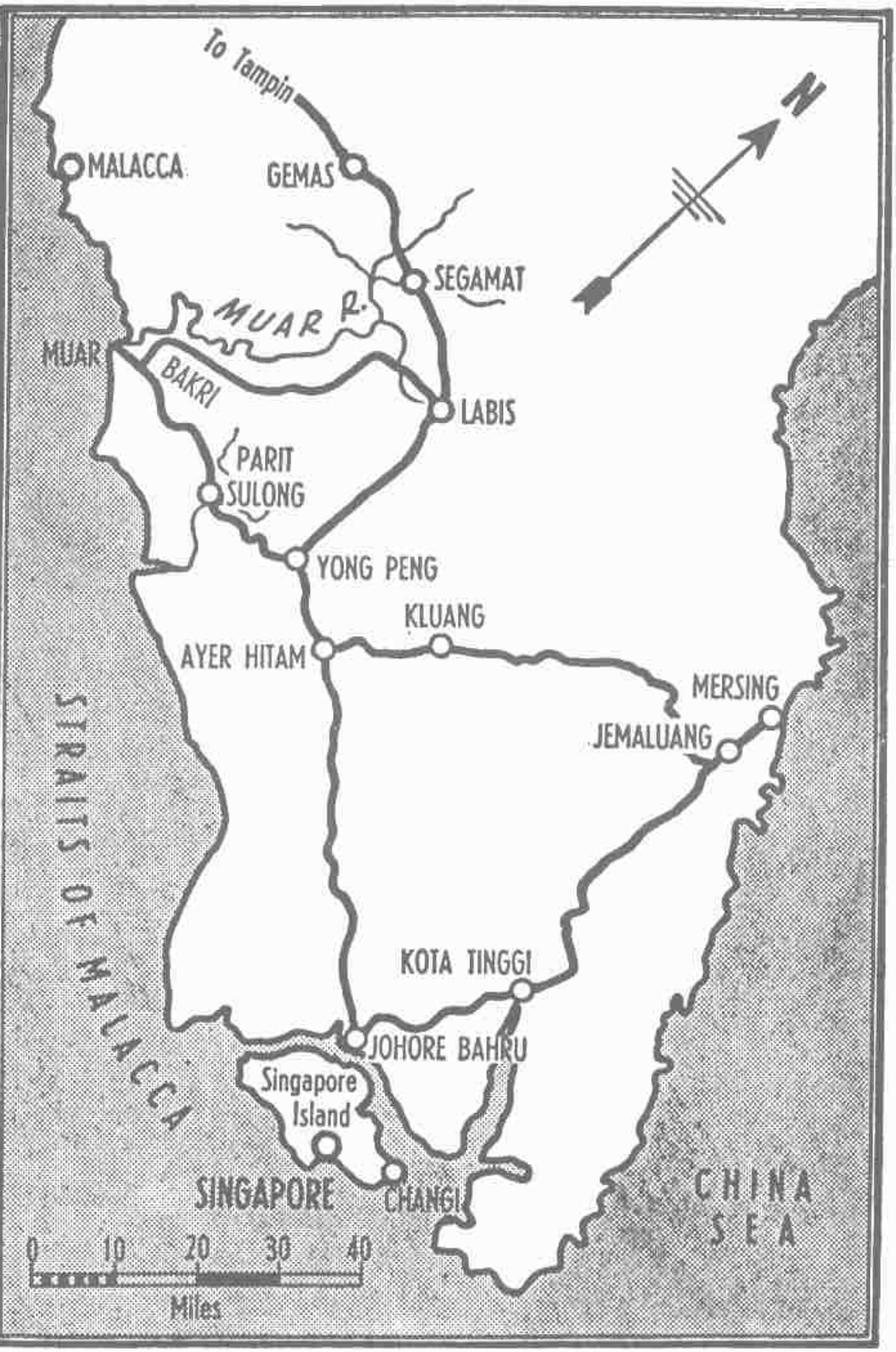
The Singapore Surrender



Southern Malaya — from a sketch map by M. W. V. Curnow, MM, 2/19th Bn. AIF

The Singapore Surrender

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Introduction

THE Fall of Singapore to the Japanese on 15 February 1942 was the greatest disaster in British military history. It also marked the beginning of the end of the British Empire.

When World War II broke out in 1939, British Malaya contained some of the richest jewels (tin and rubber in particular) in the British Crown. It consisted of the Colony of the Straits Settlements, the Federated and Unfederated Malay States.

The island of Singapore was the chief 'Settlement', with its so-called 'impregnable fortress' guarding the gateway to the Far East. Unfortunately for us, the Japanese opened the gate on the wrong side and came in the back way.

The Malayan Peninsula is some 500 miles long, divided down the centre by a jungle-clad range of mountains rising as high as 7,000 feet in the north. Singapore Island is about 200 square miles in area, separated from the toe of the mainland by a 1,100 yard-wide causeway over the narrow Johore Strait. The city of Singapore had a peacetime population of about 750,000, chiefly Malays and Chinese.

In only fifty-five days, with complete air and sea superiority, the Japanese had rounded up the British forces and driven them down the Malayan Peninsula onto a small island from which there was no escape. Fifteen days later, seventy days in all, the British surrendered. Singapore was to become known as the Naked Island.

Half a century later, the fall of Singapore is still hotly debated in military and political circles. How did it happen and why did it happen?

Nowhere is the debate more intense than in Australia, which must share some of the blame for the catastrophe. The price we paid for the prewar neglect of Singapore's defences was the loss of the elite 8th Division AIF (less one brigade). They fought valiantly with heavy casualties, then the survivors were condemned to three and a half years of almost unbelievable brutality as prisoners-of-war. The main blame, however, lay with successive British governments, the false assumption

of white superiority and the blunders of bumbling generals and politicians.

The thoughts of former Australian soldiers on pilgrimages to Singapore and Thailand on 15 February 1992 can be imagined. There must be bitterness mingled with pride and a sense of incredulity that it could ever have happened.

The two books reprinted in this volume describe part of the story which is akin to that of a Greek tragedy. They were written while the war was still in progress when little was known of the fate of our prisoners-of-war in Japanese hands. Anything that filtered out about their inhuman treatment was rightly censored from public view for fear of Japanese reprisals against them.

Grim Glory was first published in July 1942. It dealt mainly with the epic Battle of Muar in which a small force of fewer than 2,000 fighting Australians held at bay the crack 1st Japanese Imperial Guards Division for five important days.

I had served as a private soldier with 2/19th Battalion AIF and later as a Reuters war correspondent during the campaign. The book was written quickly and emotionally while facts were fresh in my mind.

The first book published in Australia about the Malayan and Singapore Island battles *Grim Glory* appeared at a time when the public were being led to believe that our Australian troops had given up without a fight in the Malayan debacle. As a consequence, the 8th Division was being held in scant respect by its brother divisions in the Middle East and elsewhere.

I am still proud and thankful that I was in a position to tell next-of-kin what they so badly wanted to hear. Our soldiers had not run away—they had taken part in an epic and heroic battle. The knowledge would help to sustain them during the years of anxiety and uncertainty about the fate of their loved ones behind the bamboo curtain.

Grim Glory was to run into eight editions with total sales of 80,000 copies. The early editions were heavily censored but I was able to make adjustments and additions to the postwar editions. I made little change to the main narrative. My description of the Battle of Muar is accurate thanks to a copy of the 2/19th Battalion's daily war diary which fell off the back of a truck, so to speak, into my possession through the good offices of a soldier who escaped back to Australia after the capitulation.

The version in this volume is the seventh edition, published in 1955. General H. Gordon Bennett, Commander of the 8th Division in Malaya, wrote three forewords to various editions of *Grim Glory*. The one in this volume was written at a time when Australian troops were again

in Malaya, this time fighting against Chinese Communist guerillas.

I followed up *Grim Glory* with *You'll Be Sorry*, published in 1944. The title came from the sardonic warning given to new recruits by old soldiers. (The same title has since been used by two other writers, Tim Bowden for a radio series on prisoners-of-war and Ann Howard in a recent book about the Australian Women's Army Service.)

You'll Be Sorry is a frank and honest account of my experiences as a soldier and a war correspondent. I have some misgivings about its republication. It is an extremely personal book and I am acutely embarrassed at times in re-reading it.

It is introspective and charged with a sense of guilt that I did not get killed as a soldier or become a prisoner-of-war like so many of my army mates. The chip on my shoulder came not just from being manpowered from the army, but the fact that one had to agree to the release in writing.

The excuse after the war that my pen was mightier and more useful than my sword did not hold water. In April 1946 I had an emotional reunion with the survivors of 2/19th Battalion in the Sydney Domain to join them in the first Anzac Day march after the war. But one man, a driver, refused to shake my hand. 'You had a lovely war, didn't you?' he said. I guess he was right and I wondered how many of the others felt the same way about me. I stumbled away from the Domain with tears in my eyes and it was some years before I was influenced by my mates to march with them. I still worry about it and I will take the sorrow of it with me to the crematorium.

