram Road Jail"



Major Melville Portal, M.B.E. "Only the thickness of one empty rice sack saved him from the Japanese torture chamber"



me golf lessons every day. We used to practice in a rather smelly area behind the latrines, driving ball after ball into a large canvas screen. I even bought a Number 7 iron from Ron, and half a dozen golf balls, for several pounds of peanuts. As the days went by I made steady progress. My keenness to become a scratch golfer when once the war was over occupied my mind day and night. I practised on my own religiously.

But even this was not enough. I wanted to hit that little white ball into the wide open spaces, not into a canvas screen among the latrines. And what finer golfing ground than the enormous expanse of sand on the airstrip? It was too good to miss, far too tempting to resist. It would be great to practice mashie shots on those wide open spaces.

As party commanders we were encouraged to march down to the airstrip carrying a walking stick. The idea was that it helped to give us the military bearing which in normal times we would have derived from the sword or regimental cane. So now my Number 7 iron, turned upside down, became the walking stick from which I was supposed to acquire the look of a well drilled subaltern marching onto the parade ground. And in my pocket three or four golf balls.

In this way the days grew shorter and less tedious, and Ron Harris's stock as a teacher of golf soared sky high every time I hit those little balls high into the air between one working party and another. At first prudence told me to play such shots only when the Japs were busy elsewhere. In the course of time, however, it became an accepted part of the day's programme, and though disapproval was expressed even angrily on certain occasions by the more senior Japanese officials, the rank and file grew to smile at it. It earned me the name of "The Golfing Shoko."

Towards the end of 1944 we had made several bays for the protection of individual Japanese aircraft during Allied bombing raids. I soon discovered that the back wall of these bays was an admirable place against which to drive golf balls. Furthermore, these bays were secluded from inquisitive eyes, they had a quietness and restfulness all of their own. I used to be very happy in one of these bays, practising what the great Ron Harris had taught me behind the latrines.

Then came the afternoon when over confidence, and possibly lack of concentration, caused me to drop the right shoulder in

one of those downward swings. The blade of the club cut clean under the ball, lofting it high above the back wall and way into the blue sky. Furthermore it was sliced, so badly sliced in fact as to drop onto a flatish stone within twenty yards of the Control Tent, shoot upwards and sideways towards the open entrance and finally to roll, almost apologetically, through that tent under the very noses of five important military figures. For standing in the entrance the senior Japanese airdrome officer was about to announce — through a British interpreter — certain details concerning surprise visits to the airfield by the Kempei Tai. Facing him a second Japanese officer stood between our own Colonel D'Aubuz and the gallant one-armed George Wort, the two latter being our senior British officials. It was certainly a moment to remember.

Not a word was spoken. The Japanese officers looked down on the ground, their eyes following the ball through the tent and out into the sunshine beyond. An expression of wonder slowly turned to one of shock, but the awaited explosion did not follow. Instead a shrug of the shoulders and that was all. George Wort later picked up the ball and returned it to me that evening.

Back in the camp I shared a little coolie quarter with three other officers who also formed part of the airdrome working staff. These three were probably three of the best regimental officers in the camp and I reckon I was lucky to have had them as companions in that minute dwelling house. John Radford had come out to Malaya as a Brigade Major in the 18th British Division. Humphrey Hyde had fought with the Manchester Regiment and Edward Sawyer had commanded a battery of our old friends, the 22nd Mountain Regiment.

In the evenings Humphrey Hyde taught me to play bridge and a very painstaking, patient but exacting tutor he was. After a time I was allowed to play bridge with the other three in our tiny porch and while their bridge possibly deteriorated as a result of playing with a beginner, mine certainly improved. The evenings were the best time of all. After a long day in the sun standing on that airfield it was good to sit on our open porch and talk of better days in a better world which we all longed to find once again. For me that coolie quarter has happy memories. Those were far better days than most.

Another officer who came round to see us in the evenings was the Australian Test cricketer, Ben Barnett. This attractive

character was not only one of the best cricketers of pre-war Australian test sides, he was also one of the best amateur conjurers of anywhere in the world. Since the age of twelve I had always been fascinated by conjuring, and here was Ben Barnett not only willing to entertain us with his tricks but anxious to teach me how to perform them. Those occasions with a pack of cards in our coolie quarter soon led to further diversions on the airdrome, for Ben too was working on the strip with his own party of a hundred Australians.

It was always fun working close to Ben Barnett and his Australians, for on these occasions he would come over to me and during periods of rest we would run through our repertoire of card tricks. And as the days went by I would try out those tricks on the men of my party and often on the Japs too, until eventually such things became part of the daily routine. In this way we all found in such frivolity a not unwelcome diversion from the irksome round of filling and emptying rail trucks.

Ben had already established himself as a character in the camp by his performance in the early days with a working party in Singapore. His party of one hundred Australians was ordered to build a road across the Bukit Timah Golf Course. The Japs supplied a steam roller, but the Australians had to drive it and maintain it, since the Japs themselves at that time knew absolutely nothing about steam rollers. Every day an Australian soldier would draw a four-gallon tin of petrol from the Jap store. The Japanese soldier in charge of the party would watch the Australian driver pour the petrol into some strange pipe in some strange place high up on the steam roller, at the end of which operation he would give the order to commence work.

This went on for five weeks before the Japs realised that you don't run a steam roller on petrol.

What had been happening was this. The Australians had got hold of a spare four-gallon tin which was empty. When they drew their daily ration of one full four-gallon tin, somewhere between the store and the steam roller the tins were swapped, so that an empty tin always arrived at the steam roller. The Australian driver would then climb up onto the steam roller and go through the motions of pouring the imaginary petrol into an imaginary pipe leading to an imaginary tank. When this had been done he would climb down from the lofty heights of his machine and report to the Japs that everything was ready to

start work. The Japs would then say "O.K., O.K." and give the signal to start work.

In the meantime the Australians would post individuals behind various bushes and walls forming a sort of chain gang leading to a certain spot where the Chinese came every day to buy this very valuable petrol. And so a lucrative business was built up on sound financial lines — for those five weeks — which just goes to show what can be done by the right kind of private enterprise with men like Ben Barnett and his Australians to run it.

That episode took place in 1942. But now we were approaching the end of 1944 and the Germans in Europe were on the run. We could sense the beginning of the end.

Chapter 29

ONE JAPANESE WHO WAS DIFFERENT

At the beginning of October 1944, a new character appeared on the airfield who was to play a big part in my life. This was a Japanese Sergeant in the Japanese Air Force, who in his appearance, his bearing, his speech, his attitude was . . . different. Different from the ill-bred bunch of soldiers who supervised the British and Australian working parties throughout those two and a quarter years. His uniform was different too, for it was not only clean, it was whole as opposed to patched like a patchwork quilt. He was clean shaven. He carried himself with a certain dignity, and his voice was not harsh and coarse like the others. He was even unusually tall. Here was a Japanese who was — different.

I noticed him at once and soon engaged him in conversation. He knew little English, but I was daily learning more Japanese words, and had borrowed an English-Japanese dictionary from someone in the camp. During working hours I often saw him sitting on an up-turned rail truck, just gazing about him but showing little interest in what my party was supposed to be doing. He wore a sergeant's stripes on his sleeve and some insignia which at once distinguished him as belonging to the Japanese Air Force.

Every now and again he would make a show of toughness by reprimanding certain men of my party, when he would speak in the usual harsh Japanese way. But I saw that this was very much forced; it was not natural. The man was not one of the rest. He was — different.

He told me about his prowess as a pilot. He said he had flown aircraft for five years and had been in action against the Chinese. I asked him if he ever flew airplanes now. He replied that he would be flying to Sumatra next month. Where in Sumatra? Palembang. This gave me an idea. I decided to work on this man; I was even prepared to trust him.

Then one day we were talking together when our infamous

Japanese Sergeant-Major appeared on the scene in a rage. He had discovered one of my men half way up a coconut tree — not for the first time — and had brought him back to the party with red marks standing out across his bare back and chest where this brute had lashed him with a stick. That Sergeant jumped up to meet the trouble and it was he as much as me who received the brunt of the Sergeant-Major's tirade against that Englishman who stole coconuts. It was possibly this occasion which helped to foster some form of sympathy between us.

Next day I noticed that the Sergeant's brown tatty note-case had fallen from his pocket into the sand. He had walked away oblivious to its loss and I bent down to pick it up, and as I did so a coloured photograph slipped out of one of the partitions and I saw a picture of a neat little Japanese woman surrounded by four children. I picked it up, replaced it in the note case and handed the latter back to him. A little later I talked to him about this photograph. His face lit up with a childlike look and he spoke simply and fondly of his family. He told me he had not seen them for more than six years. I asked him if he ever got letters from them, and he answered rather sadly that in all these years he had had only six letters. It was war.

And so came my chance to speak about my own problem. I spoke about Ruth being a prisoner in Palembang, about Lynette who had left Singapore so late and of how her ship had been bombed in the harbour. I poured out my story with an almost fanatical feeling of sincerity, and at the end I asked the Jap if he would take a letter to Ruth in the Women's Camp at Palembang when he flew there next month. The man was taken aback. He seemed at first not to understand the question, and then to doubt my intentions. Finally he said that it was too dangerous because the Kempei Tai might even search his kit and it would be very bad for him as well as for me if they discovered a letter from one prisoner here to another across the sea. I did not press the point. I was not going to plead, and I let the subject drop. My knowledge of the man so far gave me hope that he would reconsider that decision, given time.

And so it was. Two days later I approached him again about the letter and this time he said he would take it. He would be leaving in eleven days' time. The long wait of over two years was beginning to thaw.

So I typed a long letter to Ruth. I told her much that had

happened to me, of conditions in our camp, of Lynette, and above all of our re-union which, I said, could not now be long delayed. I was careful not to mention anything whatever about the war, of Japanese movements in Singapore, of anything which could compromise either of us in the event of the worst happening and the letter being detected by the Kempei Tai.

I told only a handful of my friends. They were not happy about the arrangement; they told me that I was foolish to trust this man. But I had weighed it all up, and in any case I had to take a chance. My instinct told me it would be all right.

And so that Japanese Sergeant flew off to Palembang with my letter to Ruth. The camp wireless set told me the war in Europe would be over soon. That was comforting, but what about this war out here with Japan? When would that be over? Would it be too late? How long could all the prisoners in the Far East keep alive on the present diet after nearly three years of starvation, without vitamins and proteins? That was the big question.

But who could know at this time that the Women's Internment Camp at Palembang had been vacated? Who could know that the women prisoners had been shipped across to an unhealthy camp at Muntok on Banka Island. And when that Japanese Sergeant landed on Palembang airdrome, he knew that this was so.

Chapter 30

A CARD TRICK BAFFLES THE GESTAPO

THIS was the time when the British camp authorities became worried about the illicit trading that was going on amongst prisoners working on the airdrome and the Chinese and Malay traders who found their way into that stretch of jungle which lay between the airfield and Changi village. These traders were prepared to pay large sums of money in local Japanese currency for all items of clothing, for mugs and plates, for rings and clocks, and above all for Rolex watches and Parker pens. The British prisoners knew this and knew too where to find these traders during their working hours on the airdrome. It was therefore only necessary for a prisoner to ask the Jap in charge if he could "be excused" for him to enter the outer edge of the jungle. The use of this outer fringe for purposes of nature had been accepted by the Japs from the start, but this concession had been greatly abused and was now becoming alarmingly out of hand, for in each party more and more men were anxious to sell anything they could spare in order to get money. Money alone was going to decide whether a man survived or died, for now after nearly three years of starvation, food had become even scarcer than ever, and men were becoming weaker and weaker. With money a man could buy food over the wire after dark from Chinese and Malay traders. It was a vicious circle, but one which had to be followed. It was now the survival of the fittest, and up to a point, each man must help himself.

Thus it was that the request "to be excused" became monotonous. Yet the Japs did not suspect. On the other hand all officers in charge of a party on the airdrome were ordered by the Camp authorities to stop men of their party "flogging" items of clothing. It was felt that they must hang on to the little clothing they still possessed, especially their army boots. The men did not feel this way at all. They argued that food was the only thing that mattered. They wanted sugar, coconuts, tins of bully beef and tobacco which money alone could buy them. Why shouldn't

they "flog" their clothes, their boots, their private and personal possessions? That was their case.

My heart told me that they had a very good case indeed and one with which I was in full sympathy. My head told me that as an officer, although a prisoner, it was my duty to see that the men for whom I was responsible obeyed Camp Orders. But as my heart has always ruled my head throughout my life it wasn't very difficult to decide which line I was going to take.

The truth was I had already made up my mind that the time had come when I too must sell my one remaining personal possession of any value, a shagreen travelling clock which had been given to me as a wedding present by Ivor Reeves of the K.S.L.I. That travelling clock had accompanied me all through the campaign in my haversack from Kuantan to Singapore, and it had served me well as a prisoner. The fact that it had been given me by a brother officer and close friend was reason enough why I was loathe to part with it. But at the end of 1944 this was no time for sentiment. Like everyone else I needed money for food; it would have to go.

And if I was going to indulge in illicit trading myself, I could hardly stop the men of my party from doing so too. I therefore made up my mind not just to turn a blind eye to everything that went on in that strip of jungle on the airdrome, but to join in the fun myself.

So plenty went on in that strip of jungle. Nor was it difficult to contact those traders for they were there almost every afternoon. It was just a case of groping your way through dense foliage and negotiating one or two obstacles to a depth of one hundred yards without of course being seen by the Japs. We had our experts who knew the ropes and these splendid men advised the rest of us. After a time they became such old soldiers at the game that they would even quote us the price which the traders were likely to pay for our goods. In this way I came to learn that the Chinese would give me \$100 for my travelling clock, and this seemed an awful lot of money to me, for it worked out at something like £30 sterling. Against this was the knowledge that I would have to pay £7 for a pound of white sugar and about £2 for a coconut. My mouth began to water.

But then the Gods stepped in with the wrong feet. My venture into the jungle was doomed from the start. Unknown to any of us the dreaded Kempei Tai had decided to swoop down on the

airfield for a check up. Not even the Japanese airdrome officials had been warned. It was just my luck to be spotted by one of the members of that loathsome organisation as I disappeared among the dense foliage. Within hearing distance of my Chinese black marketeer I sensed the proximity of strangers, and turning nervously in the direction I had come I found myself face to face with two members of the Japanese Gestapo. For perhaps the first time in my life I found myself completely tongue-tied. I simply stared at them, at the same time half consciously feeling for the clock in the left pocket of my khaki shorts. There was not even time to be frightened for they were on me in a flash pinning my arms behind my back until I thought they would break. A nasty kind of smell of unwashed bodies flew to my nostrils and I found myself forced to listen to a stream of Japanese oaths. Although I could not understand what they were saying it was fairly obvious that they thought very little of me. It was certainly a painful and unpleasant journey back to the airstrip. My arrival there in a condition of considerable distress caused the men of my party to down tools and look on expectantly, perhaps also fearfully. They had reason to look concerned.