Against all these things, my friend, Neil McDonald, has persuaded me that *You'll Be Sorry* is a better book than *Grim Glory* and should be reprinted because of its other important content. Neil is a lecturer at the Charles Sturt University, Bathurst, an authority on Australian films, a military historian and a talented writer. As I write, he is completing a book about Damien Parer, the legendary Australian war photographer, and is also at work on a biography of the late Sir Charles Moses.

Neil says he discusses *You'll Be Sorry* with his students to explain to them the make-up of Australia at the outbreak of war in 1939. He discusses with them the agonising trials and tribulations of a private soldier and the book's descriptive passages about the conduct of the campaign from a war correspondent's point of view.

So be it. It is a story of the time, not so long ago, when Australia's populatio , was of 98 per cent British stock. To this extent, it will seem maudlin to many of our new multicultural Australians. We really

did go to war for King and Country but the misconception today (deliberately propagated in some quarters) is that the country was England and the British Empire. The country we went to war for was Australia; the Crown and the flag were the symbols of it.

My two books were written in honour and admiration of the men and women of the 8th Division, recruited in the dark days of Dunkirk in 1940. The reissue of the books is addressed to their sons and daughters, their grandsons and grand-daughters to assure them that 'Menzies' Glamour Boys' fought to the death, true patriots all.

Their spirit and courage during their prisoner-of-war days has been recorded in many, many books, television and radio documentaries. They deserved a better fate, a chance of military glory and immortality, but it was not to be. They were made sacrificial offerings to an already lost cause. I cry for them.

It was a lost cause from the very beginning. Since the fall of Singapore fifty years ago, classified and other secret documents about the Malayan campaign have gradually been released by various governments for study by historians and others. Japanese military and political versions of the campaign are now freely available.

The bogies that Japanese aeroplane pilots could not see at night and that tanks could not be used in jungle country were exposed. And the humble Japanese bicycles proved more efffective than the motor vehicles with which the British forces were equipped.

Colonel Masanobu Tsuji, chief of operations and planning staff, 25th Japanese Army, Malaya, told the story of the bicycle in his book *Shonan, the Hinge of Fate*. Tsuji wrote how active preparation for the conquest of Malaya began in September 1941, eighteen months before the outbreak of war, and the bicycle figured prominently in the plans. A division was to be equipped with 500 motor vehicles and 6,000 bicycles. Because of their cheapness, Japanese-manufactured bicycles had become one of the chief exports from Japan to the whole of South-east Asia, with replacements and spares easily available in Malaya.

With the infantry on bicycles, there was no traffic congestion or delay when the bridges were destroyed. The soldiers simply waded across the rivers carrying their bicycles on their shoulders, maintaining a hot pursuit of the enemy along the asphalt roads. A bicycle repair squad was attached to each Japanese company to fix tyres frequently punctured in the severe heat. Often the bicycles were ridden on their rims, running smoothly on the perfect paved roads and making a noise like tanks. Each Japanese bicycle soldier was equipped with a light machine-gun and a small rifle over his shoulder, often riding 20 hours a day.

'Thanks to Britain's money spent on the excellent paved roads, and to the cheap Japanese bicycles, the assault on Malaya was easy,' Tsuji wrote.

The catastrophe spawned a spate of books by generals, privates, war correspondents, civil servants, armchair critics, politicians, conscientious objectors, etc., all wise after the event. Apologies, charges, counter-charges, whitewashing and smearing have enlivened the pages of countless books and been aired on television and radio. In amongst the personal vendettas, some of the basic causes of the loss of Malaya remain unchallenged.

Chief of these was the 'too little, too late' syndrome. Other causes were the spreading of forces to protect a non-existent air force, resulting in the campaign being fought on exterior lines and in small bits and pieces; the Singapore Island defences being based on a seaboard landing; the complete lack of prepared defences in Southern Malaya and Singapore Island; the prestige-shattering blunder of committing the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* to Malayan waters without air protection.

Some unbelievable blunders were committed near the end. The too little, too late, syndrome almost turned into a too much, too late, policy.

Late in January, a whole British division, the 18th, disembarked at Singapore from the United Kingdom after being at sea for three months via the United States and South Africa. Poor devils, they were bundled off on their shaky sea-legs into unfamiliar savage jungle warfare.

About the same time, a shipload of more than 600 Australian reinforcements arrived. They were raw, untrained recruits who had been in the army for only a few weeks. Most of them had never seen a Bren gun or a sub-machine gun and had never even handled a rifle. A few days later, they too, were in battle. Three weeks later, those who had not been killed in action were condemned to cruel captivity by the Japanese. What a war for them!

Who were the British and Australian brass hat idiots who sent those men to their fate at a time when we all knew Singapore was doomed beyond any hope of salvation?

By then nothing could have saved Singapore. Supplies of water, petrol and ammunition were rapidly running out. The city was in panic, its population had been swollen to more than a million by refugees from the north, and the streets were full of unburied dead bodies from air raids. The oil tanks were aflame, the docks jammed with ships and people trying to get away.

Even the arrival of 100,000 well-trained troops would not have made

any difference. The clever Japanese Commander, General Yamashita, might have even lured them across the Causeway into the jungles of Johore, there to leave them to disintegrate and destroy themselves while searching for someone to fight.

A thousand aeroplanes would have been useless, too. The island's landing fields were pockmarked by bomb and artillery shell. Aviation fuel was ablaze or in short supply. If the planes had come in crates, there was nobody left to assemble or service them, the native workers, naturally enough, having long since fled.

Yet on 10 February, five days before the surrender, Winston Churchill did not appear to understand the realities of the situation. He sent the following direction to Field Marshal Wavell, supreme commander of the united forces of ABDA (American, British, Dutch, Australian) ranged against the Japanese:

> Percival [General Percival] has over 100,000 men, of whom 33,000 are British and 17,000 Australians. It is doubtful whether the Japanese have as many in the whole Malay Peninsula . . . In these circumstances the defenders must greatly outnumber Japanese forces who have crossed the straits, and in a well-contested battle they should destroy them. There must at this stage be no thought of saving the troops or sparing the population. The battle must be fought to the bitter end at all costs. The 18th Division has a chance to make its name in history. Commanders and senior officers should die with their troops. The honour of the British Empire and the British Army is at stake.
>
> I rely on you to show no mercy in any form. With the Russians fighting as they are and the Americans so stubborn at Luzon, the whole reputation of our country and our race is involved. It is expected that every unit will be brought into close contact with the enemy and fight it out.

It was all very well for Churchill to utter such stirring defiance from the depths of his bunker in Downing Street. His rhetoric was far removed from reality.

Lionel Wigmore, the Australian official historian of the Malayan campaign, made some blunt comments about the message in *The Japanese Thrust* (Australian War Memorial):

> Mr Churchill said nothing about the Malayan campaign having been virtually lost at sea and in the air within a few days of its commencement; nothing about the disastrous dispersal of the

army on the mainland to protect airfields now valuable only to the enemy; nothing about the Japanese monopoly of tanks; though indeed his figures did indicate that about half the force at General Percival's disposal comprised Asian soldiers.

And so it all ended on 15 February 1942, with tears of frustration and humiliation running down the cheeks of many Australian and British soldiers. In the aftermath, the 8th Division continued to be rent by controversy and tragedy.

The escape of General Bennett after the capitulation caused great and heated argument, leading to a Royal Commission. With hindsight, I still believe Bennett was the best general in Malaya because of his aggressive and pragmatic nature, though there was nothing he or any other general could have done to save the situation after the first week. He was a peppery (red), short-tempered egotistical man (what general isn't?) with an immense pride in the quality and spirit of his men.

I think in later life he may have regretted his decision to escape, in view of his icy-cold and insulting reception by the Australian military establishment. At the time, however, he believed his return to Australia, with first-hand knowledge of Japanese jungle tactics, was essential and urgent. What a pity he was not ordered out by Prime Minister Curtin, in the same way as General Douglas MacArthur was ordered out of the Philippines by President Roosevelt.

Another tragedy of the prisoner-of-war days was that of Major Charles Cousens, taken to trial on a charge of treason after the war and stripped of his commission by the Army hierarchy. The charge was dropped but there is little doubt Cousens died of a broken heart. Ivan Chapman has written a brilliant examination of this tragic case in *Tokyo Calling* (Hale & Iremonger).

The two books in this volume throw some light, though perhaps superficial in content, on what happened at the time.

Gilbert Mant
Port Macquarie
July 1991

Grim Glory

DEDICATION

To the Memory of my Cobber

JOHN CHARLES RESCORL

Author's Preface

THIS story of the Battle of Muar was written quickly and emotionally in 1942, while the facts were fresh in the author's mind.

It was published at a time when there were many misconceptions about the role Australian troops played in Malaya. The book helped to create a more sympathetic and admiring attitude towards the men of the 8th Division, who had by then disappeared into captivity.

This new edition contains some new material and some amendments, but it was felt that any great changes to the original narrative would destroy its spontaneity.

The book never purported to be a history of the Malayan campaign or even of the Battle of Muar itself. So if everybody doesn't get a mention and some units seem to be neglected, please remember that the book's original purpose is still its main purpose. The Battle of Muar remains a symbol of the 8th Division itself.