The extraordinary thing was that neither of my two captors made any attempt to search me. So there in the left pocket of my khaki shorts still lay the clock, apparently unobserved and unsuspected, although to me it was beginning to feel as large as the Albert Hall.

The senior of the two Kempei Tai, a corporal, then moved away to report the whole incident, and before long two slightly more important looking individuals, though equally unattractive, arrived on the scene. Not far distant a large tent had been pitched and to this I was now marched. Twenty minutes later two Japanese officers, one of whom had had a very bad shave that morning, drove up in an open car. They were both wearing a sword at their side. It was all very impressive, but I found it difficult to believe that my crime could be worthy of all this stage-management. Finally a British interpreter arrived together with another British Officer from the Control Tent. The former was a young officer of the Royal Signals who had taken up the study of the Japanese language only six months previously, but because of sickness among our limited Japanese speaking

officers, had been called out for duty as the interpreter of the day. Little did he know what he was in for.

Some folding wooden chairs were produced so that half the assembly were now able to be seated. The others stood in groups facing me in one corner of the tent where I had been placed as though contagious. I was not one of those to be given a chair. The Japanese officer who had had a bad shave that morning now took charge and the scene was set for an extract from a Gilbert and Sullivan opera.

This officer made a little speech in Japanese, and this was followed by a stream of garbled invective hissed at us by the corporal of the Kempei Tai like an angry bee. Scarcely stopping to draw breath and continually pointing a dirty finger in my direction, his face soon became contorted with rage as a barrage of hate poured from his lips. This unpleasant individual was obviously out for his pound of flesh.

At the end of this not unimpressive performance he stepped up to our British interpreter with a big question mark written all over his face. He wanted an answer at once. But what was the question, I wondered, and so did the British interpreter.

Here was a puzzlement if ever there was one. The Royal Signals had taught this good looking young officer many things during his limited service but the Japanese language was not one of them. Nor had his studies of the past months in the camp taught him enough to deal with a situation like this. Despite the hot sunshine of Malaya his face was pallid in complexion compared with most of us. It now turned beetroot red and I could see little beads of sweat breaking out on his upper lip. The poor chap had no idea what question was being asked.

Then everyone seemed to break out talking at once, there was a lot of gesticulation, hand waving and finger pointing. What on earth would happen next?

Thank Heaven for the officer who had had a bad shave. It was he who, by the use of a few English words and a great deal of silent acting came to our rescue. The interpreter turned to me with the words:

"Why were you in the jungle and what were you doing there?"

There was a hush and I felt everyone's face turned in my direction. They all looked at me so curiously that I began to feel that they expected me to say something momentous, per-

haps even to make a startling confession. There was, however, only one thing I could say.

"I was looking for a place to spend a penny."

This simple statement produced near pandemonium. The angry little Corporal, advancing once again on the wretched interpreter, was obviously demanding an immediate translation of what I had said. Seeing fresh beads of sweat breaking out on the British officer's face and realising his tongue-tied condition, this monstrous little monkey was soon beside himself with frustration and impatience. Everyone present had turned to the interpreter expectantly, and everyone seemed to be shouting at him at the same time. Even the Japanese officer who had had a bad shave that morning joined in. They were like a pack of hounds moving in for the kill.

One thing was certain. The officer of the Royal Signals had not been studying the Japanese language long enough to cope with this situation. Nowhere in the first forty-six chapters of his lesson book appeared such an idiom as this. His only hope was to illustrate but there was something far too nice about him to give such an embarrassing performance.

It was then that instinct made me put my hands in my pockets. The clock was still there all right, but what was in the right pocket? Not only two golf balls but a pack of cards. The same instinct caused me to take out the pack of cards and show it to everyone present. A sudden turning of heads told me that all eyes were now, not on the interpreter but on the six of diamonds at the bottom of the pack. Ben Barnett had taught me that by stroking the bottom card four or five times it can be made to change to any other card in the pack. I loved this trick. I had practised it for the last two months and I felt I had really mastered it. And here was the perfect occasion, an ideal setting, and the rarest audience in the whole wide world.

So the six of diamonds became the queen of spades, and the expressions of incredulity on those Japanese faces were only matched by the indignation which followed. The queen of spades had barely been changed to the nine of clubs when the entire pack of cards was knocked out of my hand by the now enraged corporal. Dealing out blows with both arms he might well have left me in a sorry state but for the timely intervention of the Japanese officer with the unshaven chin.

They found me guilty at the end of many more moments of

farce, guilty of liaising with Asiatics though not for purposes of trading. It seemed that the suspicious minds of the Kempei Tai had begun to connect any contact between British prisoners and Asiatics with some exaggerated plot to take over the government of Singapore. Perhaps this was why they did not search me. Surely the travelling clock would have proved me innocent of anything so flattering?

Nevertheless, I spent several uneasy hours that evening back in camp, prepared to leave next day for Outram Road Jail.

But Fate worked kindly for me that night. Back in the Camp office, the British authorities presented a case on my behalf that the Shoko with the golf club, the golf balls and the pack of cards was very definitely "nuts" and could not be taken seriously. Captain Takahashi himself, the Japanese Commandant who disliked and feared the Kempei Tai, supported this case. A stormy battle was fought and won. The sentence was amended to read: "Dismissed from the airdrome."

Four names spring to my mind when I ponder on that close shave. Andy Dillon, Newey, D'Aubuz and the one-armed George Wort. I believe it was these four who got me out of that tight spot and saved me from an unsavoury time in Outram Road Jail. Maybe even twenty years after it is not too late to say thank you to them all.

The very next day two young officers of the 22nd Mountain Regiment undertook to sell that travelling clock for me. No-one could be sure that the Kempei Tai would not appear on the airstrip once again. Yet — between them — they negotiated the sale and returned to camp that evening to give me \$100.

Who were these noble figures who had the nerve to run the gauntlet so soon after my own narrow escape?

They were Pery Standish and Tony Chenevix-Trench, the latter now Headmaster of Eton.

Chapter 31

BANKA FEVER AND DEATH

RETURNING to Ruth on Banka Island, that new camp outside Muntok promised well. After the verminous squalor of Palembang she found that being situated on a hill, it was sufficiently above sea level for the inmates to enjoy the freshness of the sea air, and the attap huts were newer, larger and cleaner.

The men in the Palembang camps had also been moved across to Muntok and were now back in the old Coolie Assembly Centre where they had started nearly three years previously. Somehow they had brow-beaten the Japs into letting them send food to the Women's camp so that when Ruth and her fellow prisoners arrived, there for once was a worth while meal to greet them.

The camp had nine wells, but the water soon ran out. This called for more water fatigues, which meant fetching water from a tiny creek about ten minutes walking distance from the camp. Although arduous, this fatigue had its attractions, for the creek was situated beyond a stretch of jungle country in which a number of wild flowers flourished, while the creek itself offered an incomparable opportunity to bathe and wash.

Ruth and Christine soon found themselves members of a party ordered to put a barbed wire fence round the hospital. A week later they were carrying garbage, including broken plates, tins and eggshells to sprinkle on the sweet potato plants. Then the Japs intensified work on the gardens because of the great scarcity of food all over the East, and more and more women were forced to go out of camp every day with chunkals to help grow sweet potatoes in an ever increasing acreage. The Dutch worked in their own plot, alongside but separate from the British. One of the Dutch women was Johanna Grootes-Honig, with whom Ruth quickly became friendly. In the evenings she would walk over to Ruth's hut to have a chat with her, then together they would brew a mug of strong black coffee by the light of the one oil lamp shared by one hundred and forty in the hut. Very

lovely those evenings were too, for nothing had changed the moon and the stars. Little Christian, Johanna's six-year-old son, would often accompany his mother on those visits.

Those days in Muntok were hot and humid, and the nights were cold. Three years on a starvation diet had already taken more than fifty lives. But now a fever fell upon the camp with dreadful effect. Some called it malaria, others called it dengue, and finally they named it Banka fever. More and more got ill, yet the life of the camp had to go on.

Four doctors — all women — and a team of British and Australian nurses were continually on duty. Dutch nuns who had formerly worked as nurses in Charitas Hospital in Palembang, continued to staff the hospital which was now better organized than ever before. The hospital hut could accommodate two dozen patients lying side by side on the "bali bali" shelf of thin branches. In the children's ward someone had procured two old cots for babies, while the older children lay on the "bali bali" shelf.

The nuns worked heroically. One of them did all the laundry for the hospital and the sick in an oil drum. Another nun spent her entire time cooking for the sick and making hot drinks for the very ill. Like the nurses in the last days of Singapore those nuns behaved like angels.

Yet by December two hundred and ten women prisoners had gone down with Banka fever, and among these the greatly loved Miss Dryburgh lay for weeks on her bed growing weaker and weaker. Her eventual death affected every member of the camp for she had played a noble part in the lives of each one of them. It was she who had initiated and trained that orchestra of voices among the women. Equally gifted as an artist, there was someone of sterling quality whose name should be greatly honoured.

Just before Christmas Ruth and Christine both went down with Banka fever. Carried to the hospital they lay side by side on the "bali bali" platform. Johanna Grootes-Honig came to visit them every evening, bringing with her little extras in the way of food. But now money was running short and black market prices were rising rapidly. Just like us in Changi they all had desperate need of money in order to buy food to survive.

Somewhere in the camp a Dutch woman with a natural flair for business was running a black market racket with the natives

beyond the wire. Madam Kleines had owned a tailor's shop with her husband before the war and still had valuable contacts among the natives in Sumatra and at Muntok. A pretty Indonesian girl of twenty called Julia Roos worked for Madam Kleines on a commission basis. Julia it was who crawled through the wire after dark to carry on the dangerous part of the business in much the same way as we were making our assignments on the airdrome at Changi. In this way Auntie Priel, as Madam Kleines had come to be known, ran a desperate business under the very noses of the Japs. For every item of clothing and jewellery going out of the camp, greatly needed supplies of food came in. One sarong going out would mean twenty-five eggs coming in; for a gold ring passing over the wire the natives would bring to Julia's meeting place supplies of sugar, vegetables and fish. The Heyho guards were glad to turn a blind eye provided a middle-man commission reached their pockets. It was as simple as that. Only Japanese patrols outside the wire threatened Auntie Priel and her fight to save lives within.

But for all her efforts and despite the nightly courage of Julia Roos, Auntie Priel fought a losing battle. Christmas passed in mourning the dead. By the New Year seventy-seven bodies had been carried out to the cemetery and little Christian Grootes-Honig was one of these. Christine had grown stronger and was able to return to her hut but Ruth lay in the throes of that fever, weak and helpless.

Once the New Year had dawned Johanna Grootes-Honig set about arranging the sale of Ruth's three-banded eternity ring. During the afternoon of the 18th January Aunt Priel sent for Julia Roos to warn her that "a job" had been fixed for that night. On this occasion one of the Heyho guards had been bought. Aunt Priel had shown him the eternity ring in return for which the Heyho promised to bring into camp such things as eggs, coffee, sugar and vegetables as well as money. It was agreed that Julia Roos should meet him at the usual rendezvous at nine o'clock.

That night a Jap patrol passed within a few feet of Julia's meeting place, causing the Heyho guard to take fright. This left Julia alone among the trees nervously awaiting the arrival of a native with the food. In her own words she writes: "I waited alone for many moments but no-one came. Then suddenly I saw a man standing only five yards from me. He had a

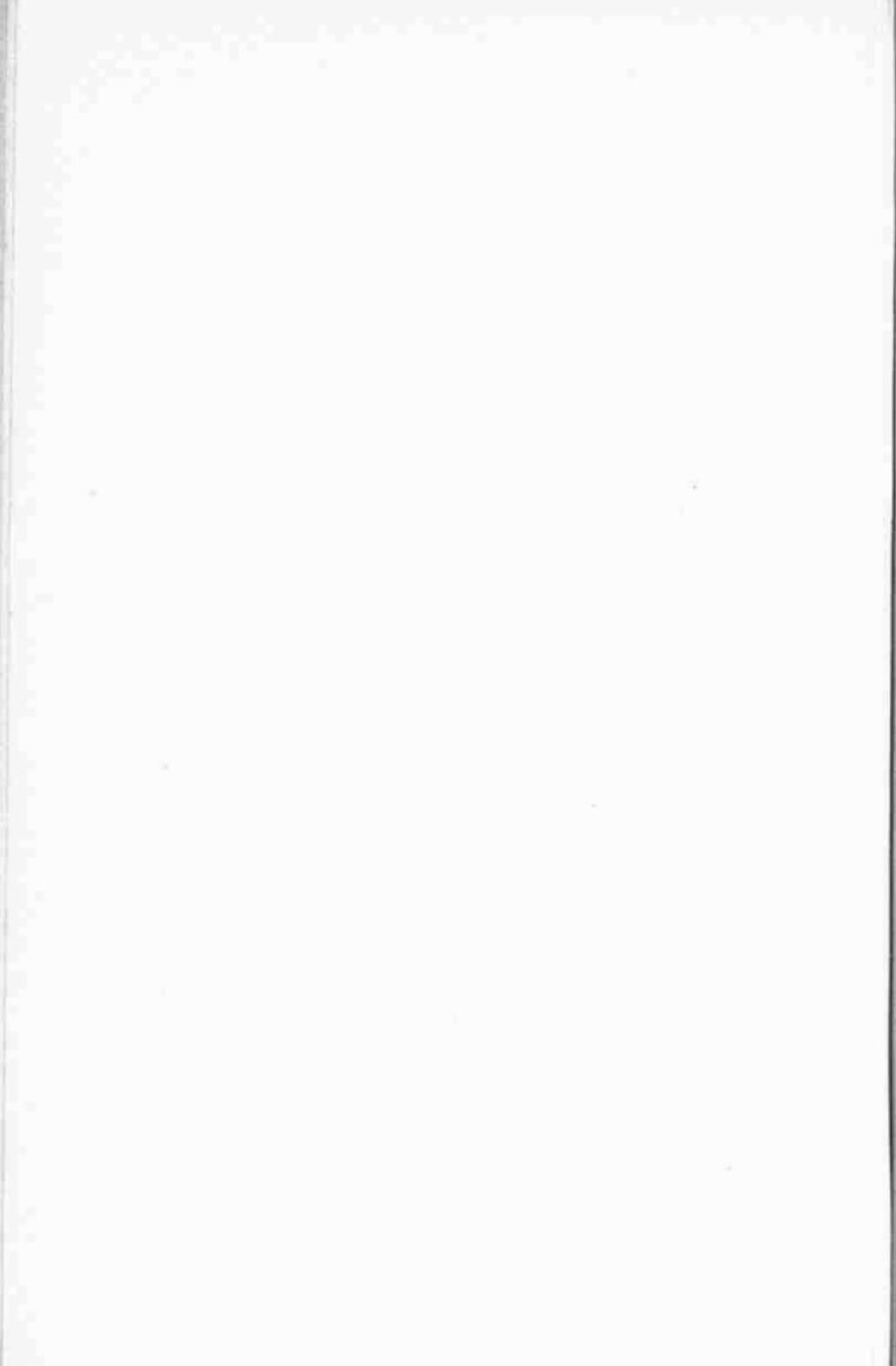


**Close-up of The Supremo and the late Lady Louis Mountbatten with
ex-P.O.W.s in Singapore, September 1945**

(Copyright the Imperial War Museum)



**Julia Roos. "She crawled through
the wire night after night to save
lives within"**



bald head and broad shoulders. I felt there was something wrong. 'Come closer,' he called to me in the local language, and then I felt a hand which had been drenched in oil. I jumped backwards and ran as fast as my legs would carry me with this Jap behind me. I had to climb over a stone wall on which barbed wire had been erected, and in doing so I cut my legs but I was free from the Jap."