Foreword

LIEUTENANT-GENERAL H. GORDON BENNETT, CB, CMG, DSO, VD

THE publication of this revised and expanded edition of *Grim Glory* is timely, coming as it does, when Australian troops are again stationed in Malaya.

This troop move is in line with the traditional British policy of preparing for the last war instead of the next one. The one battalion already sent is too small to be effective in a modern war. It will probably be followed by other units.

The Australian public was led to believe that this battalion was to be used against the Communist guerillas in Malaya. It was for that reason that many Australian supported the move.

Now we are told it is also to be part of a strategic reserve. As such, Penang Island seems to be the wrong place for it. If an enemy advance is expected through Siam, as in the last war, it would be well placed, but it is most unlikely that any enemy will repeat the methods of the 1941-45 war.

We now have established a happier relationship with Siam. It seems more than likely that an enemy will use Indonesia next time, as the Japanese used Thailand in the last war. This would leave a force in Penang cut off from our main Australian Defence Force.

Modern aircraft developments and the introduction of nuclear weapons have made Singapore ineffective as an outpost of vital importance either to Australia or the Indian Ocean. Air forces would now fly high over any such outposts, and they could render them ineffective by one well-placed bomb.

In the next war aircraft and airborne weapons and even guided aerial missiles will leave land forces on the ground gazing up at them. Our best weapon of defence will be strong air forces with radar and other

modern equipment, well placed to intercept any invader. In short, the war, at the outset, will be fought in the air and not on the ground.

It will be remembered that the Battle of Muar (the subject of this book) took place towards the end of a long victorious advance by the Japanese army down the Malayan peninsula, when the Japanese General Yamashita outwitted and out-generalled the British General Percival.

This was due to the adopted British policy of passive defence (the Maginot Line complex) being outmoded and outflanked by the more modern and more realistic German method of aggressive penetration deep into enemy territory, accepting great risks in doing it. Yamashita had had a two-year attachment to the German General Staff just prior to the war. In fact, it seems probable that the campaign was planned in Germany.

The Australian 2/30th Battalion had acquitted itself exceptionally well in Australia's first clash of arms with the Japanese in the Battle of Gemas. Percival had refused to allow the two brigades of the AIF to fight in one formation, otherwise the course of the campaign would probably have been different—at least, it would have delayed the final decision.

Circumstances, however, forced Percival to detach the 2/19th Battalion from the 22nd Infantry Brigade at Mersing to join the 2/29th Battalion at Bakri. These two battalions, with artillery and other ancillary support, fought the epic engagement which is the subject of this book.

The story of the battle at Bakri and Parit Sulong is more than the story of a battle between a small force of less than 2,000 fighting Australians, and the 1st Japanese Guards Division—in which the Australians held the enemy at bay for five long important days. It is the story of indomitable courage, grim determination and unusual endurance.

These men went into battle, breathing the words, 'No quarter given or asked for'. Most of them fought to the death. Not once in their many wireless messages to AIF Headquarters did they ask for help or suggest surrender. And when the tired and battered remnants of this small band returned to our lines, they hurriedly reorganised and went back into battle filled with the determination to destroy their foe.

The story tells of fine leadership and exemplary courage of their Commander, Lieutenant-Colonel C. G. W. Anderson, VC, MC, in civil life a grazier from Koorawatha, near Young, New South Wales; of a strong offensive spirit in all ranks, who, though depleted in numbers,

attacked and counterattacked over and over again, forcing their way through miles of stoutly-defended road blocks; of human endurance, especially among the wounded who struggled past the Japanese lines through miles of jungle and swamp back to our lines.

In this book, Gilbert Mant has accurately described the battle and has written a story that every Australian should read, particularly the young men of the new Australian force stationed in Malaya, who will tread the tracks and battlefields of the 8th Division.

1

The End and the Beginning

THE trucks with the badly wounded men inside were pulled into the side of the road so that the Japanese tanks could go through unimpeded.

This was the hardest moment of all—leaving the wounded behind. A young Australian officer, himself with a shrapnel would in his thigh, limped along the line of trucks. He had two clean white towels with him and the last of the morphia tablets. These he distributed to those who were suffering the most.

He said huskily, 'Good-bye, old man', to a fellow officer, but by the time he had come to the last truck he could not speak at all.

The young officer found thirty-one 'walking wounded' willing to make the last desperate bid for safety before the Japanese tanks rumbled down the road. The unwounded remnants of the two battalions, and attached troops, already had left in deployed formation for that miraculous gap in the ring of Japanese besiegers.

For four days and nights they had fought their way along the Bakri–Yong Peng road against overwhelming numbers of the enemy, who surrounded them on every side. Perhaps 1,800 strong at the beginning, they had fought the cream of the Japanese invading army in Malaya. Against them was the crack 1st Imperial Guards Division, probably 15,000 strong, and other Japanese storm troops.

At cruel cost to themselves they had saved the British left flank in Malaya at a critical period and made possible the extrication of our main army in the centre. Of them General Gordon Bennett was to say: 'No more astounding effort has been made in this war or the

last war. The Australians were in a hopeless position, but there was no thought or mention of surrender. They were as full of fight at the end as they were in the beginning. Such devotion to duty would be difficult to surpass.'

During those incredible four days and nights they had undergone continuous artillery and mortar fire from the ground; vicious dive-bombing and machine-gunning from the air. They had smashed their way through miles of road blocks; fought at one stage with axes like crusaders of old; crushed Japanese tank assaults at point-blank range; made irresistible bayonet charges singing 'Waltzin' Matilda'.

Food, water and morphia running low, by the third day they were being called the 'doomed battalions'. But you cannot doom gallantry or glory. They fought on.

And then they came to the bridge at Parit Sulong. They had done the impossible. Much of their equipment was still intact—the trucks, the Bren-gun carriers, the guns. Now they were only a few miles from the British lines, and there was new hope in the tired, sunken eyes of the battered but unconquerable band of Australians.

The bridge at Parit Sulong, when they had started on the long road home, had been in British hands. They had no reason to doubt that it had changed hands.

And so the end had come. The bridge at Parit Sulong, with its murderous ambush of Japanese machine-guns, its impregnable barricades. The terrible farewell to mortally wounded comrades in the trucks . . . and the break for safety through the gap. They might have preferred to stay there and die, had they known the ghastly fate awaiting their helpless comrades at sunset that day.

One of the men left behind, lying in a truck with a shattered leg, was thinking back as he waited for the Japanese to come: 'It's a long way back to that day at Walgrove when the old battalion was formed . . .'

It was indeed a long way back to that cold winter's morning in July 1940, when 22nd Australian Infantry Brigade came into being at Walgrove, New South Wales. They shuffled along in the manner of semi-raw recruits from the wing of militia battalions and formed up on the rise overlooking the stone building so aptly described on ordnance maps as a 'ruin'.

Soon those who elected to join 2/19th Battalion were caught in the complicated machinery of 'forming a battalion'. They came, some from the city, but chiefly from the Riverina district of New South Wales. They talked of Wagga, Cootamundra, Gundagai, Leeton, Griffith.

They were the real country breed. They had the puckered-up look of the Australian bushman in their steady eyes, in their loping walk, in their bronzed skins. Many of them were born to the rifle, to snap-shooting against kangaroos—it was to stand them in good stead later on.

They had all enlisted just after the fall of France. There were many men with four-figure incomes in civil life now proudly earning their 6s. a day. They were barristers, bank clerks, journalists, schoolmasters, rubbing shoulders with navvies, stockmen, prize-fighters, bricklayers and unemployed labourers. There was a large proportion of married men with children. They were all in it because they thought it was the right thing to do. They were the salt of the earth. They were at home with their CO, a Cootamundra doctor in private life, Colonel Duncan Maxwell. Their 2/IC was Major C. G. W. Anderson. We shall hear more of Maxwell and Anderson.

So 2/19th was born, pledged to uphold the traditions of the 'Fighting Nineteenth' of the First AIF. No veteran from Gallipoli and France of the old 19th can doubt how well that tradition was upheld, after reading this story. They lined up in countless queues for palliasses, uniforms, hats, rifles. Uproariously they shouted, 'You'll be sorry!' as new detachments came in from training camps, including a New Guinea contingent of eight. Life under canvas. 'Giggle suits' (those shapeless khaki training slacks and jackets). The 'bull-ring'. Round and round until they were giddy with new knowledge. Machine-gun stoppages. Lunging at each other with bayonets. Squad drill. Rifle exercises. More squad drill. They cursed the mechanics of infantry training, but they realised dimly later that it had taught them the coordination of mind and muscle.

Then the move to the Ingleburn huts and the feeling that they were getting out of their swaddling clothes. They were 'learning to crawl', as the CO put it. More bull rings. Longer route marches along hot, dusty roads, with 'Piccolo Pete' setting the pace on his penny whistle. The excruciating growing-pains of a band and the wail of bagpipes. The first bivouac. The joyous sensation of conquering Mount Everest as the weakest member reached the summit of Leppington with a full pack for the first time. A long, gruelling bivouac around Narellan and back. Company drill. More bull rings for luck. The first real 'stunt' with blank cartridges and smoke bombs. Slowly, but surely, they were getting the 'feel' of things. That memorable march through Sydney when they surprised even themselves by the discipline and precision of their marching. Although they said it themselves, it would be a

long time before Sydney saw Australian troops march again as 22nd Brigade marched that day.