The following night Julia tried again, this time taking another Indonesian girl with her. But before they had reached the usual meeting place they saw before them a man. "He spoke to me in the Muntok language," she says, "and told me that he carried a letter for a lady in the camp. 'You can read on the letter the address,' he said, and then disappeared."

Placing the letter in the pocket of her jacket Julia and her companion then sat down to await the arrival of the native who was due to bring the expected foodstuffs. By ten o'clock they were back in camp, and both food and letter were then handed over to Aunt Priel.

Later that night Christine read my letter to Ruth. She simply nodded and smiled, turned over onto her left side and fell into a deep sleep.

The next day they buried her in that cemetery with the wild jungle flowers and marked her grave with a small wooden cross.

Chapter 32

DAYS OF WAITING

BUT in Changi I knew none of these things. By some strange coincidence it was at this very time in January 1945, that I fell a victim to a sickness we called dengue fever. For three days I lay on my bed in Hut G just outside the jail wall wrestling with all the usual symptoms. A rubber planter in the next bed to mine bought me six aspirins from the Australians. I asked him how he got them and he told me he had exchanged a dozen pages of his Bible for them. The latter were much in demand because their thin texture made them suitable for cigarette paper. That planter also bought me three eggs and some sugar, which helped me to recover rapidly.

At night the rats made such a noise that it was difficult to sleep. They scampered all over the rafters in the roof, then descended to the window sills and ran along our bed rails. Like everyone else, I was sleeping inside a mosquito net, so it did not really trouble me in the normal way. But with a fever the effect was terrifying and I used to wake up in a panic, and with sweat pouring off me.

All bad things pass, and on the fourth day I was back working on the vegetable gardens. My job was to dilute urine and pour it over the tapioca plants with a watering can. With my planter friend I also had to dig a 6 foot by 4 foot garden plot in the main roadway between G hut and the jail wall in order to grow spinach. We were loaned pickaxes and spades, and there was always plenty of compost. Food was so scarce at this time that almost every foot of space was transformed into a garden.

Once we had moved into the year 1945, our time as prisoners could be described as the days of waiting. It had gradually become clear that the Allies were going to win the war, and by this time it was just a matter of when. What was far more of a baffling problem to me was how we were going to be released. Life carried on on the edge of a volcano of Japanese unpredictableness. Would we be shipped away before an attack could

be launched? Would the Japs just slaughter everyone out of hand? What would happen when Allied troops landed? These were some of the questions that we revolved endlessly in our brains and discussed interminably with our friends. They were certainly not calculated to produce a compatible frame of mind.

We were told that as soon as Mountbatten's forces landed in Malaya, we would all be sent into the jail — all thirteen thousand of us. We were also told that when fighting began on Singapore Island itself, Tokyo had issued orders that all prisoners were to be bumped off. Some of the English-speaking guards went so far as to tell us that we would be herded into the outer courtyard of the jail and machine gunned from the turrets at both ends. There was very little we could do against such a contingency, but I do know that a lot of us in Hut G harvested our weekly pepper ration very carefully to throw in the eyes of the guards who came to round us up. In the event we were spared from such things by those two atom bombs, and we might just as well have enjoyed our pepper.

They say that necessity is the mother of improvisation. In the last year at Changi we were so short of everything that something drastic had to be done. As a result, every kind of factory sprang into existence, staffed by technicians amongst us with native talent and cunning. In this way a soap and paper factory produced soap from woodash, paper from raw cellulose pulp which in turn was made out of lalang grass, and both milk of magnesia and tooth powder from Heaven knows what. The Rubber Factory depended on motor car tyres for raw material and these had to be stolen from the Japs by working parties in Singapore town. When the thieving season was working smoothly, many of those who were otherwise barefooted suddenly blossomed out in crepe rubber chapplies. A number of medical appliances such as air-cushions, air-beds, syringe bulbs and tubes were successfully repaired. As for the tinsmiths and welders factory, they surpassed themselves in the month of January 1945 by making over a thousand articles which included mugs, mess tins, spoons, watering cans, urine buckets, swill tubs, smoothing planes (for the Tobacco Factory), knitting needles, cobblers' knives (for the cobblers' shop), coconut graters and so on. In addition, this astonishing shop repaired, overhauled and reconditioned canteen scales, axes, parangs, chisels, musical

instruments, wheelbarrows, grass extract machines and gramophones.

In a little factory inside the jail a small body of men were producing artificial dentures from odds and ends. From Portland cement and borehole mud they devised a substitute for plaster of Paris. From latex, sulphur and old ground up dentures they made vulcanite, and from the Selangor Race Club Cup they produced silver amalgam for fillings. Not content with such enterprise, this remarkable body of men used to resurrect seemingly useless and badly smashed spectacles. Hats off to the Dentures-Spectacles Shop !

Nor must we forget those splendid soldiers who set up a nib stamping machine in a quiet corner of the jail, so that nearly every nib in the camp soon came to bear the name of Parker. Nowhere in the world during the latter half of 1944 was a Parker pen more highly prized than among the Japanese and Korean soldiery on Singapore Island. It had for these simple-minded men what has come to be termed "status value." The man with a Parker pen was ten times the guy who hadn't got one. Well, before the end I guess they all had a pen with a nib stamped Parker, and for this they must thank those three British soldiers for their enterprise and their industry. We too should be grateful because a pen with Parker on the nib fetched a very high price, and a high price meant more food.

And in case the illustrious firm of Parker cash in on these aged facts unreservedly, let me quickly add that a Rolex watch had an even greater "status value" and fetched a far higher price. The only trouble was no-one thought of setting up a watch stamping machine with the mystical letters R O L E X.

All of this just goes to show that "War is a purifier. It is also a simplifier; it teaches us to know how little we really require in daily life and how many of the environments with which men and women hamper themselves are superfluous and the fruit of idleness."

Having eulogised such talent among our vast labour force in the camp, let me also introduce two of the most remarkable men in the world of sport, remarkable in any country and in any period. These were Stanley Harris and Wilfred Wooller. The former had won lasting fame in the early twenties as an English as well as South African rugger international, playing on the right wing for both countries. He had won the light heavyweight

amateur boxing championship of South Africa which earned him a place in the South African boxing team at the Olympic Games in Paris in 1924. In the tennis world he had been runner-up in the 1929 Covered Courts singles championship at Queens Club and with Miss Joan Ridley had won the mixed doubles. For five years between 1929 and 1933 Stanley was to be seen playing in the Wimbledon tennis championships. He played for South Africa in the Davis Cup. Wilfred Wooller had been a triple blue at Cambridge, gaining blues for rugger, soccer and cricket. He had played rugger for Wales and cricket for Glamorganshire. Such achievement in either case should have been more than enough for most men in a lifetime of endeavour, but in the case of Stanley Harris he had even been a finalist in the World's Amateur Dancing Championships !

As for Wilfred Wooller, in that last year in Changi he not only proved himself to be the best chess player in the camp, but he also won the Changi Dart Throwing trophy.

Not content with such astonishing success, Stanley has since taken up polo, and until recent years was playing on the Inanda Club ground in Johannesburg and at Cowdrey Park in England. Wilfred Wooller, for his part, has made a further name for himself as captain of the Glamorganshire County cricket side, and is of course now well known as a television and radio commentator at international rugger matches.

I have never ceased to wonder at such all-round ability in gamesmanship on the part of any two men. The only other man I know who comes into the same class of achievement is the great Jimmy Cassels, now a full-blown General and head of the British Army.

Every so often we were reminded of the brutality of which our captors were capable, by the arrival of a corpse or near-corpse from Outram Road jail. Many prisoners had been allowed to rot and die in that prison, and now these odd near-corpses who came out to us in Changi were often too ill to be saved because the Jap guards in charge of them were too idle to arrange earlier transport.

Rations began to decline steadily until in July 1945 the average ration totalled 8 ozs of rice a day and less than half an ounce of fried fish with a few ounces of green vegetables and tapioca root grown in the camp gardens. The Japs continued their policy of underfeeding the sick, and men in hospital

dragged out an existence that would ultimately lead to death. The general decline in weight alarmed our doctors, and even men fit enough to do heavy work looked like walking anatomical models. Red Cross parcels were received from a Mercy Ship, but issued at a scale of one to twenty men twice a week, they merely served to titillate the palate. Important drugs, known to be in the ship and urgently required in the camp, were never received.

American B29 raids raised our morale sky high. When these welcome visitors flew overhead, we would rush out of our huts and cheer. The Japs would then become hysterical, grunting and hissing orders at us to get back into our huts again.

Two splendid R.A.F. men in Hut E, Jeffrey Skinner and Dudley Boyce, were running a wireless set at this time, concealed in a cavity chiselled out of one of their bed supports. This, however, was not the official source of news from the outside world. Only a handful of men in the camp knew of the official wireless set which had been built into the wall of Major Melville Portal's quarter in the coolie lines just below Hut G. A sink had been removed and the brickwork behind it excavated. During daylight hours, the sink was slipped back into place entirely concealing both cavity and set. Major Melville Portal, an officer of the Coldstream Guards, seconded for duty with the Malay Regiment, had been the organising brain behind camp news for nearly three years, and it is doubtful if many realise how much we prisoners owed to him and his two stalwart henchmen, Sergeant Wise of the East Surrey Regiment and Corporal Denny, who operated the set.

In the early days of 1942 the set had been built and operated by Captain Mudie of the Royal Signals. In September of that year Mudie had left in a party for Thailand, and the set had then become the property of Melville Portal, who was a staff officer at Southern Area H.Q. and who was then quartered in a house close to Selerang Square. Portal was allocated two small rooms and in one of these the set was nightly operated by Sergeant Wise and maintained by Corporal Blackman of the Royal Signals. These three rendered a truly wonderful service to the camp. Through them we received extracts from the news bulletins from London, New Delhi and America, we heard the gist of Sir Winston Churchill's speeches, comments by Wickham Steed, and many even received messages which gave them news

of the safe arrival of their families in Australia, South Africa and India.

This service continued under Melville Portal for the best part of two years, surviving various Japanese searches and warnings of execution. As a precaution against surprise searches a deep hole was dug under an attap shelter in the garden. Even then the Kempei Tai were wont to visit the camp with insufficient warning, and there came the day when the set was rushed to that hole and covered only with a sheet of corrugated iron and some sacks. The Kempei Tai arrived on a particularly hot afternoon and because of the heat, the senior officer stood under the attap shelter. While he awaited the result of the search, he idly picked at the sacks with his stick, removing them one by one. Portal and a few others who were in the know could only stand hypnotised waiting for the inevitable. Then, just in time, a Japanese corporal arrived to report that nothing had been found in the house, and the whole party departed as abruptly as they had come.

One can now smile at such things, but at the time it could not have been much fun controlling that set with the knowledge that to be discovered meant torture or execution by the sword. It is therefore of some consolation to know that Melville Portal was awarded the M.B.E. for his services in connection with this very vital and dangerous aspect of P.O.W. life, while Sergeant Wise and Corporal Denny were each mentioned in despatches. That set, incidentally, lives to-day in a topee box in Melville's house in Sussex.

In August the end was at hand. At last we were to emerge into the brave new world of the future. The thought, though exciting, was also frightening, for we wondered how we would be able to meet it after being exiled so long. And of course I thought of Ruth and of our future after all that had passed. Hiroshima had been flattened. The Emperor himself had announced on the radio that the Imperial Japanese Forces were to lay down their arms in unconditional surrender. Nevertheless, the Japs in Changi continued to say nothing, so we had to pretend we knew nothing. How farcical it all was. After a frustrating twenty-four hours the news was officially announced, and there was much rejoicing. In the afternoon I went down to the sea to bathe in a large party, and when we passed the Japanese guard, they turned out in full strength and presented arms. It

came as a great shock, as only the day before we prisoners had had to give "eyes right" to that very guard. Now at last all that awful humiliation was over.

That evening a doctor in the Royal Army Medical Corps and an infantry officer were parachuted onto Changi airfield. Having worked so long on building that airfield, I was tickled that the Allies were not going to risk landing aircraft on it. The two officers came up to the jail and we just looked at them as though they were the latest creations in Madame Tussaud's. They looked absolutely marvellous, well-fed, healthy, clean, bronzed, magnificent. Their uniform was impressive too. So this was what men in the outside world looked like. I wondered how long it would be before we too looked as magnificent.

The next morning a woman came into the camp, the first woman any of us had seen for three and a half years. The rumour quickly spread and many came from under the shower baths in all their nakedness to take a look at this wonderment from another world. I was just too late, and very angry I was at missing her, because I soon discovered she was the administrative head of an E.N.S.A. party and none other than Barbara Ashley, the toast of Poona in 1938.

The next day all Indian Army officers attended a conference in the camp, and it was decided to take over control of each of the Indian P.O.W. camps in Singapore straightaway. We agreed that everyone should find his own way into Singapore and rendez-vous at certain selected places. So I set off with Charles Charlton. We simply walked out of the camp with our total worldly possessions in one small bundle tied up in a blanket. We jumped a lift into Singapore on a Chinese lorry and joined up with the other officers at our selected meeting point, which was less than a mile from the Indian P.O.W. camp we were intending to take over on the following day. The next thing was to find accommodation, and as the Island abounded in large-sized houses of the European type which were all empty, this was not difficult.

Twenty of us took over a spacious, airy house, and I found myself a bed in one of the downstairs rooms which I shared with four other officers. The Chinese brought us the most wonderful looking fish as well as vegetables and fruit. They even offered us a pig. We were careful not to eat too much, since we had heard that there were one or two Australians groaning in

hospital after celebrating too well. But oh ! how good it was to eat at all !

Every morning we spent in the nearby Indian P.O.W. Camp. I shall always remember that first reunion with our Indian soldiers. I was with John Parkin and Baja Brown when we walked into their camp in company with two military representatives of a newly-arrived organisation known as RAPWI (Rehabilitation of Allied Prisoners of War). There must have been several thousand Indian troops in that camp, but news travels fast among such a community and it was not long before groups of men of the 5/11 Sikhs came running towards us. They came, Sikhs and Punjabi Mussulmans, hideously thin and unkempt, but with smiling faces and with an enthusiasm which was the greatest tonic we had known for years. And what a happy moment it was when we found some of those wounded men we had left behind in that Kampong in the Tebrau Estate towards the end of our time behind the Japs. In some miraculous way they had survived their wounds and come safely through their ordeal, those two brave little P.M.'s among them. I remember what a particularly touching reunion it was for John Parkin, who loved his regiment more than anything else in the world. It was good to see how much it meant to him, good too to see the spontaneous delight on the faces of the men when they first saw him. It gave one a feeling of enormous pride to witness this display of respect and affection which those Indian soldiers gave so readily to their British officers. Such a thing can only be fully understood by those who have served with Indian soldiers over a number of years. It made me realise that here was one of the most wonderful human relationships in the whole world. It also made me feel proud to have served with these men during my limited regimental service in the Indian Army. Life is made up of experiences: in my own case this has been one of the richest.

And the more I come to think of it the more convinced I become that the best type of British Officer of the pre-partition Indian Army, in other words, many of those who rose to command their regiments, must surely have been the best *regimental* officers of any army in the world. Apart from all the personal qualities of character and leadership they had to have, their men demanded from them not only the highest standard of

military excellence but also the most selfless dedication to everything connected with their lives. And they got it.

Chapter 33

MEN TO REMEMBER

MUCH has been heard of the part played by the "Indian National Army" after the fall of Singapore. Little has been heard of the suffering and bravery of those thousands of Indian soldiers who remained loyal, and because of their loyalty were subjected to every form of cruelty and humiliation by some of their compatriots who had become Japanese dupes.

The Japs were always clever with their propaganda. On the 17th February, 1942, it was officially announced that an "Indian National Army" had been formed to liberate India with the help of the Japanese. On this day too all Indian units were separated from their British officers and concentrated at Farrar Park, Singapore. There they were handed over to a notoriously pro-Japanese Indian Officer and his unscrupulous gang of mutineers. They were immediately subjected to Indian independence propaganda. At the end of March 1942 Rash Behari Bose, a man of about sixty, who had been exiled from India in 1912 for throwing a bomb at the Viceroy (Lord Hardinge) and had since been living in Japan, called a meeting at Bangkok which was attended by the military leaders of the mutineers. At this meeting Rash Behari Bose was elected President of the Council of Action of the Indian Independence League, Greater East Asia, and the pro-Japanese Indian Officer was officially nominated G.O.C. of the armed forces.

On the 7th April the formation of the "Indian National Army" began. From this date until the end of the year compulsion was applied to join the I.N.A. Everything was done to undermine the morale and discipline of our Indian soldiers. Resistance on the latter's part was ruthlessly dealt with by third degree treatment. Twelve Indian soldiers died under torture, while scores were incapacitated for life. It is not my intention to sicken the reader with the complete story of the atrocities committed in this period.

The middle of December 1942 saw the end of the first "Indian National Army." It is possible that some of the leaders of that

organisation had begun to realise that Japan and Germany would in the end lose the war. They, therefore, decided to throw in their lot with the loyalists. On the other hand the G.O.C. of the I.N.A. had quarrelled with Rash Behari Bose, President of the Council of Action. The thieves had begun to fall out! The G.O.C. had complained firstly that Japan had refused to accord the Indian Independence League the dignity of proper recognition; secondly, that members of the I.N.A. had suffered indignities and ill-treatment at the hands of Japanese soldiers; and thirdly that Japan intended to employ the I.N.A. in the field to fight her own battles in places such as New Guinea which had no connection with the liberation of India for which sole purpose he contended the I.N.A. could be legitimately employed. He ended by stating that for all these reasons he had lost confidence in the Japanese Government's good faith and had formed the opinion that far from helping India to achieve independence they merely intended to replace British domination by Japanese domination.

One has to admit that the G.O.C., however misguided and however great a traitor from our point of view, displayed high courage in making this statement, for he can have been under no delusion concerning his own fate at the hands of the Japs for such temerity.

It is of interest to record here that with regard to this last and most serious charge the Japs replied that it was unfounded and ridiculous in view of the many public statements made by Japan concerning her sympathy with India, and her determination to help India to throw off the British yoke and join the Greater East-Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. In spite of this, and in spite of the G.O.C.'s "recalcitrant and ungrateful attitude," the Japs declared they were prepared to ask the Premier, General Tojo, to make yet another statement of Japan's good intentions towards India. They closed by saying that the G.O.C.'s attitude had left them no alternative but to order his arrest, but in view of his past services and of his genuine patriotic motives towards his Motherland they were prepared to release him provided he gave an undertaking to do or say nothing detrimental to the Japanese war effort and to refrain from any interference with the Indian Independence League as directed by its Council of Action.

After the fall of the G.O.C., and his replacement by a



Sikh prisoners are seen seated blindfolded with target marks hanging over their hearts

(Copyright the Imperial War Museum)



The final act of brutality. A Japanese soldier can be seen bayoneting one of the victims. There is a saying "never judge a man harshly unless you yourself have been through his experiences." Few people know what our Indian prisoners had to endure during those three and a half years of captivity.

(Copyright Imperial War Museum)



Mahratta Officer, the Japs made it clear that they intended there should always be an "Indian National Army." Members of the latter were told that unless they joined the new I.N.A. they would be turned into a labour corps and sent to far-off theatres of war in New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. This served as a definite threat and a large number once again threw in their lot with the Japs by joining the new I.N.A., although it is only fair to add that a minority did oppose the Japs on this score and were accordingly sent overseas, many of them to die there.

About the middle of 1943 the Indian political leader, Subhas Chandra Bose, arrived on the scene to give the whole movement a tremendous impetus. One time President of the Indian National Congress and an extreme left-winger connected with the terrorist movement in Bengal, Bose had escaped from Police surveillance in Calcutta in 1940 and somehow or other reached Germany. He then turned up in Japan unexpectedly in the spring of 1943. Having taken over the reins in Singapore, he immediately infused new life into the I.N.A. The latter became a serious force as opposed to a political gesture. Bose carried out drastic measures, setting up training schools and making both officers and men do manual work for at least five hours a day. This came as a great shock to some of the I.N.A., whose one aim in joining that army was to have comfort and ease. There being now no choice for those who had already committed themselves, the I.N.A. carried on, in some cases willingly, in others unwillingly, until the end of the war. Sometime in 1944 the I.N.A. moved to Burma and subsequently participated in the "Chalo Delhi" operation, in which the majority threw away their arms and ran towards the British forces opposing them. That, in brief, is the background.

It is an ugly story in an ugly world, but fortunately it is a story which has another side, a story of such loyalty, stoicism and courage that is scarcely credible.

Who has heard of the true story of Subedar Dalbahadur Thapa of the 2/2nd K.E.O. Gurkha Rifles? The leaders of the I.N.A. had reported this officer to the Japanese as being the chief obstructionist to their recruiting campaign. Pulled in by the Japanese commander, he was warned to mend his ways on pain of losing his head. Refusing to collaborate, he was made to kneel down while the Japanese officer drew his sword and raised it

above his head. Dalbahadur was given another chance to change his attitude but still refused and told the Jap to get on with it. Here was a soldier of the British Commonwealth of Nations who was prepared to sacrifice his life rather than his loyalty. At the last minute, intervention by a less-inhuman Japanese officer saved Dalbahadur's life, and he suffered instead a severe beating-up. In this we have the twentieth-century example of a man who was prepared to be "faithful even unto death."

Subedar Major Hari Sing Bohra of the same regiment showed courage of an equally high order in defying both the leaders of the I.N.A. and the Japs. This great and glorious warrior died as a result of the various forms of ill-treatment he suffered as a prisoner, and when he died he was blind and out of his mind. That was the price they made him pay for a quality of loyalty and courage which is beyond belief.

After the war this gallant Gurkha officer was posthumously awarded the Indian Order of Merit. It is perhaps of interest that his grandfather, his father and an elder brother had all been Subedar Majors of the same regiment. Such a notable record of achievement in his family undoubtedly contributed to the steadfastness he showed — even unto death. No doubt discipline and *esprit-de-corps* also played their part, but in the final analysis it is certain that, in the case of Dalbahadur Thapa as well as of Hari Sing Bohra, their steadfastness sprang from their own innate sense of right and wrong — and from their character.

Only a very small number of Gurkha soldiers out of three thousand joined the I.N.A. It was once suggested that these few had besmirched the good name of the Gurkhas. Let it be recorded that the behaviour of the remainder glorified that great name over and over again. And just how magnificent the Gurkhas were in adversity this true story will show.

While we were prisoners of war, hungry for food and nicotine, a fatigue party of mixed British and Australian officers and men were marching past Raffles Hotel when Japanese officers standing on the pavement threw cigarettes to them. They unfortunately broke ranks and picked them up, which was just what the Japs wanted to see. Five minutes later the same thing happened to a Gurkha fatigue party, but with this difference. The Gurkhas marched proudly on with their heads in the air and with their heels they ground those cigarettes into the dust.

They showed us up, didn't they? And why? Because they showed much more character.

There is a saying: "Fame is a vapour, popularity an accident, riches take wings, only one thing endures — character."

And anyone who knows what it is to be really hungry over a long period of time, and to be absolutely craving for a cigarette, will realise just how much character those great little men showed in doing what they did on that occasion.

It should be recorded here that one Regiment, the 2/10th Baluch Regiment, remained loyal to a man. It is a pity no suitable reward appears to exist for conduct such as theirs—and such as the Gurkhas'.

Harbakhsh Singh, our Adjutant at Kuantan, joined up with his brother, Gurbakh Singh, commanding the Jind Infantry, and it was through the latter's inspiring leadership that not one single man of that unit, not even a "follower," joined the "Indian National Army." With Harbakhsh went Prithipal Singh, so did our gallant old Subedar Major as well as his son, Jemadar Harwant Singh, together with a formidable body of men of the 5/11 Sikhs. This little army remained together throughout the period of imprisonment under the Japanese, and for his remarkable conduct and leadership, Gurbakh Singh was awarded the O.B.E.

As for "Drag" Dhargalkar and Hari Badhwar of the 3rd Cavalry, no words of mine can speak adequately of the quality of leadership and loyalty which these two Indian officers displayed under constant provocation all the way through. So anxious were the Japs to break their spirit, and with it their loyalty, that they put them in one of the infamous Bangkok cages, and kept them there for eighty days. The cage in which they were imprisoned measured 7 feet high, 5 feet 5 inches long and 5 feet 5 inches broad. Nor was this all. The cage had been constructed underground. So "Drag" and Hari never saw the light of day for eighty-eight days; they lived continuously under the light of a 100 candle power bulb. A bucket in the corner answered the calls of nature. Three times a day they were given two ounces of rice. Their Japanese sentries, having been given orders to degrade and humiliate them, spat on them through the bars. When they were released as mere skeletons, "Drag" was sent to Kranji Hospital in Singapore with a paralysed leg, and both were weak with beri beri and dysentery. But

never once did they waver in their loyalty. Their spirit remained unconquerable, not only under that infamous treatment but also in other concentration and segregation camps later on.

As senior officer in all the Indian prison camps it was "Drag" Dhargalkar who led the loyalist movement throughout those three and a half years, and it was Hari Badhwar who acted as his right hand man. There cannot be many officers of the pre-war Indian Cavalry who will not remember these two with respect, admiration and affection. It is more doubtful if they all know what heroes they were. Hari was always well-groomed — dapper, gay and colourful. With a famous moustache he was an institution in himself. It is just another stark fact in a long tale of tragedy that Hari should have died of cancer three years ago while commanding an Area in Bombay as a Major-General; and in facing that affliction he showed the same cool courage with which he had defied the Japs. "Drag" went on to become a Lieut-General at Army Headquarters in Delhi. A brilliant horseman (3 handicap at Polo), reserve for the Indian Test cricket team of 1936, and first-class tennis player, he is now fast attaining a single figure at golf. Today he lives in Putney. Those who meet him in the Roehampton Club most evenings find an attractive personality, friendly, modest and with tremendous charm. I doubt if any of them know his story. But Dhargalkar is a name to conjure with, and "Drag" himself a man to remember.

I wonder if the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst know that Gentleman Cadet Dhargalkar passed through that magnificent military establishment thirty-five years ago? There can be few finer advertisements.

Perhaps I may be forgiven at this point for adding weight to my own argument in this chapter by quoting here words from Lord Russell of Liverpool in his book *The Knights of Bushido*. This is what he writes:

"Every kind of pressure, both moral and physical, was put upon these unfortunate Indian soldiers, and they were sent to concentration camps where they were beaten, tortured and even beheaded for refusing to join the renegade army. Many died of their ill-treatment. Deprived of the moral support of their British Officers, in whom they placed such trust, they doubtless felt their position very keenly, and it is to their undying credit that so many of them resisted all the efforts of the Japanese to sway them from allegiance to their King-Emperor."

And a little later in the same book this paragraph tells its own story: "There were not surprisingly a few cases of food pilfering for which the punishment was usually a severe beating. From March 1945 a more serious view was taken of these misdemeanours and several prisoners of war were beheaded for petty theft."

Separation from their British officers in whom they had always placed such trust had a moral significance which can never be accurately measured. Just how tragic their plight often became may be gauged by a letter which our underground contacts somehow managed to smuggle into camp in October 1942. The letter had been addressed in pencil to my friend, Derek Robertson, as the C.O. of the 2/2 Gurkha Rifles, but the writer, no doubt fearful of the dire consequences of being found out, had omitted his signature. Obviously a fairly senior individual of Derek's regiment, he wrote:

"Subedar Major Hari Sing Bohra was taken away to a concentration camp in August, other Gurkha officers were taken away in September . . ." He ended on this pathetic note: ". . . and now they are starting on the N.C.O's — what are we to do Sahib?" What indeed?

What could any of us do? The writing of notes of encouragement, which had to be conveyed to the Indian prison camps by a hazardous chain of circumstances must have brought small comfort under such conditions. Yet it speaks volumes for that human relationship between officers and men, that \$150 should have been subscribed by all the British officers of the 2/2 Gurkhas from their very meagre resources, and smuggled — thanks to Major "Uncle" Evans — to the men of that regiment at the other end of the Island. Another triumph for the human spirit, to which even the Kempei Tai could find no answer.