They moved to Bathurst, cheered and greeted from innumerable houses as the special trains climbed the Blue Mountains. The 2/19th Battalion truly 'found itself' at Bathurst. There was a sudden stirring feeling one Sunday morning at church parade that it was a battalion at last. The men, as they swung behind the band, seemed to have a new spring in their stride, a pride in their bearing, a supreme confidence in themselves, their mates and the battalion. Now the bivouacs came thick and fast. Mock battles over the brown hills and down by Campbell's River, with the carriers charging recklessly over obstacles. The digging of a complete trench system and the first Brigade 'stunt' ever carried out in Australia, and pronounced a conspicuous success.

After a while they reckoned they had learnt as much as they would learn in Australia. They grew impatient for the overseas adventure. Rumours of early embarkation seemed confirmed when identification discs and sea bags were issued. The latrine wireless tipped Egypt, Darwin, Iraq, England, West Africa, Abyssinia—and the delightful suggestion of a goodwill tour to America. Tropical shorts (they had another blasphemous name for them later on) appeared and—heaven knows how it leaked out—the word Singapore was on every tongue. Then it was goodbye to Bathurst and fine Bathurst friends. Before they could catch their breaths almost, they were aboard their anonymous luxury liner with a noisy flotilla of launches to bid them farewell . . .

The voyage. The stifling blackouts with closed portholes at night. The blessed sunshine on the boat deck. Bull rings on board ship. Boxing tournaments. Lectures on tropical diseaes (and one disease not peculiar to the tropics). Lectures on the importance of maintaining 'British prestige' in foreign places. Bedlam in the wet canteens at night. Boat drill with lifebelts. The false German broadcast which 'sank' them somewhere or other. And then the gradual approach of the tropics and a sullen sort of heat from the sun.

2

Malaya in Peacetime

ONE morning on 18 February 1941, the 6,000 odd 'passengers' on the anonymous liner (it was the *Queen Mary*) crowded the decks as a woodlined coastline appeared. Ahead of them was a slim, grey British escorting cruiser, and, as the great liner slipped up the narrow straits, it was joined by a slimmer patrol vessel manned by brown-skinned Malays.

It was a great moment when the liner edged into the mighty Singapore (Ichabod) Naval Base. This was a great occasion, not only for the first Australian troops ever to reach Malaya, but also for Singapore itself. A British regimental band was there on the wharf. The governor of the Straits Settlements, Sir Shenton Thomas, was there. The GOC Malaya Command, General Bond, was there. And sundry big wigs. The Australians had fun and games throwing down pennies to the coolies on the wharf. When they saw the governor and the big wigs, the Australians couldn't resist throwing down pennies to them also. The big wigs took it in good part. They smiled. It was a good story for the newspapers, especially the American newspapers, which expect Australians to do that sort of thing. That same wharf was to have different things thrown on it later on.

News cabled to Australia about this time makes curious reading now. Here are some examples:

> *Batavia Daily News*: Singapore could hold out against a simultaneous land and sea attack for a year. Therefore we can see no direct danger for Singapore if the Japanese, in despair, act against the Netherlands East Indies.

Singapore Straits Times: As to the danger of an air attack, China's small air force and few guns do not provide a comparison, as the Japanese airmen will not find such conditions if they attack this country. They will learn the real meaning of aerial combat long before sighting our shores and, if an odd one got through, he would be warmly welcomed.

Sydney Sun: Washington—United States naval experts declare that Singapore is well-nigh invincible and could only be starved out by a blockade. They believe Japan could not capture Singapore without very heavy losses, even if there was not a single British battleship in the vicinity.

The troops were disembarked at various times during the day and night. Laden down like packhorses, the infantry battalions staggered on their 'sea legs' a quarter of a mile to the narrow-gauge FMS railway trains. At first the vivid green of the countryside fairly dazzled their eyes as the trains slid through paddocks, paddy fields, rubber estates and the jungles.

The 2/19th Battalion was allotted to Seremban, picturesque capital of the State of Negri Sembilan. Thanks to Japanese radio propaganda about the 'terrible Australians', the local reception was somewhat chilly at first. Some of the Chinese shopkeepers boarded up their shops. Hardly a woman ventured into the streets for at least a week. Rape, murder and looting were to be expected from these terrible Australians. These ugly stories were soon dispelled by the quiet behaviour of the AIF. Soon women came timidly into the open, their virtue inviolate. Soon 2/19th Battalion lines were swarming with cocoa-brown Malay youngsters with wide eyes and flashing white teeth. They bartered words in Malay for Australian postage stamps. The children spoke perfect English themselves, a tribute to the fine English schools in Malaya. They were jolly children, solemn one moment, then breaking into infectious merriment. Within a few weeks the Australians were firm friends with Malays, Chinese and Indians.

With the 2/19th Battalion at Seremban, and 2/18th and 2/20th Battalions theoretically in reserve twenty-five miles away at Port Dickson, famous beauty spot on the shores of the Strait of Malacca, training now began in earnest. They had to learn elementary lessons in a strange terrain and a strange climate. The Malayan jungle was a different proposition to the bleak bare hills of Ingleburn and Bathurst. A nose for direction, with which so many of the Riverina bushmen had been born, was likely to be put out of joint in the dense forests with their

jigsaw puzzle of narrow tracks.

The jungle was the jungle of Hollywood, a 'green hell', as the newspaper cliche has it so often. Anyone going into a jungle for the first time was familiar with it through reading stories about 'Darkest Africa'. It was exactly like that. A monstrously dense expanse of trees and undergrowth. The little trees, straight and as tightly packed as matchsticks, fought for a place in the sunlight against the giant cedars hundreds of feet above. Great vines, some as thick as ships' ropes, laced the trees together. It was the survival of the fittest in the jungle, for man, beast and vegetation alike. There was a silence, too; the unearthly silence of a great leafy cathedral. And yet it wasn't a silence at all, but really a great stillness. There were noises. The chatter of monkeys. A perceptible crash as a leaf fell to the ground. The 'hoot-hoot' of a strange tropical bird. The tiny squeak of a jungle animal. Rustlings and whisperings that could not be identified. But the great stillness dominated. The steamy, sweaty smell of the jungle arose everywhere. It was dark and dank 'inside'. Only occasional shafts of sunlight splashed and dappled down through the tangle of trees and vines.

It was a hard school the Australians learnt in. Lack of green vegetables and excessive sweating were largely responsible for a crop of worrying skin complaints. Nearly all of them had prickly heat, tinea and dhoby's itch, the last-named an exasperating itch in the nether regions apparently from germs carried in clothes after severe manhandling by native laundrymen. The Australians sweated and toiled and swore in the jungle and the hilly rubber country. Bivouacs meant sleeping under mosquito nets and wondering whether one would roll over into a king cobra during the night. They dragged through steamy, stinking swamps, and cursed as they got entangled in labyrinthine vines and creepers on rubber estates. Leeches, scorpions, snakes, mosquitoes—they suffered them all, but not in silence. They 'saw red' when well-meaning folk wanted to know if they were 'having a nice holiday'.

Some day proper recognition will be given to the foresight and realism of red-haired, pugnacious Major-General (now Lieutenant-General) H. Gordon Bennett, under whose direction the various Australian commanders at once set to work to train their men for jungle warfare. It meant, in many ways, revolutionary changes in the training the battalions had received in Australia.

The 2/19th Battalion was especially fortunate in having Colonel Maxwell and Major Anderson as No. 1 and No. 2. Maxwell, a giant of a man, was known naturally enough as 'Tiny' Maxwell, and for his size, had extraordinary physique and stamina. His military career

had been as unusual as it had been distinguished. By profession a physician and surgeon, he served in the 1914–18 war as a front-line soldier, trooper, sniper, NCO, and lastly as officer, winning the Military Cross and several mentions in despatches. The war over he returned to the practice of medicine and became one of the best known doctors in southern New South Wales. On the outbreak of war he offered himself again for military service, characteristically seeking service, not with a medical unit in which he would readily have gained high rank but with an infantry battalion. Later on Maxwell was to make another characteristic gesture in the last tragic days of Singapore. He sought, and got, General Bennett's permission to stay behind in one of Singapore's military hospitals, where doctors were desperately needed.