The truth is that our Indian soldiers had a double burden to bear. In addition to years of brutal treatment, semi-starvation and disease from which all prisoners of the Japanese suffered, they had to contend with prolonged attacks on their loyalty by persecution and persistent insidious propaganda. When continued unchallenged for years on end this must have had a telling effect, for how could they fail to feel that perhaps after all the British Raj was finished? Even for the unconvinced but faint-hearted it must have been a temptation to salve the conscience with the excuse of duress. Were they not entitled to ask

how would their British and Australian comrades have reacted had they been submitted to a similar test? How indeed? Would we not have found a formula to salve the conscience with the excuse of duress, as we did on Selerang Square in Chapter 26? I wonder.

But those thousands of loyal Indian soldiers stood firm. For some reason their story has never been fully told; either in this country or in India. Many moving stories of stubborn refusal to sacrifice their honour have since come to light, but none of these have hit the headlines. So due credit has never been given to these men who, after surviving a bitter and arduous campaign, had to endure years of physical and mental persecution. Their loyalty to their salt under such conditions is something for which no praise can be too high. In the past a battle honour has been won for a feat of arms lasting one or two days. This was a battle which lasted not just for weeks or even months, but for three and a half years. It went on relentlessly with never a break, the loneliest battle of all.

Chapter 34

THE JAPANESE SURRENDER

THEN came the morning when the camp was visited and inspected by the Supremo himself, Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten. We were all formed up on parade, several thousand Indians and at least a hundred British officers. When the great man arrived the parade was called to attention and at once he started to walk down the front line of officers. I was fifth from the right and when he came to me he asked me where my home was. I was astonished to find that I was incapable of answering because my mind was a complete blank. It was absolutely infuriating, because while I could imagine the great man saying to himself "this poor chap is nuts, a typical case of lack of vitamins," I was in fact quite certain in my own mind that I was one of the comparatively few who were very nearly sane and normal. All I could remember was the fact that my mother's home had been in the centre of the country over which the Old Berkeley used to hunt. After what must have been an interminable time to the patient Supremo, I managed to blurt out "Hertfordshire, sir," and then the village came to me, "At Sarratt" I added. He told me that he had motored through that county only a month previously and that the countryside was looking wonderful. Then a staff officer who had previously been briefed, intervened to tell him that I was a prisoner with a special problem. I told the Supremo that my wife was in a prison camp in Sumatra and that I would like to go over and meet up with her there. Could it be arranged? He listened gravely and then in a warm sympathetic way asked his wife to step up and take over my problem. Lady Louis was following him closely down the line, looking resplendent in the uniform of The St John Ambulance Brigade and wearing a civic crown over crossed stretchers as her badge of rank. As a result of a brief conversation with Lady Louis I was thrilled to be informed that arrangements would be made for me to fly to Sumatra as soon as possible.

When the parade had been dismissed, I thought hard about

that question the Supremo had asked me, and I realised then that three and a half years' starvation had done something quite frightening to my mental make-up. So I took myself away to think things over and after a time fragments of those early days of my life in Hertfordshire came piercing through. I could picture the little village of Sarratt with its long rambling village green, and at the far northern end of the green I could picture by grandmother's home "Little Sarratt Hall" where my mother was born, and where, at a young age, I used to be taken with my sister and brother to have tea with "Granny" on occasional Sundays as a special treat. I could also remember my portly uncle, Robert Webber, who had been Master of the Old Berkeley for twenty-seven years. In fact it had been his great-great-grandfather who had hunted the hounds of the 2nd Duke of Richmond and Gordon whilst living with the latter at Goodwood four generations earlier. The thought of that village green at Sarratt induced a longing to return once again to the glory of the English countryside.

The very next day I received a message to the effect that I should stand by to fly to Sumatra at short notice.

Meanwhile all my friends began to leave by ship for India, to go to a large convalescent camp in the Old Viceroy's House in Calcutta. This left only three of us remaining in that spacious house.

Then a telephone call informed me that my proposed flight to Sumatra was off. Lady Louis herself had gone over to Palembang and would be arranging the flight to Singapore of all those women and children who were in prison camps in Sumatra. I must be patient a little longer. Nearly three weeks had passed since we had walked out of Changi.

On the 12th September I went off on my own to witness the dramatic spectacle of the Japanese surrender. British and Indian soldiers and sailors paraded in line on the famous Padang outside the Municipal Building. They looked simply magnificent, smart and tough, and alight with an aura of pride after driving the Japs out of Burma. Lord Louis Mountbatten, in white tropical naval uniform, with six or seven rows of medals, looked resplendent as he inspected the troops, while Lady Louis watched with other dignitaries from the steps of the building.

I stood in the vast crowd on the sideline surrounded by Chinese and Malays, many of whom had just come out of prison

camps. With them I watched those shoddy looking Japanese generals being marched up the steps of the building without their swords, between a double row of British and Indian guards. It was a brief and moving ceremony of victory. I watched the expressions of relief and joy on the faces of all those around me, and felt myself choked with emotion. What a contrast they were to those looks of incredulity and dismay I had seen as they had watched us, after our surrender, marching off to Changi, leaving them to the mercy of the Japanese invader. Now, after all the suffering they had endured in the intervening years, this must have been a moment they would never forget.

Two days later a message reached me telling me to go to Alexandra Hospital where the women prisoners from Sumatra and Java were due to arrive at any minute. Managing to hop a lift, I was standing in the hall of that hospital when those poor women walked up the main entrance steps. I shall never forget that spectacle. How ill and weary they looked, how unkempt, how thin. I felt a lump come into my throat, and for the very first time a little stab of pain, of dread of what might be. Then I saw Christine Cleveley and she saw me. She was overcome and found it difficult to say anything. She squeezed my hand and whispered in my ear, "I'm so sorry, Denis." It was just like that.

I simply turned and walked down the steps into the fresh air. I said not a word to Christine but just kept on walking. I walked and walked all the way back to that house. Then, relieved to find no-one in the house, I lay on my bed and allowed my feelings to take control.

Chapter 35

RETURN TO LYNETTE

THE next morning I knew I had to go back to the hospital and talk to Christine. I sat on the edge of her bed while she told me her story. Her voice was subdued and at times it faded to a whisper, but she spoke clearly enough. She told me how, in the first two years of captivity, Ruth had shown the same fanatical zeal for exercise and physical fitness as she had in the years before the war. "She used to walk alone round and round the camp perimeter every evening," Christine said, "We tried hard to talk her out of it but she was very stubborn. She used to say it made her feel well."

"I know exactly what you mean," I answered, and I meant it because I had had seven years' experience of this fetish of Ruth's.

"That exertion," Christine went on, "combined with the starvation diet, had been too much for her. She became terribly thin and frail, and though she gave up such exercise long before the move back to Muntok, the harm had been done." Christine paused and I could see how moved she was by the telling of such things. But she went on—"Like so many of us she fell to that dreaded Banka fever, and that finished her. She was very happy to get your letter. I remember her smiling over it. After I left her I understand she turned over onto her left side and her heart suddenly ceased to beat. It was just like that."

Before I left the hospital I also paid a visit to Vivian Bullwinkel and she too told me her terrible story. It was all so harrowing that I was glad to leave the hospital for the last time.

When I reached my house I found an immaculately groomed girl in uniform with a letter in her hand. She had come from Lady Louis Mountbatten's headquarters in a staff car. I invited her to come and sit down while I read the letter she had brought me. It was a letter from Lady Louis herself, a letter which she had taken the trouble to write in her own handwriting, a letter which came straight from the heart. I felt immensely grateful

and rather overcome, and I wrote a little letter in reply. Then I talked for a while with that smart secretary and I learnt what a wonderful job Lady Louis was doing for all internees throughout the Far East, and how selfless and tireless she was in her efforts to alleviate distress, to re-unite families and many other things besides. Though she was working eighteen hours a day and scarcely gave herself time to eat a proper meal, she had somehow found time to write that letter to me who was just one of many thousands of former prisoners of war. I have thought since that such a thing is the hallmark of greatness — but then Lady Louis *was* great.

There was now only one thing for me to do and that was to get home to England to my daughter, to my family and to Ruth's family, as quickly as I could. The last ship had left for India and my best hope seemed to be by air. I was now nobody's baby so I simply took myself down to Kallang Airport hoping to hop a lift at least to Calcutta. I was dressed in a recently issued suit of jungle green uniform with a haversack slung across my shoulder. My only possessions were in that haversack, a flannel, a toothbrush, a razor, shaving soap and three handkerchiefs. In my pocket thirty shillings.

At the airport I found a group of American Air Force officers who were about to fly a Skymaster to America via Calcutta and the Azores. After five minutes tactful small talk I got their permission to go aboard. The aircraft had been fitted out for the transportation of vehicles and stores, but was now about to convey a party of forty men, women and children from internment camps in Java. We sat on hard benches which ran the whole length of the aircraft on either side. The only view I had throughout that flight to Calcutta was of a line of ill-looking refugees on the opposite bench.

We left during the late afternoon and something serious must have happened, because instead of making for Calcutta we turned right-handed and landed at Saigon in French Indo-China. Here in the darkness we waited a whole hour before being driven in open lorries, again like cattle, to the centre of the town some ten miles away. I noticed several Japs armed with rifle and bayonet on sentry duty, and in the town itself American soldiers walked in the streets with a Sten gun on one arm and a girl on the other. Apparently a revolution was taking place, many Frenchmen had had their throats cut; the peace

was being kept by Americans and Japs. It was like a Gilbert and Sullivan opera, but I was in no mood for such a bizarre situation and prayed that, after surviving the past years in Changi, I might be spared any more nonsense such as this before reaching home.

We were dumped in the hospital, and after another long wait, a large plate of raw looking meat was produced, together with a plate of bread. I was then led by the French matron to a ward on the first floor where I was to sleep the night with two friendly Frenchmen, one white, one coloured. They seemed pleased to welcome me and they both took the trouble to untuck their mosquito nets in order to shake me by the hand. I could not help noticing a terrible gash at the back of the neck of the white Frenchman. Soon I learnt that the Japs had beheaded him during the short-lived fighting in French Indo-China in 1941, and had left him as dead somewhere near the coastline. Later he had been found by local natives, taken to hospital and operated on. What actually happened was that the blow from the Japanese sword had not severed the neck muscles at all, but had fallen one inch too low, cutting into the flesh between the shoulder blades. He told me all this in French, not without a great deal of pride. He told me too that he was a Lieut-Colonel at the time of his execution. There was something rather appealing about this elderly Frenchman. His coloured companion too I found to be both talkative and friendly. They were still talking when I dropped off to sleep between clean sheets for the first time since the 2nd February 1942.

By evening the next day we landed on an airfield ten miles outside Calcutta. It was dark and deserted but I found an Indian soldier in an army lorry and persuaded him to drive me into Calcutta. There I telephoned Government House and asked to speak to the Governor. The latter was at that time none other than Mr R. G. Casey who had been so kind to Ruth on her flight out to Singapore in December 1939. Unhappily for me, he was away in England but his secretary listened sympathetically to my story, and through the latter's good offices I was soon on an aircraft for England. In the meantime, I stayed two days in a magnificent convalescent camp in the Old Viceroy's House, which enabled me to procure a suit of battle dress and other items of clothing against the colder climate in Europe. I also drew £10 from the camp cashier.

I left in a Viking. We stopped a night each at Karachi, Cairo and Malta, finally touching down one afternoon at the end of September at Hurn, near Bournemouth.

By lunch time the following day I was standing on Victoria Station wondering what to do next. Not one of my family knew I was in England, and for my part I had no idea where any of them were living. So I looked in the telephone directory and discovered that Kay, my step-mother, was living in a flat in Kensington Court. A taxi took me to the door and I rang the bell. No one answered, so I went down to the basement and persuaded the caretaker to let me in. An hour later in came Kay. That evening my sister Rosemary joined us at the Berkeley where we ate a very much rationed dinner in company with a vast assortment of uniforms. This was my first taste of family companionship for so long; how good it was to be with both of them again. They looked just the same as when I had last seen them eight years ago. I remember feeling very proud to be with them.

The next day I caught a train down to Wiltshire where Lynette was then staying with Muriel and Leonard Middleton. We were introduced to one another in the drawing room of Paddock Wood in the little village of East Knoyle.

I bent down to kiss her cheek and then, still crouching, I looked at her intently half consciously searching for a likeness to Ruth. She was four and three quarters, healthy looking and sturdy, her eyes were brown and she was a little bit shy.

The last three and a half years had been a challenge, but then I realised that here now in front of me a greater challenge had suddenly appeared. It was a challenge of the future, her future.

And as though she saw the look of uncertainty in my face, she took me firmly by the hand and led me into the garden. We walked together across the lawn and into the little wood beyond.

EPILOGUE

ANOTHER SIDE TO THE SINGAPORE STORY

"A SENSE of shock and shame has persisted through seventeen years." This is what Kenneth Attiwill writes in his book *The Singapore Story*, which was published in 1959. It refers of course to our defeat in Malaya which ended in the fall of Singapore in World War II.

Those of us who lived through every phase of that great disaster, from the first day to the last, have been conscious of the significance of those words. They linger with us today.

We had three and a half years as prisoners of war in which to ponder on that defeat. At the end of it all, in August 1945, we felt we could view the whole campaign in better perspective. We could see that we had been a sacrifice, a necessary sacrifice because of Britain's weakness at that time on every front. All that had really been expected of us was to fight a delaying action and this we had done, occupying two and a half months of valuable Japanese time. World opinion has proclaimed that we should have done better. As one of the little men, as a mere company commander in that campaign, my answer is that we would have done better had we not been starved of aeroplanes, of naval support, of armour, and of adequate reinforcements.

The surrender of Singapore, like Dunkirk, was a military disaster, but unlike Dunkirk, there was no home-coming to fight again for those who took part. Dunkirk was a marvel of improvisation in getting the troops away, and as a result has been made to read like a victory rather than a defeat, a victory of survival. But what would have happened at Dunkirk if the British Navy and the little ships, and some air cover, had not been available? The result would have been exactly the same as at Singapore. As it is, associated with the disaster of Singapore there has grown up in the public mind a stigma of disgrace and ignominy.

There are many who fought and died as gallantly in the Malaya campaign as any of their fellow-men in any other theatre of war. Such men deserve better than to be associated with this

stigma, which is likewise a gross injustice to the women in Malaya who also died fighting.

That mistakes were made there is no doubt. It is likely that our command structure was too complicated. It is also true that ugly scenes took place in the back areas during the last days. One has to admit too the demoralisation of some Indian troops in the early days when their youth and inexperience were all too sadly apparent. All these things, and many others too, have been highlighted in the various books which have been written since the fall of Singapore, for defeat inevitably brings wholesale recrimination.

But there is another side to this story.