Anderson, who was to win the Victoria Cross on the road to Parit Sulong, was another remarkable character. An Englishman, he was born at Cape Town, South Africa, in 1897. In the last war he served with the King's African Rifles and was awarded the Military Cross in the East African campaign. He was a master of jungle warfare, and a big-game hunter whose fame was known throughout Africa. Jungle lore and military strategy and tactics were his hobbies. He met and married an Australian girl in South Africa, and began sheep-farming near Young, New South Wales, in 1937. As soon as the war broke out he joined up again. Anderson was a compact, sturdily built man, who wore glasses over his keen penetrating eyes. He was a fast, precise, fluent talker with a shrewd sense of humour. In the Malayan jungle he was in his element. He predicted with uncanny foreknowledge the tactics the Japanese would use if they invaded Malaya. He lectured the men, in effect: 'The jungle will frighten you at first. Don't let it. There are simply no terrors in a jungle if you know it. You have to learn the jungles here. You must think you are on safari stalking wild animals. You have got to learn to be Boy Scouts again. You must learn the jungle tracks intimately. You must learn stealth and silence and how to find your way about in the dark. You must learn to be as cunning as the wild animals themselves. You must learn to live on as little food as possible and to do without water for long periods. Japan has crack troops trained in jungle warfare for years. Do not underestimate them. Through owning tin mines and rubber estates—curiously enough in strategical parts of Malaya—the Japanese have detailed plans and knowledge of the country. They will probably try to sneak round, behind our rear and flanks and catch us unawares. But, remember, two can play at that game. *We must learn to stalk the Japanese like animals . . .*'

He and Maxwell drummed in the lesson over and over again. They

drummed in also the importance of fire control; to shoot only when the shot would take effect. The lesson was so well learnt that it played a decisive part in the heroic battle of Muar River. The same thing was happening in other Australian units. Intelligence sections spent weeks in the AIF's war station, in the Mersing area of the east coast, familiarising themselves with the dense jungle areas and mapping hundreds of narrow tracks, watercourses, roads and other featues, some of them never mapped before.

The months passed, and the Japanese threat seemed to recede further and further into the limbo of speculative things. The polite little Japanese hairdressers in every Malayan town cut the hair of the Australians soldiers and asked innumerable questions. The eager little Japanese photographers canvassed to develop films taken by the soldiers. The slant-eyed little Japanese prostitutes in the hotels looked for Australian customers.,

Boredom set in amongst the Australians, who did not take kindly to what they called 'garrison duties'. They wanted to be fighting with their brother divisions in the Middle East. Scores of applications were made for transfer to units outside Malaya. Satirical notices began to appear outside tents and atap huts: 'MENZIES' GLAMOUR BOYS', 'WE CAME HERE FOR GLORY AND ALL WE GOT WAS GLAMOUR', 'WHEN DO WE FIGHT?' and so on.

3

The Tuan Besars

MUCH has been written, and much will be written, about the European population of Malaya before and during the Pacific war. This population, amounting to about 30,000 included a large number of Scots, Australians and New Zealanders, chiefly engaged in rubber planting and tin mining.

Tribute should be paid at once to the British and Dominion women in various parts of Malaya, who so quickly provided canteens for the Australian soldiers when they reached the country, and gave up so much of their time to operating them. Notable examples were the Anzac Club in Singapore, which a gallant band of women kept going until the Japanese invaders were actually on Singapore Island, and the Anzac Club at Kuala Lumpur. It should be mentioned, however, that no voluntary effort was made before the arrival of the Australians to make easier the lives of British garrison troops, some of whom had been in Malaya for four years. The British Tommies were sore about this preferential treatment to the AIF, and rightly so. A prophet as lowly as a British private soldier had very little honour amongst his own people in Malaya in prewar days.

To understand the background of the '*tuan besars*' ('big shots' in other words) of British Malaya, it is necessary to recognise that Malaya, in common with other British possessions in the Far East, was an exploited country. It was exploited commercially in the same way as the Dutch exploited Java, or the Australians exploited New Guinea.

To be sure, in Malaya, as in Java, the coming of the European exploiters brought with it material benefits, Malaya had good main roads, a fine

railway system, good schools, and administrative buildings. The lot of the Malay had improved, but it is doubtful whether he was intrinsically any happier than in the days when he lived in his kampong and was a fierce fighting man.

The British dominated the country commercially and politically, and the native inhabitants were the subject races. Exaggerated stories have been told that all Malays and Tamils in Malaya were fifth-columnists and traitors when war did break out. This was not borne out by facts, although there were many cases of treachery. Whereas in Burma the politically discontented Burmese actually bore arms against the British, the Malays in Malaya, of whom there were over 2,000,000, as a race maintained a disinterested neutrality. The truth of the matter is that the native races were completely indifferent regarding the Allied cause. Without actively opposing it, they had little cause to love the British regime of the type Malaya enjoyed, and felt that if Japan won, it would mean merely a change of masters. They were taught in the English schools that Britain was a benevolent master and was there to protect against aggression. Their loyalty, if it ever really existed, suffered a rude shock when war broke out. In many cases they were left to fend for themselves.

The Chinese, of whom there were more than 2,350,000 in Malaya, were on a different footing. The merchant class had practically a commercial stranglehold in various Malayan towns and cities, and had considerable investments at stake. It was this fact and the fact that China was already at war with Japan, rather than any particular love for the British, that ranged the Chinese so solidly on the British side. Time and time again Chinese of all classes took great risks in aiding British and Australian soldiers who were cut off from their units by the Japanese. And yet the Chinese had grievances. For instance, the Chinese manager of a big British store in a certain town was paid less than his European clerk, presumably because he was a Chinese. This was called upholding 'British prestige'.

Australian private soldiers were quickly aware of the undercurrent of hostility against the British in Malaya. One of the reasons which made this apparent to them was that, as private soldiers, they were barred from European clubs in Malaya, such as the Selangor ('Spotted Dog') Club at Kuala Lumpur and the Sungei Ujong Club at Seremban. In some cases the question of admitting other ranks was put to a vote and defeated. It is only fair to the clubs to say that the Australian military authorities in Malaya made it fairly plain that they were opposed to the principle. From the disciplinary point of view, this was

understandable enough, but it led to some quaint situations. For instance, the volunteer AIF being what it is, there were many privates who were respected members of exclusive Australian clubs, and they carried letters of introduction to the secretaries of affiliated clubs in Malaya.

They were refused admittance because of their military rank in the same way as they were refused admittance to Raffles Hotel in Singapore. In Australia at this time such well-known clubs as the Royal Sydney Golf Club, the Union Club and others were extending hospitality to Malayan judges and civil servants (privates in the Malayan VDC) who were members of affiliated Malayan clubs. The Australian clubs were angry, and it was only the outbreak of war with Japan, when clubs did not matter very much anyway, that stopped 'retaliatory' measures.

In all parts of Malaya the cultured class of Indians and Chinese had first-class clubs of their own, and many Australian private soldiers soon found that here they were indeed welcome. Soon the Australians were their friends, and gained their confidence. It was apparent, especially amongst the educated Indians, that they and the Chinese were treated as distinct 'outsiders' by the Europeans. They were socially snubbed and had been for years. Some of them were graduates from Oxford and Cambridge, and the snubs rankled. It seemed to them that their membership of the British Commonwealth of Nations was so much hypocrisy. It was the stirrings of national consciousness, and the war brought it to the surface. The Australians, raw in the intricacies of imperialism, could not but feel sympathy for them.

No more biting commentary on the European outlook in Malaya can be given than to mention that Australian soldiers, banned from their own clubs, were accused of 'lowering British prestige' by mixing so intimately with the Indians and Chinese in their clubs.

Blame it on the climate, the life they were forced to lead—but unquestionably there was an acute class consciousness and a moral flabbiness amongst the Europeans in Malaya of this period. Here snobbishness ruled supreme. A British resident was an official and social god. The *tuan besars* were minor gods, with many worshippers. The story goes in Malaya that Noel Coward's 'Mad Dogs and Englishmen', that cruel satire on the white man in the East, was inspired after a Singapore hostess had rebuked him for some inconsequential social misdemeanour.

The Pacific war proved beyond much doubt that the White Man's Prestige in the Far East was never founded on racial prestige, but simply on fear. The crumbling of native support in Malaya came when the strength of British arms began to totter.

What has to be said about the European civil servant, the rubber and tin man in Malaya, should not be interpreted as an 'attack' on them. They were all Michael Arlen's 'charming people', and, through lack of official guidance, the events after the outbreak of war with Japan left them in a rather pathetic daze. They saw their whole world collapsing around them; not only material bomb damage but spiritual damage. Many of them lost everything they possessed. The whole thing to them was fantastically unreal. They walked around, bewildered, unable to understand the catastrophe.

For years they had enjoyed a despotic and arrogant social rule. They had paid no income tax. They had lived in delightful bungalows with an abundance of native servants. Most families were able to support a syce (chaffeur), cook, house boy, *amah* (nurse), gardener and perhaps others. Many women going to Malaya for the first time had wanted to lead practical lives in their new homes. But they found, for instance, that Chinese cooks resented their presence in the kitchen; it was a loss of 'face'. Inevitably they drifted into the easy life of the tropics. Many women found that they had literally nothing to do during the daytime.

Life on rubber plantations was not exactly strenuous. A manager worked early in the morning and again late in the afternoon overseeing his colony of Tamil labourers. Immediately after luncheon all Europeans took their afternoon siesta until about 4 p.m.; it was a solemn rite. The equatorial climate was enervating; the siesta was regarded as absolutely necessary from the health point of view. And so was the regular drinking of whisky and gin. At night European life revolved around the clubs. There was a great deal of drinking and a great deal of gossip and scandal.