Let's begin with one or two misconceptions. Great publicity has been given to the exaggerated quantity of alcohol which English people in Malaya were supposed to drink. I used to be reminded of those "whisky-swilling planters" who were supposed to be sodden with "high balls" and "pot-bellied" from too many Sunday lunches of MaMee and Malayan curry. It has been assumed that English women who lived in Malaya were anaesthetised by the sun, and softened by servants and afternoon siestas. Such ideas have become clichés which have been lapped up even by sensible thinking people, and duly passed on. What is the truth?

Ruth and I spent nearly two and a half years in Malaya and it is true to say that we had nearly as many friends among the English civilians of Malaya as we had among the Services. My own experience was that everyone in Malaya drank more than they would have drunk in England, but no more than people used to drink in India. People who live in a country where the temperature is nearer 90° than 70° nearly every day in the year, need to drink. What is apt to be forgotten is the fact that in Malaya a great number of the men were actively working on rubber estates as well as in other outdoor employment, which gave them both exercise and fresh air to blow away the alcoholic fumes. From my own experience, outdoor exercise in one form or another was quite a fetish of a large section of the English people in Singapore. Lieut-General Percival in his book *The War in Malaya* states: "The fact remains that there were very few 'drunks' in Malaya." Certainly I never met one myself.

When I was up country somewhere near Labu during the retreat down the peninsula, the men of a Local Defence Corps

unit rescued me from hunger, dampness and weariness. They took me into a large school building, gave me a hot dinner and plenty to drink. Who were these hospitable men? They were Malayan rubber planters who had either lost everything they ever possessed or were about to lose it. One man who was well over sixty told me that he had been worth something in the region of 1½ million dollars and now at that very moment his total worldly assets amounted to less than \$10. His rubber factory was at that time burning fiercely before the Japs should arrive to take it over. I had seen the blaze on my way into Labu that morning, a dense mass of black smoke gushing forth from the distant tree-tops and staining the sky with its voluminous vapour. Yet here he was commanding his little private army of planters, anxious to do anything they could to help the weary regular forces. They were all dressed in uniform, armed with rifles and sub-machine guns, living rough, patrolling the countryside and carrying out sentry duties. It was both impressive and touching to see, impressive because they were so alive and alert and doing a fine job, touching because of the sadness of their plight.

Before I left them, that grand old man who looked so young, insisted on giving me a bottle of John Haig. If this is what public opinion terms "whisky swilling" then I raise my hat sky high to all the planters of Malaya.

In the last eight months of life in Changi I found myself living in a hut outside the jail with a number of rubber planters. I think the most telling thing I can add is to say that, in my experience, their behaviour as prisoners was an object lesson to many of us. One of them slept in the next bed to me. This man had lost everything, and in 1944 he was so unhappy about other private matters that he had cut his throat with a razor blade from ear to ear. We found him in time and a doctor stitched him up; he recovered completely. He and I were bridge partners for those last eight months, playing most nights sitting on the edge of our bug-infested beds. When I got ill with dengue fever in the middle of January of 1945, it was this planter who sold his signet ring in order to buy aspirin tablets, eggs and other things over the wire to get me well again.

I often wonder how many people realise the extent of the loss in money, sentiment and livelihood that those Malaysians suffered when the Japs stormed through their country. Perhaps Mrs. Gwendolen Evans' letter to the Editor of the *Daily Telegraph*,



This photograph (taken after the war) shows four of the Chinese ringleaders who survived Japanese treatment concerned with the story of Sergeant Bennett. On the right is Field Marshal Sir Gerald Templer and on the left Colonel A. O. Robinson who brought the story to light.

written in May 1942, may now invite a more sympathetic hearing in the world at large. Here it is:—

COPY

27th May, 1942

To the Editor of the *Daily Telegraph*.

Sir.—I was evacuated from Singapore on January 31. I had two homes in Malaya, one at the estate upon which my husband worked, and one up at the Cameron Highlands, where we hoped to retire.

I have lost both of these, with all my possessions collected during the course of 28 years, and worse still, my husband is probably interned in Singapore. I have endeavoured to bear this with fortitude and without much complaint because I realised that my country was up against issues so great that it might well have been impossible for her Government to send to Malaya the equipment which could have saved this rich and valuable country.

Now, on my return to England, I find that not only is little or no acknowledgment made of the bravery of the civilians who worked so hard and stayed to face such terrible odds, but rather that there are certain people who blame them for the fall of Malaya.

That such statements should be allowed to be made about these men who voluntarily gave their time and energy to their country in its hour of need without any responsible person attempting to deny them, seems to be nothing short of disgraceful.

Yours etc.,

GWENDOLEN EVANS.

Herne Bay.

That Malaysians should have been blamed in 1942 for the fall of Malaya is a travesty of justice which personally I find quite sickening.

Once again, what are the facts?

While the men rushed to serve with the Volunteer Forces of Malaya, in which their knowledge of the country and the language were invaluable and in which they did a magnificent job, the women also served. Some, like Mrs Elder, Christine Cleveley, Judy Cooke and Ruth herself manned first-aid posts

with the Malayan Medical Auxiliary Service, or like Mrs Clyne, took on nursing duties in the hospitals. Many of the men were required to remain at their jobs, but even these took on war duties in their spare hours. Brian Harrison was not only lecturing at Raffles College, he was also broadcasting for the Ministry of Information and serving with the Singapore Royal Artillery (Volunteer) Force. Stean Sehested took on Mine Watching and Civil Defence, others worked overtime and often under a hail of bombs in the docks dealing with the evacuation of women and children. Some intimate histories of individual Malaysians during the last days of Singapore make interesting reading in Kenneth Attiwill's *The Singapore Story*, and they are not without their glory. I could write of many others, but the case of Cyp Markham will do for me.

Cyp was a very likeable Englishman in his early thirties who had spent ten years in the Educational Department in Malaya. When I first came to Singapore, he and his pretty wife, Bidy, were very good to me, and later on when Ruth came out to join me, we had many gay parties with this popular couple. Cyp was an exceptionally good pilot in the Malayan Auxiliary Air Force. Towards the end of January 1942, a Japanese invasion force had assembled in the China Sea about twenty miles north-east of Endau. Air Headquarters ordered a striking force of nine Hudsons and twelve Wildebeestes to attack the Japanese ships with a fighter escort. Cyp flew one of those Wildebeestes. A maximum speed of 100 m.p.h. and an open cockpit must have given him some notion of the suicidal nature of his mission. The striking force came up against heavy fighter opposition and anti-aircraft fire, but they pressed home their attack. Born with the right kind of blood in his veins, Cyp knew he just must score a direct hit on one of two Japanese transports and to do this he had to fly low over his target. His 250-lb bombs found their mark and the transport was set on fire, but Cyp was shot down and killed.

. . .

The Malays themselves fell into two categories. Many of the civilian Malays just sat on the fence to see which side was going to win and there were many cases of our position being given away by them. Again, the workers in many cases just disappeared

"into the bush" — as also did the Chinese. If one is honest one will admit that there was nothing very surprising about this, for they were merely trying to insure their future. But it was all very trying at the time.

Very different were the Malays under military discipline. These were the little men with big hearts. The two regular battalions commanded by Toby Andre and Walter Young, and led by the best type of British officer, showed the stuff they were made of in the fighting at The Gap on the Island. As for those little Malay drivers who drove us through long, wet nights from Kuantan to Labu, I shall never forget them. Their youth, their utter weariness and their grit were unforgettable. Even that little old man with the wrinkled face and his blind wife, who put me up at Labu in their house on stilts — well, I guess they also served.

Since the war the behaviour of the Chinese in Malaya has presented them with an unfavourable image in the eyes of the British public. Very different is the story of the Chinese during the Malayan campaign and throughout the Japanese occupation. Most of us who were prisoners will remember how nobly they would help us if they possibly could. The passing of food and messages and money into our camps on the Island cost many of them their heads. Most bitterly did they pay for their valour. Something like 14,000 were executed in Singapore during the occupation.

Within two days of the fall of Singapore two hundred Chinese volunteer soldiers were massacred on the beaches at Changi by machine-gun bullets. After dark some men of the Gordon Highlanders crept out of camp to see if any of the victims were still alive. They found two. They carried them back to camp and took them to our overcrowded hospital. As men were dying like flies at that time, not from disease or malnutrition, but from war wounds, it was easy to slip those two young Chinese Lance Corporals of the Straits Settlements Volunteer Force onto the ration strength in the place of two of our dead. They remained with us for three and a half years and grew to look more British every day!

When the Japs advanced upon Ipoh, the last people to leave their posts were the Chinese and Eurasian girl operators in the telephone exchange. Under a hail of bombs and with Japanese infantry about to enter the town they were still handling military

traffic when given the order to leave. One cannot help marvelling at, as well as applauding, such devotion to duty. Those girls certainly earned an honoured place in the history of these events.

And now the story of Sergeant Bennett, of the Royal Leicestershire Regiment, a story of superlative courage against a background of constant fear and dread.

After the battle of Jitra several British soldiers landed on Penang Island. Some elected to go onward to fight again, but others, because of wounds and sickness, elected to stay concealed in the forest on the hills of the island. This party consisted of Sergeant Bennett, six other soldiers of the Leicesters and one Indian sepoy. A number of Chinese clubbed together to feed them. Only at the end of three years were they discovered and rounded up by the Japanese. By that time only three were still alive, Sergeant Bennett, one British soldier and the sepoy. These three were brought down from their hide-out to identify their Chinese helpers. All three were put through third degree treatment, the British soldier and the sepoy both dying under the water torture. Only Sergeant Bennett survived. The two Britishers remained silent, but the sepoy finally caved in before he died.

Some of the Chinese were thus identified. One died from torture. The eldest brother of the family most closely concerned agreed to confess to being the chief instigator so that the others might be allowed to go free. For this act of self-sacrifice he was subsequently hanged by the Kempei Tai. The others went free but only after experiencing the nastier side of Japanese hospitality.

Within two weeks of the Japanese surrender in August 1945, Sergeant Bennett was murdered. Why? Because he knew too much about his tormentors. The incriminating evidence he could have given before the War Crimes Tribunal would have sent them to the gallows. So another British hero remained behind in the East with not even a small wooden cross to mark his grave.

Some years after the war an officer of the 2/9th Gurkhas, who shared those years of captivity with all of us in Changi brought this story to light. This was Colonel A. O. Robinson, whose friendship with the District Officer of the South-West district of Penang Island led to his meeting all those concerned. One sunny Sunday morning on the lawn of the District Officer's home he heard the story pieced together by the Chinese seated

in front of him. Much had to be translated, but the story, so meekly told, was of such valour, both of the Chinese and of the two English soldiers, that Colonel Robinson felt constrained to pass on the details to the Royal Leicestershire Regiment in England. Both Regiment and County responded nobly. An article was published in the local press and many letters were received in Penang from people in Leicestershire. Finally, Field-Marshal Sir Gerald Templer was persuaded to present to the surviving ringleaders of this story, scrolls which had been admirably executed by the Leicester School of Art. This form of recognition was apparently all they wanted.

And now this. After Japanese tanks had broken through at Slim, an officer of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders found himself alone, exhausted and ill. A middle-aged Chinese and his teen-age daughter took him to their house and harboured him. After a few days they grew fearful of certain Malay policemen who were known to play the Jap game. So they told him he must go and live on his own in the jungle, but that they would feed him. It was arranged that he should come every day to a certain tree and there he would find a bundle of food. After three days, just as he was beginning to regain his health, he found a note concealed in the bundle. Taking it out he read these lines which had been scribbled in pencil:

"They found out that we had kept you in our home. They took my father and cut off his head. I WILL CONTINUE TO FEED YOU AS LONG AS I CAN."

Was there ever greater valour than this? To what sublime heights can the gentle feelings of humanity aspire?

I have called this book a tribute to the men and women who were there. This little Chinese girl and her father are riding high among those who were there. They were the bravest of the brave.

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The Argylls and the combined British Battalion of Leicesters and Surreys both fought magnificently under two first class commanders in Ian Stewart and Esmond Morrison. The British Battalion were continually in action all the way down the peninsula. In nearly ten weeks they knew only a few short spells of rest. It was nearly the same with the Argylls.

How many people, I wonder, have ever heard of the part played by the 3rd/16th Punjab Regiment of the Indian Army in the Malayan tragedy? How many know about the commanding officer of that gallant battalion? The complete story makes heroic reading, for his regiment were engaged almost without a break from the first day of the war until the last. Five British officers lost their lives fighting, two were badly wounded, and one died as a prisoner of war. Casualties among the Viceroy's Commissioned Officers were proportionately even higher and something like six hundred men of the regiment were either killed or wounded.

Moorhead was the name of that commanding officer, and if ever a commander deserved the credit for what his regiment achieved in war, it was Moorhead. This is what Charles Charlton, his adjutant, wrote of him when we were locked up in Changi:

'In the days of training, he worked twice as hard as any other man in the Battalion and he saw to it that none had a soft time. In war he was tireless. It was the ordeal he had trained himself for, mentally and physically: the result was that in a campaign where muddle and panic were only too common, he stood out as a model of coolness and clearheadedness. His personal bravery caused his officers continual anxiety. He was always last in a withdrawal and only too often among the leading troops in an advance. But if his bravery caused anxiety among his officers, it was anxiety for his safety, for his example had the effect of stimulating others to emulate him in his contempt for his own well-being. As a Battalion Commander, he had adopted a Spartan mode of life, but he showed his intense humanity in countless ways. His officers and his men loved him, but their fear of his displeasure was greater than their fear of the enemy. His death was a tragedy that should never have been allowed to happen, but to have served under him is the one compensation that the survivors of the Battalion have left.'

Listen too to what Sir Compton Mackenzie writes about Moorhead on page 344 of his terrific book *Eastern Epic* (which pays just and generous tribute to our Indian soldiers in Malaya).

He writes: "A havildar of the 3/16 Punjab Regiment when he heard of Moorhead's death said: '*Mera dil tutgaya. Aisa bahadur admi Kabhi nahin honge.*' ('My heart is broken. There will never be a man more brave than he)."

And in the next paragraph, also of Moorhead's death, he adds:

"Let Pakistan and India remember that such a man led Mussalman and Sikh in amity once upon a time, and let Britain remember that she wasted heroes like these because mammon took more from India than self-sacrifice was able to repay."

John Parkin, my own C.O., was another outstanding regimental commander, and I consider I was lucky to have served under such a man. He inspired complete confidence in the outcome of every critical situation. He had no thought for his own safety and his judgment was never at fault. In the last five days behind the Japs in Johore his was a marvellous exhibition of the real fighting spirit, a spirit which refused to contemplate failure, and which never flagged. He was the British bulldog at bay. Had he and Moorhead fought in Europe theirs would be well-known names today. They fought in Malaya, so their stature as leaders has been telescoped by the immensity of disaster.

Such men as Barstow, Billy Key, Esmond Morrison, Ray Selby, Toby Andre and those two commanders who won the Victoria Cross, Cumming of the Indian Army and Anderson, the Australian, have suffered in the same way. God knows there were others too, like Brigadier Duncan, the commander of the luckless 45th Indian Brigade, who was killed leading a bayonet attack, a superlatively gallant officer. It is all in the luck of the draw.

As for the bravery, leadership and self-sacrifice of Captain Graham of the 1/8th Punjab Regiment at Kampar, his gallantry was an epic which must surely rank with any act of valour in either world war. Why he was not awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross is something which many of us have asked for more than twenty years. Is it still too late?

Leading the Sikh company of his regiment against the Japs on the upper slopes of Thompson's Ridge at Kampar, Graham and his men carried the first and second lines at the bayonet's point against a storm of fire. In the final charge, with only thirty men left, a mortar bomb blew off both his legs below the knee just as he reached the last Japanese trench. Even then he carried on the fight, kneeling upon his shattered stumps and hurling grenades at the remnants of the Japanese Imperial Guards, all the time shouting brave words of encouragement to those of his men who were left. Then he collapsed, and, a little later, died.

I don't suppose there are many who know about the Memorial which the Japs built at Kota Bahru to those of their men who

fell fighting against General Billy Key's 8 Indian Brigade. The 3/17 Dogra Regiment, in pill-boxes and section posts on the beaches, had heard so much about fifth columnists that they refused to withdraw when ordered to do so, and it was left for a British officer to go round personally and give the order. This fine Regiment suffered appalling casualties; they fought like heroes. The other regiments of this Brigade, 1/13 Frontier Force Rifles, 2/10 Baluch Regiment and 2/12 Frontier Force Regiment also offered dogged resistance, their only artillery support being one 4.5 howitzer battery and one Mountain battery.

And what of the most wonderful little men in the whole wide world — the Gurkhas ?

In Malaya we had the 28th Brigade under the leadership of Brigadier Carpendale of the 1st Gurkhas who was succeeded by Ray Selby of the 9th Gurkhas. This Brigade, made up of the 2/1st, 2/2nd and 2/9th Gurkhas Rifles, were involved in practically the whole retreat, from the first outpost station at Asun till the surrender of Singapore. The three commanding officers of the Gurkha regiments were all of the highest standard, of whom Jim Fulton was wounded and died in Taiping Gaol, and Geoffrey Woollcombe was drowned at sea; only the intrepid Maurice Allsebrooke came through. Writing of Geoffrey Woollcombe who commanded the 2/2nd Gurkha Rifles throughout the campaign, his second-in-command, Derek Robertson, writes :

"At the end of that long retreat, he retained the respect, admiration and affection of his officers and men. To inspire all three under such circumstances is the mark of a very great leader. Many inspired one or two, but to inspire all three is something quite out of the ordinary."

It would be easy to write at length about the Gurkhas but this Epilogue will be long enough. Nevertheless, mention is justified of the havildar of the 2/1st Gurkhas who knocked out three Japanese tanks with an anti-tank rifle single-handed. It is enough to add here that the Gurkhas in the Malayan campaign lived up to their great reputation they have always had and to their motto: "It is better to die than to be a coward."

It is perhaps difficult for most people to realise the immensity of that retreat. It was far longer and of greater duration than either the retreat from Mons or to Dunkirk. It was carried out in far worse climatic conditions, without any armour, almost completely without air support and without a Navy, perhaps the

most vital consideration of the lot in the defence of a long peninsula.

The historian and G.S.O.I. of 11 Indian Division, Colonel A. M. L. Harrison*, gives a life-like picture of the privations and hardships which the fighting units of that Division went through on their long retreat. He describes the cumulative effects of such a retreat in these words.

"No food, no sleep. Stand and retreat. Stand by day if you can. Retreat by night because you must. Fight when the enemy comes. March when the lorries fail. March along roads marked by Japanese airmen overhead, or through rubber where the way is easily lost. . . . There is no hope of relief, no promise of respite behind fresh troops. 'Stand and retreat and stand again. There is no relief.' The whole spirit of the retreat of the 11th Division is contained in these words. And the most potent and hideous recollection of the ten weeks' campaign is lack of sleep and hunger — hunger because again and again the rations did not reach the troops because the troops were on the move or the roads were blocked. . . . Night after night men would fall asleep as they marched, or stood halted by the roadside awaiting the arrival of lorries. They would be roused to be urged, nay driven, into those blessed lorries, and would tumble in to lie in heaps and fall into a fitful unrestful sleep as the lorries bumped and swerved their way through the night to some destination where they would tumble out to be fed, if they were lucky, and once again to work, to dig and to wire a new position, and to hold it for a short while — men drugged with weariness and tortured by an overwhelming craving for sleep, men who had to be shaken out of a coma of utter tiredness to make their dazed brains connect with an issued order, to force their flagging will-power into driving their exhausted bodies to the next task. There is a limit to human endurance. The troops had already [end of December 1941] passed far beyond the normal limit. They surpassed it a hundredfold before inevitably they reached the limit of even their superhuman endurance."

And who after all were these weary troops? In the main they were Indian soldiers who had been comparatively recently enlisted in India. It may now be forgotten that expansion of the

* It is a thousand pities that no one has been willing to publish this officer's graphically written history of the 11th Indian Division in Malaya.

Indian Army was not embarked upon until after the first year of war in Europe, with the result that in the latter half of 1941 each of the battalions in Malaya had been milked of well over one hundred officers, N.C.O's and specialists who had to be replaced by raw recruits. Before the war most Indian regiments had seen a considerable amount of active frontier service and their sections were accustomed to being self-reliant in piquets on the hills and dealing with tribesmen. The average service of the Sepoys and Gurkha riflemen was six years, N.C.O's ten years and Viceroy's Commissioned Officers and Gurkha Officers sixteen to twenty years. They were used to being shot at, they had a tremendous pride of regiment and a great spirit. They had complete faith and trust in their British officers who spoke their language and thoroughly understood them. Regiments like these would not have been worried about being cut off and might well have proved a thorn in the flank or rear of the Japs for quite a time. As it was, in every Indian regiment there were very few sepoy and riflemen of more than two years' service. N.C.O's were newly promoted while V.C.O's and Gurkha officers had gone up two or three jumps on the promotion ladder all too quickly.

So was it to be wondered at that such inexperienced troops should have become demoralised in the early days, after Jitra for instance, when we were trying to establish a rearguard position at Alor Star? Or when Japanese tanks broke through at Slim? As it was, most of those troops, when they were collected together and given a brief rest, recovered their morale and became useful fighting units again. And what does the Official History say? It is this. "What is surprising is not that new units in the early stages of the Japanese war failed to stem the enemy's advance, but that they fought as well as they did."

And if the men were exhausted, what about their British commanders? A large proportion of Emergency Commissioned Officers could not speak the language and were therefore incapable of issuing orders, excellent material though they were. This meant that those British officers who could speak the language often had to lead sub units other than their own on certain operations. It was not uncommon in the confused fighting in Malaya for C.O's to command companies. All this threw an enormous additional strain on to their shoulders. They certainly carried a heavy burden.

Some ugly things, I believe, have been said about the Australians. This no doubt is because of the few who put up terrible blacks along the sea-front of Singapore town when the evacuation of women and children was in train. Many of these may well have been from the untrained and undisciplined reinforcements which were thrown into Singapore at the last minute. But such stories should never have been allowed to detract from the fighting qualities of most of the 8th Australian Division in Malaya. Probably the highlight of the whole campaign was the fighting of the Australian troops in the withdrawal from Bakri on the Muar Road when their Commander, Lieut-Colonel Anderson, won a well-deserved Victoria Cross. And how many people, I wonder, have ever heard of the exploit of the 2/30th Battalion which destroyed seven Japanese tanks and killed scores of Japanese cyclists in an ambush covering Gemas, or of the 2/18th Battalion which, supported by two field batteries, inflicted three hundred casualties on a Japanese column in a well-prepared ambush in the Nithsdale Estate in East Johore, or of the remnants of the 22nd Brigade Group who, under the determined leadership of Brigadier Taylor, held up the enemy's advance in the Pandau area of Singapore Island for forty-eight hours at a critical time. All these actions were worthy of the best Australian traditions.

The 18th (British) Division commanded by the much-loved Major-General Beckwith-Smith, must surely have been the unluckiest Division of any in World War II. Having trained for desert warfare in North Africa, they found themselves hurled into a strange type of jungle war in the East after a sea voyage of nearly three months. Some of their guns and equipment were sunk in Singapore harbour before they ever got ashore. Nevertheless, this was a well-commanded and probably the best trained (except in jungle warfare) of any of the reinforcements which were sent to Malaya. Force of circumstances ordained that it had to be thrown in piece-meal as it arrived to stem the enemy's advance without any time to become acclimatised or accustomed to its strange surroundings. Who could expect its troops would excel in such conditions? As it was — many of its units gave evidence of outstanding fighting qualities in the actions in which they took part. To mention only two — there was the 135 Field Regiment (Hertfordshire Yeomanry) under Brigadier Toosey in the fighting in Johore and on Singapore Island and the 1st Cambridgeshire on the Island. I am told that

the latter were still holding out many hours after the surrender hour and that the men were more frightened of Carpenter, their gallant C.O., than of the Nips !

Those of us who were privileged to observe both officers and men of the Lanarkshire Yeomanry during those years of captivity are able to testify to the value of a county association in that important relationship between officers and men. This yeomanry regiment set an example of behaviour as prisoners of war which simply could not be rivalled. (Their outstanding part in the campaign, especially at Slim, is another story.) They were like one great big family in which everyone took care of everyone. When small parties or even individual soldiers of the regiment were taken away by the Japs and transferred to remote camps, somehow or other an officer of the regiment would be sure to find his way. No single soldier of that regiment was ever allowed to feel forgotten. They seemed to possess a spirit which said "we come through this as a regiment and not as individuals." It was one of those things which sticks in the memory, which some of us talk about even today.

I had many friends at Malaya Command. They were all out to do their best. There was never any panic or alarm. When Ruth and I paid our visits to arrange her evacuation, we found everyone helpful and friendly. One of the heroes of that headquarters was Major Catt of the 5/14 Punjab Regiment. Not content with working overtime all day in his office he obtained permission to lead a night patrol into the Japanese positions towards the end of the battle on the Island. He was shot in the stomach and died in hospital the next day.



The Royal Navy were soon out of the picture, but this was not their fault. We have to go back to 1937 to discover the whys and wherefores. Originally the defence scheme for Malaya had been based on the assumption that, if war came to the Far East, a British fleet strong enough to control the sea approaches would be sent there. Although warning had been given to the War Office by the G.O.C. Malaya in December 1937 that, in the event of war in the West, this might not be possible, it was only in May 1939 that the Committee of Imperial Defence accepted this situation. A year later the Oversea Defence Committee laid

down that in the circumstances the primary responsibility for the defence of Malaya must rest with the R.A.F. but they added that as it could not be anticipated that the necessary strength of the R.A.F. could be built up for some time, the strength of the Army in Malaya should also be increased. Nevertheless, thanks in the main to Sir Winston Churchill's insistence, the two capital ships, *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*, were sent to the Far East late in 1941 in a belated effort to deter the Japanese from entering the war. When these two big ships were sunk on the third day of the war, the Navy were virtually out of the picture. Thereafter the Japanese had command of the China Sea and after a further seven days they had also established air control of the Malacca Straits. They were therefore able to penetrate up the creeks on the coast, landing forces behind us and thereby threatening our L of C causing us to withdraw. We were therefore always fighting with exposed flanks which we had no means of securing.

Nevertheless, quite a story can be told of individual deeds of heroism by men of the Royal Navy on the escape route between Singapore and the Banka Straits. Of these the crown must surely go to Lieutenant T. Wilkinson, R.N.R., who commanded that small auxiliary patrol vessel named *Li Wo*, whose epic story has been told towards the end of Chapter 18. A similar action by Lieutenant Christmas of the Royal New Zealand Naval Volunteer Reserve, who fought his Motor Launch 311 to the end, has been described in Chapter 21.

Of all the many glorious deeds in British naval history it would be hard to beat these two heroic epics of *Li Wo* and *ML 311*, fought in a lonely sea at the other end of the globe, little known and soon forgotten.

Nor would it be right to fail to record here the action of two gunboats, H.M.S. *Dragonfly* and H.M.S. *Scorpion*, who on the last four nights of January 1942 embarked 2,700 men of the 15th Indian and 53rd British Brigades from the swampy coastline south of Batu Pahat, after they had been irrevocably cut off. As General Percival wrote in his Despatches "Here was an operation which reflected the greatest credit on all ranks of the Royal Navy engaged in it."

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The Air Ministry cannot escape a large measure of blame for

accepting the recommendations of the Air Officer Commanding Far East way back in 1937-8. This concerned the siting of aerodromes in vulnerable places within five or six miles of the east and west coast of Malaya and fairly close to the Thai border, which had very definite disadvantages. It was obvious that the Army would have to defend these aerodromes and this proposed siting would inevitably create wide dispersal of ground troops for their defence. This, in fact, was exactly what happened. But up to May 1941 the R.A.F. firmly believed that war with Japan could be won by independent air action. On that date we were lucky enough to be sent as Air Officer Commander-in-Chief, Far East, a man who was essentially a realist and who saw at once the weakness of the R.A.F. and its limitations. This was Air Vice-Marshal Pulford, an outstanding officer by any standard and a noble character if ever there was one, whose loyalty to General Percival throughout that disastrous war put him head and shoulders above the normal run of humans.

Pulford took over command of the R.A.F. Far East about the same time as General Percival became G.O.C. Malaya. As neither of them had their families with them, it was arranged that Pulford should live with the G.O.C. at Flagstaff House in Singapore. They soon became close friends and, what was perhaps more important, the co-operation between their respective staffs immediately improved. Pulford was a tremendous worker, and was greatly respected by everybody. Ruth herself was on his staff in a very junior capacity for the whole of June and July of 1941. She wrote to me at that time of his friendly charm, his desire to get to know everyone, how approachable he was and how much he was admired. At the end he wanted to stay behind with General Percival even though all his aircraft had been destroyed or withdrawn to Sumatra. The G.O.C. persuaded him to leave in order that he might use his ability in other theatres of war. As they shook hands for the last time Pulford's apt words sum up the issue, "I expect you and I will be blamed for this but God knows we have done our best with what we were given." The awful tragedy is that Percival's decision to persuade him to leave resulted in his death on a lonely island somewhere between Singapore and Java. How cruel the Fates can be.

The Royal Air Force in any case never had a chance. They had nowhere near their requirements. To be exact they had

asked for 566 aircraft. The British Government, while agreeing to this figure as the target, had aimed at having 336 aircraft in Malaya by December 1941. In actual fact, when war broke out, we had 141 1st Line aircraft and practically no reserves, and many of the former were either obsolete or obsolescent. So in numbers the R.A.F. had one quarter of their requirements and well under half of what the Government had aimed at getting there. We were outnumbered by the Japanese at least four to one in 1st Line aircraft.