It is impossible to escape the conclusion that the Europeans in Malaya, as well as in other parts of the Far East, led preposterously spoilt, artificial existences. Life was a terrible round of leisured boredom. They lived in an outdated atmosphere of Kipling, and nobody was wise enough to see the coming of the tragedy that was to engulf them. Worst of all, the climate was considered unsuitable for children, so that when they were about eight years old they had to be sent abroad to school. This enforced separation robbed many Malayan homes of a normal family life. It flung Europeans more and more into the clubs, and it created moral looseness.

Women did not have enough with which to occupy their minds. It inevitably bred in them an attitude of *tid'apa* ('it doesn't matter'). Malaya suffered acutely from *tid* apathy. It wasn't the people's fault;

it was simply force of circumstances; but it did not help to stabilise matters when Malaya was falling to pieces. When the blow fell there were fine examples of courage and self-sacrifice by men and women alike. But underlying it all was a feeling of helplessness, a complete inability to understand why the native races were so indifferent to the fate of the Europeans.

This was the civil background to the Malayan tragedy of 1942, caused largely through the lack of direction from higher quarters. Anyone who knows the story can only feel unutterably sorry for the victims of it.

There is no helplessness or indifference today. Many of the victims of 1942 are courageously back on their rubber estates with their equally courageous women, fighting behind barbed-wire barricades and machine-guns to hold their place in the sun and to carry the increasingly heavy burden of the white man.

The enemy they fight today is not *tid*-apathy, but ruthless and fanatical foreign ideologists. Paradoxically, many of the Chinese who fought a guerilla warfare against the Japanese in 1942–45 are now fighting just as implacably under the Communist flag against the people of Malaya.

It was once said that 'Malaya is a country owned by the Malays, run by the British for the benefit of the Chinese'.

Nobody today quite knows who Malaya is being run by or for—but its future is still of immense importance to Australia.

4

The Onslaught

EARLY in December 1941, the blow fell in Malaya, as it fell at Pearl Harbor and in the Philippines. The Japanese swiftly occupied Thailand; pounced on Kota Bahru in the north-east corner of Malaya; swept down from Singgora in Thailand into Kedah and towards the strategically important and lovely island of Penang, where Australian troops are being stationed in 1955. In Kedah the 2nd Battalion, Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, met the first shock of the onslaught. One company of Argylls and an AIF transport unit were actually inside Thailand the day after war broke out. On the previous day, it was stated, this company of Argylls had stood to on the Kedah–Thailand border with orders to proceed to Singgora; but the Japanese were one jump ahead and had already occupied this vital railway junction. There have been tales of Foreign Office political caution about this move into Thailand; anyhow, the chance was missed.

On 9 December Japanese reconnaisance planes flew over Penang. On the following day the Japanese launched their first big aerial blitz. The town, docks and Chinatown were mercilessly bombed. The story of Penang provides the sorriest chapter of the whole Malayan campaign. Evacuation apparently was decided upon, as a military necessity, from the first bombing. Hardly a shot was fired in defence of the island, which commanded the northern end of Malacca Strait and the sea and air lanes to India, and the Middle East. On 11 December Penang was bombed and machine-gunned again. On 13 December there was another bombing. This time three Brewster Buffalo fighters went up to tackle the Japanese. One returned.

There were disgraceful stories of the evacuation; of private motor cars belonging to mining officials, golf sticks, tennis rackets taking up valuable space on the evacuation ships. The British still maintained the sanctity of private property; they had not yet learnt the Russian 'scorched earth' policy. At Penang huge stores of rice and other foodstuffs were left behind, ostensibly to feed the Chinese, Indians and Malays for whom there was no room on the evacuation ships. Stores of clothing, equipment and ammunition were also left intact. Only the valves were destroyed in the Penang radio station, one of the most powerful in the Far East. (The Japanese had it working within a few days, pumping out propaganda throughout the campaign.) Worst of all, no effort whatever was made to destroy the small boats that cluttered up Eastern Harbour with a forest of spars. Sampans, tonkangs, ferries, barges, they were all left intact. These vessels later on helped to seal the doom of Malaya.

The great withdrawal began down the main north–south road, lifeline of Malaya. Soon the Japanese had complete mastery of the air. Our Buffalo fighters had no chance against the faster, more heavily armed Japanese Navy O (known in Australia as Zeros). Prodigies of courage were performed by our fighter pilots who, with stoical disregard of odds, took up their crates and gave battle to an immensely superior enemy.

Meanwhile came staggering news of the destruction of the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* by Japanese dive bombers. No single event rocked the morale of Malaya more than the loss of these fine ships through lack of aerial protection.

British and Indian troops were taking the brunt of the Japanese attack, with varying success.

Some Indian troops fought well. Others were green and raw and collapsed under pressure, especially after their officers were killed. Some, indeed, were later traitorously to act as guards for the Japanese over British and Australian prisoners of war.

The neglect of their men after parade hours by officers (English and Indian) of the Indian Army resulted in a loss of battle morale that helped to lose Malaya.

But not so with the tough little Gurkhas, so frighteningly like Japanese in looks, who were loyal to a man and slit Jap throats efficiently and quietly.

The Argylls, grand fighting men, always with the pertinacious AIF 2/3 Reserve Motor Transport unit in attendance, reached Singapore Island less than 100 strong. Malaya can go on their battle honours

without shame, with pride in their achievement.

The Battle of Malaya was lost before it started, lost in the myth of Singapore's impregnability, lost in the gross underestimation of Japan's strength and military cleverness, lost in the belief that it would be impossible to use tanks in Malaya. Australia cannot escape its share of blame for all of these things.

Day by day Japanese air strength grew. Day by day our fighting troops were subjected to persistent aerial bombardment and machine-gunning. The Japanese worked to a timetable. The planes began to appear at about 8.30 a.m.; swept the skies, with their swift scudding clouds, until 1 p.m.; took an hour off for lunch; started up again at 2 p.m.; and finally stopped for the day about 4.30 p.m. There was little night bombing at the front. Why bomb at night when you can bomb throughout the daylight hours and pick your target without opposition except from ground fire? Why, indeed?

The Japanese bombed cunningly. Seldom did their bombs fall slap into the middle of a road they wanted to use themselves later on. They knew the personnel of transport convoys dashed for the shelter of rubber trees beside the road. Their bombs fell just off the road, the machine-gun bullets whistled and pinged as the planes zoomed down almost at tree top level. They bombed the outskirts of aerodromes, because they knew it was there that our planes would be dispersed. They strafed numbers and numbers of our planes on the ground.

They did not cause many casualties by aerial attack, but as the weeks went on this daily and continuous strafing had its effect on tired men. It did not break their morale, but it made them nervy and dispirited by the lack of our own aircraft. Occasionally one of our fighters would be seen at the front, but only occasionally. They had a satirical saying at the front—'Famous last words—*that's one of ours!*'

There was the story of the Indian manning a Bofors gun and firing at a strange plane. An officer suddenly recognised it as a Buffalo and shouted, 'Don't fire—that's one of ours!' 'I don't believe it!' responded the Indian and blazed away harder than ever. Some Australian fighter pilots had hair-raising escapes from our own anti-aircraft fire.

The Japanese were attacking our vital aerodromes one by one and compelling our evacuation. This was their plan and it worked admirably for them. What air strength we had was being forced southwards, and soon our fighters were being held back in preparation for the inevitable defence of Singapore Island itself.

Night after night the long convoys wound along the roads in the darkness as the troops fell back. There was a psychological reaction

in the tired soldiers at the knowledge of this mighty withdrawal. There was a stand at Kuala Kangsar, on the border of Perak, and for a moment it seemed as if the Japanese momentum might be halted. But the chance, if it was a chance, was lost.

Now the threat to the west coast was growing. Using the sampans and barges we had so obligingly left behind in Penang, the Japanese were landing and infiltrating around our flank. Small British naval forces did their best to intercept these landings, but because of lack of aerial support, they could operate only under cover of darkness. The British land commander was in an unenviable dilemma. Lack of aerial reconnaissance denied him knowledge of the strength of these enemy landing parties. He had no reserves. The ranks of his troops were thinned by casualties. If he detached a strong force to deal with these infiltrations it would weaken his main front. If he detached a small force and they were overwhelmed by superior numbers, he was that much worse off.

He chose the safe course and withdrew his forces to a line parallel with the Japanese landings. The line straddling the main road further east had perforce to withdraw in conjunction to protect its flank. This see-saw movement continued inexorably down the peninsula. Ahead of it went a thin pathetic stream of Chinese refugees. They carried their belongings in rickshaws, ox-drawn carts, bicycles. Women trudged along the road with babies slung over their shoulders. Shops were smashed open and looting, afterwards controlled, was rife. One aged wrinkled Chinese was seen on the road one day pulling his rickshaw with a large modern barber's chair stuck in the back. Others looted sewing machines, rolls of silk, radio sets, cases of beer. The shops were wide open; why not take what was in them?

Japanese troops, disguised as Malays, were infiltrating through the British lines. It was difficult to tell a Japanese from a Chinese. Japanese snipers were picking off British soldiers from rubber trees. Fifth-columnists were operating with extreme cunning. Long banana leaves, the shine on them easily discernible from the air, were found pointing towards the British headquarters. Bombs followed. Reminiscent of a Hans Andersen fairy story, trails of rice were found leading to British positions. Shirts innocently hanging on a line were full of menace; the arms indicated a gun position.