After the second day of war every airfield in the north of Malaya had been evacuated by our aircraft. Far too many of our planes were bombed and destroyed on the ground, so that when a bombing squadron was sent off on a raid, seldom more than four planes left the ground, and often less than that. The pilots and crews who flew those few surviving aircraft in such cases, and who had all the guts in the world, were fighting against heavy odds and knew it. Their story has never really been told.

Only the heroic action of Squadron Leader A. S. K. Scarf has hit the headlines. His squadron were about to fly off from Butterworth airfield to bomb Jap landings at Singora when Jap planes arrived overhead. The Japs bombed and destroyed every one of his Blenheims, except one, on the runway. Scarf piloted this one survivor and flew off alone to carry out his mission. Coming up against fierce Japanese fighter attack and ack-ack fire, he nevertheless pressed home his attack. He was mortally wounded and forced to crash-land his aircraft at Alor Star on his way home in order to save the lives of his crew. He died in hospital soon afterwards. A posthumous Victoria Cross makes a fitting reminder of the bravery of this valiant pilot.

When nearly 3,000 men of the 53rd British and 15th Indian Brigades were cut off just west of Rengit, it was Flight-Lieutenant H. Dane who flew an *unarmed* aircraft of the Malayan Volunteer Air Force on a special air reconnaissance to find them. And find them he did, thereby paving the way for their evacuation at night by the Royal Navy. This same intrepid member of the Malayan Volunteer Air Force also made desperate efforts to locate the lost 22 Indian Brigade during the last days of January. Other members of this Volunteer Air Force flew fearlessly on daily reconnaissance patrols in light flying club aircraft which were both frail and *defenceless*.

When a great military disaster takes place, there has to be someone to be a scapegoat. If it is someone who has not hit the headlines by some great gesture, some last stand heroics, and who is not a great showman, then so much the better. It is just one of those things.

Thus it was with General Percival the G.O.C. who has been consistently sniped at ever since the fall of Singapore. Even today the public who read war books are fed on lurid stories of what went wrong under his direction. Kenneth Attiwill in his *The Singapore Story* high-lights these stories. Ian Morrison, who wrote *Malayan Postscript* only three months after the surrender of Singapore and who was later killed in Korea described the General in these terms: "He did not know how to deal with any group of men. He was a completely negative person." But surely a man of that description could hardly have won two D.S.O's, an O.B.E., a Military Cross, a French Croix de Guerre and a number of mentions as General Percival had done, all for leadership in the field? It doesn't make sense to me. I doubt also whether a man of that description could have been the successful leader of the Far East Prisoners of War Federation as the General has been for the last twenty years.

Whilst I have to admit that I have never regarded General Percival as a dynamic type of soldiers' General myself, I know for a fact that it is the greatest mistake to think that he was not a good commander and not an inspiring leader. He had a quiet manner which had firmness and determination, and was probably the best and most popular Commanding Officer the Cheshires have had for many years. He commanded the 2nd Battalion of that regiment in Malta in the early thirties, and it is a fact that soldiers of that Battalion always turn up at Re-unions and talk of the good old days in Malta, for he had a wonderful way with soldiers and they all respected him. It is equally true to say that from a regimental point of view he has the love and admiration of countless officers and men. How do I know this? It is because his adjutant of those days in Malta, who is now a Major-General, is a friend of mine; it is also because my own sister was married to one of his regimental officers throughout his tour of command in Malta.

Much of the criticism of General Percival's handling of the campaign has been made by people who were not there at all, or were only there for a short time, or by people who, being



Lieut-General A. E. Percival, C.B., D.S.O., O.B.E., M.C., D.L.,
G.O.C Malaya, 1941-1942

there, were only in a position to see part of the picture. In the first place he found himself at the last minute called upon to fight a campaign which it had been originally intended should be primarily a Naval affair and later primarily an Air Force affair, with an Army inadequately equipped for the purpose and with little support from those other two Services. What is often forgotten too is the fact that the object assigned to the defence was "The Security of the Naval Base" which could only be achieved by keeping the Japanese Air Forces at arm's length. Furthermore, it is not always realised that the strategy for the conduct of the campaign had been clearly laid down in the Malaya Defence Scheme which had been drawn up before the war started and approved by the authorities in England. This envisaged, if a withdrawal from the North of Malaya had to take place, maximum delay being imposed on the Japs. The reason for this was that it was realised that, in such a situation, everything would depend upon being able to bring in sea-borne reinforcements safely to Malaya. It has been suggested that this strategy should have been changed when the disasters to our Navy and Air Forces took place during the first few days of hostilities. This was probably quite right but the truth is General Percival was *not* a free agent in this matter. He was acting under the directions of the C-in-C Far East who had received a telegram from the Chiefs of Staff in London in the middle of December confirming that the object was still to ensure the "Security of the Naval Base" and emphasising that no other consideration must be allowed to compete with this. Then on the 18th December an Inter-Allied Conference took place in Singapore which decided that the immediate plan should be to dispose the combined Allied forces available in the Far East so as to keep the Japs as far north in Malaya as possible and to hold them in the Philippines, above all to prevent them capturing aerodromes which would threaten the arrival of reinforcements. The Conference also recorded its opinion that our urgent and immediate need was for reinforcements.

General Percival's handling of the Malayan campaign was throughout dictated by this Policy, and from this he did not deviate. That his efforts were unsuccessful was largely due to many factors beyond his control.

So much for the General but what of the man? Only a handful of people know that Lord Wavell suggested to General Percival

that he should arrange a method of escape for himself in the event of Singapore having to capitulate. This he refused to do, saying that he would remain with his troops in such an eventuality — and so he did.

Shortly after the fall of Singapore General Percival was taken away by the Japs for an unpleasant and prolonged interrogation. They wanted to know the names of British technicians in the prison camp at Changi who were capable of repairing our damaged Ack Ack guns. He refused to give them this information and as a result he had to endure three days solitary confinement in a dark, dank cell in Changi Jail without any food whatever — not even a handful of rice or a cluster of chicmanis leaf, nice treatment for a G.O.C.-in-C. During the period of captivity he at all times refused to collaborate with the Japs but insisted on the treatment to which P.O.W's were supposed to be entitled under the Geneva Conventions.

Those of us who served under General Percival have very different views about him as our G.O.C. from those expressed by his critics. If anyone wants proof of how we feel, all they have to do is to come to the annual Re-union of the F.E.P.O.W. Federation at the Royal Festival Hall and they will see for themselves what a tremendous ovation General Percival always receives from all of us who served under him in Malaya.

In his book *The War in Malaya* which was published in 1949, General Percival gave a fair picture of the whole story, disregarding the various criticisms which had been levelled, except when he felt they re-acted unfairly on any of us who served under him. He accepted the fact that, as G.O.C. he was responsible for what happened in the actual fighting, and he has in consequence refrained from criticising his subordinates in public — as is so often done nowadays. And in this respect he has refused more than one attractive financial offer to write critically about the Malayan campaign. I doubt if any General in World War II has suffered more than General Percival has, but never has he allowed the past to get him down in any way. Since the war he has plunged into every kind of activity, most of it voluntary work for the good of others. He leads a full and very busy life, and I believe that, by remaining silent over the years since the war, in the face of great provocation, he has shown himself to be a very big man indeed. I believe too that the vast majority

of those who shared the agony of Singapore feel as I do in their loyalty towards this silent General.

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For twenty years it has been fashionable among those who weren't there to lay the blame for all that went wrong in Malaya and at Singapore on our Commanders. And yet it was nothing short of a miracle that the British forces who fought on the mainland of Malaya ever got back to the Island of Singapore. Had we been fighting the Germans our forces would almost certainly have been trapped a long way north of the Straits of Johore. The Japs proved themselves to be the most formidable opponents but they missed their opportunities time and time again. They had complete air superiority from the start; they only had to capture or destroy vital bridges — and ferries — on our very limited routes of withdrawal down the peninsula, and we would have lost not only all our guns and transport, but our men too. Why? Because the rivers were too wide and too fast flowing for even the strongest swimmers. They had command of both seas too so that they were also able to land their forces on either coast, infiltrate up rivers and creeks and blow those vital bridges on the ground.

The fact that most of us did get back to the Island was not entirely due to luck. The generous minded might consider giving a few marks to our generalship in some of those hair-breath withdrawals.

The touch-and-go escape of our Kuantan force in the nick of time is a case in point. As early as the 3rd January a Japanese force had landed on the western coastline just north of Kuala Selangor and had driven our forces back to within twelve miles of the main highway from Thailand to Singapore. Had they reached this highway and pushed on to the parallel road through Raub, our Kuantan force would have been doomed, since its only escape route from the state of Pahang was along the one and only lateral road to Jeruntut, and thence south through Raub and Bentong to Kuala Lumpur. (It is merely incidental that most of the 11th Division were many miles further north towards Slim river and Trolak at this time, and they too would have been trapped).

It was in any case a divine act of providence which preserved

the ferry at Jeruntut for us. Here was a sitting target for the practically unopposed Japanese Air Force. Had they put it out of action the whole of that Kuantan force would never have got out of Pahang. As it was, we were lucky to extricate half that force across the Kuantan river a few days earlier, when the Japs bombed one half of the Kuantan ferry. Luckily, we still had the other half !

Another nerve-racking operation in that long retreat was the withdrawal — just in time — of the three brigades of Westforce from the Segamat area to Kluang and Yong Peng at a time when our forces on the west coast were fighting grim and costly battles between Muar and Batu Pahat.

Again the generous-minded might acknowledge the skill with which Major-General Billy Key extricated his 8th Indian Infantry Brigade and attached troops from the fighting in Kelantan down a single track railway back to Pahang. It was certainly only the shrewd judgment and keen tactical sense of John Parkin which saved my own regiment from being trapped between Niyor and Kluang, and again from total destruction just south of Rengam. Our commanders in the Malayan campaign have received quite a hammering from press and public for the last twenty years, but what about those split-second timed retreats? It was our higher command who ordered them — just in time. It was our commanders who carried them out — just in time.

Nevertheless, I still submit that it was very largely LUCK which brought us back to the Island.



It seems that there are still people who believe that Singapore was once an impregnable fortress. Before 1941 most people thought this, and John Gunther in his *Inside Asia* described the great fortress of Singapore as "a new, bigger and better Gibraltar, one of the most formidable concatenations of naval, military and strategic power ever put together anywhere." The truth is Singapore was never an impregnable fortress, and any serviceman who was fortunate enough to spend a period of his peacetime service on that delectable island soon came to realise this. There were, in fact, five 15-inch guns, but these were sited to face out eastwards against a sea attack, and most of the 6-inch coastal batteries did the same. It is true that the 15-inch guns

could, and did, fire landwards, but they had no observation landwards and they fired only armour-piercing shells, which went into the ground to a great depth and made an enormous hole, but otherwise did not do a great deal of damage.

After the war, I went to stay with Lieut-General Sir Lewis "Piggy" Heath and his wife in Kenya. As a result of sitting up with that distinguished and kindly General until the late hours, I find I can now produce at least a dozen reasons why we lost Malaya and Singapore. But in simple terms — a considerable gap existed between what it was reasonable to assume in peacetime planning and what in fact proved to be the case when the Japanese attacked.

In pre-war planning it was assumed that Malaya should be defended for a stipulated number of days before the arrival of the British fleet could be expected. When the Japanese attacked, there was present in Malayan waters an ill-assorted naval force far inferior to the Japanese fleet. Furthermore, as the Royal Navy was heavily committed all over the world and had suffered crippling losses, no fleet reinforcement could be expected.

In pre-war planning the air force had the primary role. It was intended to cause considerable damage to any task force approaching the coast of Malaya and to prevent the Japanese gaining air supremacy over the peninsula. When the Japanese attacked, the aircraft present were obsolete or obsolescent and in far fewer numbers than was considered necessary. Furthermore, as we were fighting for air parity over Britain and North Africa, there was little chance of modern type aircraft being made available in sufficient numbers. We did not anticipate the Japanese having an aircraft as efficient as the Zero 0, and we certainly had nothing at hand that was superior to it.

Before the war there was a friendly-disposed French Indo-China, intervening between Siam and China. When the Japanese attacked, French Indo-China had capitulated. As a result, instead of ten days' sailing from Formosa, the Japanese task force, sailing from Camranh Bay, was only a matter of a few days distant from the coast of Malaya.

Lastly, it was surely reasonable to assume that the might of the United States of America in the Pacific would still have weighed the balance in our favour? But after Pearl Harbour—well, even that was denied us.

As it happened, in two days the fleet and the air force

available were virtually destroyed, leaving the army scattered over the peninsula in its role of defending vast areas containing aerodromes. At this time too, Britain herself was in a state of siege and we were being hard pressed in North Africa. The Germans had invaded Russia and were threatening Leningrad and Moscow. The effect of the U.S.A. entering the war was as yet not felt. It was therefore only to be expected that we did not receive the aircraft, tanks (especially tanks) and men for which we had asked, and the failure to supply these must find its roots in our losses in France, Belgium and Greece, and also in the call upon our reserves in men and aircraft which at one time were destined for Malaya but were diverted elsewhere.

There can be only one answer to our defeat in Malaya and the surrender of Singapore. We were just not prepared for a war in the East as well as in the West. Surely then it is wrong to blame the Malaysians, the British, Australian and Indian soldiers, the commanders and even the Government of the time? Instead, wouldn't it be much fairer, if blame is to be allocated, that a large slice of that blame be accepted by the great British public for their pacifist tendencies throughout the nineteen thirties? Richard Hough in his book *The Hunting of Force Z* sums it up in a nutshell. He makes the sombre deduction that inadequate peacetime provision for wartime requirements is an inevitable symptom of democracy. "It is the people themselves," he writes "subject to the hopeful, fumbling, imperfect workings of democracy, who are fully responsible for their own defence. They, understandably, and invariably, demand security at the lowest possible cost." And as the anonymous reviewer of Hough's book adds: "Yet it is those same people who, when the time comes, die bravely and unquestioningly in unescorted ships, in obsolete aircraft, or behind outranged guns." There is the answer.

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I have written all this from the viewpoint of an ordinary Englishman who felt things very deeply when Malaya and Singapore fell to the Japanese in World War II. I had a personal sorrow and perhaps I have felt things all the more keenly as a result of that sorrow. I know I am no General — not in a thousand years would I ever have become a General — but

perhaps this voice in the wilderness coming from one of the little men (but one who saw quite a lot of the game) may — even twenty-odd years later — invite second thoughts on the harsh judgment which has fallen upon the whole tragic episode of Singapore.

1 1 JUL 1979