The convoys wound and wound along the roads, carrying ammunition, food and the wounded. Food was a major worry. Indian troops needed special food. British troops had not learnt, as the Dutch taught their white officers in Java, to live on rice. The Japanese had none of these worries; they lived on the country as they moved remorselessly through it.

The great withdrawal went on, sometimes five miles each night, sometimes ten, twenty, thirty miles. It was a skilful withdrawal, with always hope that aerial reinforcements would arrive in time to establish and hold a Malacca–Mersing defence line. They never arrived.

Veterans of World War I frequently express an almost contemptuous bewilderment at the inability of the British forces to 'dig in' and maintain a definite line in Malaya. They point to the terrific artillery bombardments our troops sustained in France in 1914–18, and draw an unreal parallel with the Japanese aerial bombardments in Malaya. They fail to recognise that the 1939–45 warfare was not static — except for the winter campaigns in Russia — but fluid. Territorial gains, in terms of mere territory, were not decisive. It was a war of swift movements and counter thrusts, for which strong aerial support was essential. There were no 'safe' areas in the rear. A modern army's rear is just as vulnerable as its front line. No matter how 'impregnable' the Maginot Lines of France, Greece or Malaya, overwhelming enemy air strength could isolate them or reduce them to impotency by attacks on communications and supply lines. There are no 'cushy' jobs in the modern war; the clerk at Divisional Headquarters and the much abused 'brass-hat' are liable to be under fire just as much as the soldier in the front line.

In Malaya it was a constant battle to maintain communications and protect our flanks and rear against a clever and fast-moving enemy who always held the initiative. Whether by more offensive methods — even lacking control of the air — we could have struck back decisively is a matter of debate. In no circumstances, however, can such a campaign be compared to the battles of France in 1914–18 or Gallipoli.

So far, apart from the pugnacious 2/3 Reserve MT with the Argylls, the Gurkhas and the Punjabis in their care, the AIF had not yet been engaged.

5

The AIF Strikes at Last

FOR two months the AIF, consisting chiefly of 22nd and 27th Infantry Brigades, had been at their battle stations in the Mersing area on the east coast. Strategists before the war had been convinced that the Japanese would strike at this junction of the roads to Kluang and Johore Bahru. As it happened, the Japanese, to all intents and purposes, bypassed it.

The Australians had prepared strong defensive positions in their sector. 'Artillery Hill', at Mersing, overlooking the beach and the small islands offshore, constituted a powerful menace to any seaborne invading force. When war broke out the Australians at once applied the most drastic and realistic 'scorched earth' policy Malaya ever knew. Whole villages were burnt to the ground. Mining machinery was smashed to atoms. Every native inhabitant of the area was compulsorily evacuated. Thereafter anyone straying into the Australian lines did so at considerable personal peril.

The Australians were quick on the draw. They knew every inch of the country, every jungle track, every twist of the watercourses and rivers. They were fighting fit and 'rearing to go'. No troops in Malaya had been more rigorously trained in every aspect of jungle warfare. And already small bands of Australian commandos were slipping northwards at night and creating havoc behind the Japanese lines. As Anderson had said, two could play at that game.

Anderson, now a colonel, had command of 2/19th Battalion. On 1 August, Colonel Maxwell had been promoted brigadier and given command of 27th Infantry Brigade.

The Australians stood by their posts, watching the sea for the expected invasion. As the weeks went by nothing much happened around Mersing. At night they heard the distant and distinctive whine of Japanese bomber formations as they flew high overhead on their way to bomb Singapore. The Japanese, who must surely have known of the Australian positions, chose to ignore them. It was an ironic situation. After nearly a year in Malaya, the AIF still seemed to be baulked of a chance to show their mettle. They began to fret again. They itched for action.

They would have been savage had they known of fifth-column tales circulating amongst the British troops further north to the effect that the Australians would not fight because of the lack of air support. This story was pinned on the half-forgotten statement of a former Australian prime minister, who said after Greece and Crete that never again would Australian troops go into action without adequate air protection. The statement was wickedly revived and embellished and caused intense bitterness amongst British and Indian troops who so far had borne the brunt of the fighting. War correspondents' stories about this fifth-column activity asking that Mr Curtin, the Australian prime minister, should issue an unqualified denial, were censored in Singapore.

As it happened there was a more direct way of scotching these malicious rumours. The Australians went into action. It had an electrifying effect on Malaya.

It was at Gemas, about 150 miles north-west of Singapore, that men of the AIF first fought the Japanese—always remembering the deeds of 2/3 Reserve MT, who were still battling through bombs and machine-gun bullets from Japanese planes along the roads.

The 9th Indian Division, which had fought at Kota Bahru and Kuantan, was very fatigued. It was decided to rest them at Batu Anam, just south of Gemas, while the Australians formed a line in front of them to take the first shock of the expected Japanese attack.

One result was that the 27th Australian Infantry Brigade, under Brigadier Maxwell, had to be taken out of their position at Mersing. It was a great day for everyone when the AIF swung into action. There was a broad grin on the face of a Provost Corporal directing traffic at the Ayer Hitam crossroads as, hour after hour, the Australians drove through from Kluang and turned north. They sang the AIF's most popular bawdy song, 'Oh, Gord blimey how ashamed I was!' They beefed out 'Waltzin' Matilda'. They made rude gestures at the corporal, who grinned back, as thrilled as the men themselves. This was the day they had waited for so long. Now it was to be proved whether they were 'Glamour

Boys' or not. Bronzed as berries, stripped to the waist, with their equipment beside them, they went past, hour by hour, truck by truck. The guns rumbled up and the carriers rattled down the bitumen road.

I touched her on the knee—how ashamed I was!
I touched her on the knee—how ashamed I was!
I touched her on the knee; she said 'You're rather free!'
Oh Gord blimey how ashamed I was!
(And other verses progressively indecent.)

Never before had the Ayer Hitam crossroads responded to a song like that. It rang through the rubber trees, through the kampongs, and the song it sang was 'The Australians are coming!' They went into it singing, cheering, jubilant, eager to prove how well they had absorbed their lessons. They proved it, but they were not aware that it was too late, six months, twelve months, too late.

The first defensive position in the country near Gemas, an important railroad centre, was covered by young rubber trees four or five feet high, and the ground was fairly open and hilly. The Australian line was covered by the guns of the 2/15th Field Regiment.

It was some miles in advance of this position at Gemas that 2/30th (N.S.W.) Battalion, under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel F. G. ('Black Jack') Galleghan (now Brigadier Galleghan) decided to ambush the advancing enemy. An ambush unit of one company commander and twenty men were stationed four miles beyond the main advance party. They prepared a bridge for demolition and then waited patiently for the advancing Japanese tanks and infantry. It was a perfect trap and the Japanese went head-first into it. The Australians let the enemy go through, and then blew up the bridge sky high. The Japanese, still not suspecting a trap, marched on in a straggling column straight into the devastating fire of the advanced AIF forces, in well-concealed positions beside the road.

At least eight Japanese tanks and a whole battalion of Japanese infantry were wiped out in an audacious series of actions, of which this was the prelude. The company commander and his twenty men had a torrid time, but they extricated themselves at night; hid in a Malay kampong (village); and eventually rejoined the unit.

Here is a graphic first-hand story of the first ambush, written to his father by a young Australian gunner who took part in it with his troop:

'Marching up to a bridgehead at a river crossing we concealed ourselves in the jungle flanking a sunken road. For 48 hours we waited, watched,

dozed and munched bully beef and biscuits—drenched by the incessant rain. The nights were eerie in the dense dank undergrowth, the waxworks atmosphere being accentuated by the phosphorescent fungus and glow-worms, whilst the haunting calls of the night creatures but served to emphasise our isolation.

'Dawn of the great day broke clear. A few straggling vehicles of our rearguard crossed the bridge—then nothing. The terse comment of the infantry commander telephoning back to the battalion that anything further coming would be Japanese gave us a thrill of anticipation.

'We had not long to wait. At about four o'clock in the afternoon the look-out announced, "Large party of cyclists crossing the bridge". We froze and my heart stepped into "high" as on the roadway fifteen feet below passed the first of the enemy. Oblivious of the fate in store for them, they cycled easily under our gaze, laughing and chattering while Aussie fingers tightened around triggers and Mills bomb pins.

'After some hundreds had crossed the river and entered the cutting, the captain gave the order. With a roar like the crack of doom, the bridge and the Japanese on it soared skywards on a dense column of smoke and fragments.

'This was the signal for hellfire to break out. From each side of the road for a length of half a mile the Aussies poured into the congested, panic-stricken ranks of the Japanese cyclists a devastating fire with machine-guns, sub-machine guns and rifles; the while our men leisurely removed pins from Mills grenades and rolled them over the lip of the defile to further rend the enemy ranks with their ear-splitting bursts.

'After a brief but terrible few minutes, the order was given to retire. The job was done, the road a shambles on which not a living thing remained.

'We now had to return to our lines for the major action, for which the ambush was but a prelude. Issuing from our post, we found our path to the road being gamely contested by a party of Japanese partly concealed under a thicket. A brisk exchange of fire, and they too were silent.

'At this juncture it became apparent that we had become separated from the main body of the company. As we had a number of wounded and the strength of the enemy that had escaped into the jungle was unknown, it was decided to avoid the road lest we be repaid in our own coin and to execute an arc back to our own lines some miles to the rear. Easier said than done!

'After proceding along these lines in single file through fairly dense undergrowth, we were grounded by a burst of machine-gun spray. We

returned the fire and had the satisfaction of seeing the body of a Japanese gunner slump to the ground from the tree where he had been concealed.

'For two hours we lay doggo while the Japanese view hallooed in the jungle around us, even calling out "Hello, Joe!" in an attempt to get us to betray our position. Eventually, silence again settled over the jungle, and the whispered order to prepare to move was passed by word of mouth from the head of our little column. All but one arose to obey. He had died quietly as a result of the last encounter. Later we found that two more had been wounded at the same time.

'Following a compass bearing we marched wi out hindrance, first on a track, then through virgin jungle over precipitous rain-drenched hills for eight hours of darkness. It was so black that we were as though blinded; each man had to cling to the bayonet scabbard of the preceding man to keep the file together. Only touch and hearing were of use.

'A nightmare night, indeed. I cannot hope to describe that slipping, crawling and floundering over invisible logs and vines, into pits that could not be seen; the panting, gasping and cursing with bursting lungs as unseen swamps and mire added almost insuperable handicaps to our progress.

'Eventually, at about 2 a.m., ten hours after the start of the action, the aching limbs of even the well-trained infantry demanded a halt. Sinking to the drenched jungle floor, we snatched a few hours of fitful rest.

'At the first hint of daylight we were on our feet again and feeling the first pangs of hunger. A muster produced five small tins of bully beef between the thirty of us. We had a mouthful with a biscuit and resumed our climb.

'About noon we emerged from the jungle at a point near that occupied by our old front lines to find the Japanese in possession. They took a few ineffectual potshots at us and once more we slid into the jungle. All day we kept up the pressure in the jungle and rubber country, and at one stage we even marched along the railway line, relying on Japanese shortsightedness to lead them to believe that we were one of their own patrols.

'Towards nightfall we approached a town, and, not being sure of its ownership at the time, once more we took to the friendly jungle which by now had lost much of its awe and mystery. Skirting the town, we emerged at dusk on to the local golf course, which our scouts had found deserted. A Japanese helmet in the ransacked clubhouse, where we had hoped to get badly-needed food, proved that he was still ahead of us.

'Had we required any further proof as to our whereabouts, it was available shortly afterwards by the commencement of our own artillery barrage, which for some hours proceeded to pound methodically every object in the neighbourhood. It was a change for an artilleryman to be on the receiving end for a while, but our detached interest changed to personal concern when they ceased to whistle and the clang of the burst was followed by the "bee-buzz" of fragments of HE flying amongst us. We moved 500 yards to the left, and after counting heads and posting sentries, settled down and slept through the rest of the bombardment.

'Before dawn we set forth again, and by this time the lack of food was evidenced by the heavy drag of our feet, made more leaden by saturation with mud and water on our boots and stockings. Jungle, rubber, swamps and streams, on we plodded until halfway through the morning we emerged into a clearing containing a native house. It was inhabited by a friendly Tamil, who saved our bacon by producing coconut, pineapples and biscuits.

'This humble repast was like a seven-course meal to our famished band. With renewed energy and hope we pressed on by compass to where we thought our lines should be. Our course now lay through rubber, which was fairly easy going, except for the hills, which betrayed our aching muscles and overwrought lungs.

'After a few hours a number of our aircraft (rare sight) passed overhead going north-west. They were greeted by machine gun fire from a post behind us. It looked as through we were through. A little later we heard the approach of an armoured vehicle. We took to cover to give it appropriate welcome should it prove to be hostile, but boy, oh boy! it was one of ours, and we actually ran to meet it . . .'

It was our first clash with the Japanese (said General Gordon Bennett in his official narrative of the action) and it was important that our men should establish the fact that they were better soldiers than their enemies. They did it. Colonel Galleghan, who was awarded the DSO for his conduct in battle, realised that in this first encounter he had to show his men the way they were to fight. He led the men personally, and set a stimulating example.

On one occasion, Brigadier Maxwell sat beside Galleghan at the telephone while the captain commanding the forward company sent back a 'ball to ball' description of the fight.

'They are coming at us now,' said the captain. 'They are attacking from the left. They are holding their hats in their hands. They are shouting not to shoot because they are Indians.'

Galleghan to Maxwell: 'Are they Indians?'

Maxwell to Galleghan: 'Tell them to shoot; there are no Indians in that sector.'

Galleghan: 'Shoot; there are no Indians in front.'

Over the telephone could be heard the rattling and pinging of rifle fire; the hoarse cries as the Australians charged into action with their bayonets. This was the moment they had been waiting for. They made the most of it.

It was estimated that at least 1,000 Japanese were killed in their first clash with the Australians. The AIF in Malaya had blooded themselves, and their enemies. 'Menzies' Glamour Boys' were content at last.

6

The Crisis at Muar River

THERE was dog-fighting along the Gemas sector for two days. Gradually, in accordance with General Bennett's design, the Japanese were drawn on to the main defended position, which the Indians were preparing, and they were snugly held there. The Australians had strong fighting patrols on each flank preventing any infiltrating parties of Japanese from getting round our flanks through the jungle.

It had just been decided to replace the tired 2/30th Battalion with the 2/29th (Victorian) Battalion when the situation at Muar, on the west coast, became critical. The 45th Indian Brigade, new troops with hardly any experience of the difficult Malayan conditions, could not stop the Japanese, who crossed the Muar river and forced them back.

First Australian troops to engage the Japs in this sector were gunners of 65th Battery, 2/15th Field Regiment, under the command of Major W. Julius, who had been hurried across from the east coast to support the wavering Indians.

Their eight 25-pounder guns had been proofed only three days before they went into action, but the guns were to run hot in the next six days. Two troops of the battery were separated in a Jap ambush in Muar and had to engage in street-fighting like infantrymen to get out of the town.

The position became dangerous. A Japanese advance would imperil our flank and threaten our line of communications well to the rear. Something had to be done, and done quickly. The 2/29th Battalion, instead of relieving the 2/30th, was hustled into lorries and rushed across to the Muar front.

It arrived just in time to halt the Japanese advance. In halting it, the 2/29th Battalion suffered grievous casualties in some of the most ferocious fighting of the Malayan campaign. They arrived at Muar at dusk on Saturday, 17 January, and were attacked half an hour later. Another violent attack was launched against them at dawn the next morning followed by an assault by light Japanese tanks, apparently ferried across the Muar River.

In half an hour gunners of the 4th Anti Tank Regiment had destroyed all ten tanks! The battle took place on a road running through a rubber plantation. The Australians once again used ambush methods. The guns were perfectly camouflaged beside the road, and again the Japanese went unsuspectingly into the trap. There was savage joy on the faces of the Australian gunners as the tanks rumbled along the road and were shattered one by one at point-blank range. Soon the road was blazing with smashed and burning enemy tanks. One tank, coming up behind two others that had already been disabled, was sheltered by them from our gunners. The gunners were not to be denied their kill. They dashed up an embankment and hurled hand grenades and 'Molotov cocktails' on to the tank. The Japanese crews who tried to escape from the blazing tanks were mown down by Tommy-gun fire.

This was a magnificent start for the new troops, and they were jubilant. Meanwhile, the Japanese in the centre near Batu Anam had had enough after the thrashing the 2/30th had given them. Pressure ceased there more or less. Rapidly and cleverly the Japanese transferred troops to the Muar front, and the enemy launched what was to all intents and purposes a full-scale offensive. At Muar now were the 1st Japanese Imperial Guards Division, crack seasoned soldiers who had been fighting in China for years. With them in Malaya was the famous Japanese 5th Division. These two divisions had a remarkable record. They had been associated together in many notable actions, especially the capture of Canton, where they made an astonishing forced march. The 5th Division were usually used for landing operations, at which they were expert. Behind them would come the Guards, storm troops of undoubted valour and dash. It was these soldiers who faced the Australians at Muar. There were at least 15,000 of them, and possibly more.

Events moved rapidly. Now 2/29th were in grave danger of being overwhelmed as more and more Japanese troops arrived to exploit the Muar River breakthrough. At all costs it had to be stopped.

It was decided to send 2/19th Battalion, then stationed at Jamaluang, south of Mersing, to the assistance of 2/29th Battalion.

At 4 a.m. on Monday, 19 January, the 2/19th began their race across the peninsula. They went out singing, as 27th Brigade had done before them. Four-and-a-half hours later they arrived at Yong Peng, where General Bennett had his headquarters. There Colonel Anderson received orders to proceed to Bakri, on the Yong Peng–Muar road. Two platoons, under Lieutenant J. A. Varley, were left behind to hold the vital bridge at Parit Sulong.

It will be difficult for the layman to follow in detail the events of the next four days without proper ordnance maps. A rough picture of the position only can be given.

It should be remembered that the Australians had been taken away from General Bennett and were now under British command. Colonel Anderson contacted Brigadier Duncan, of 45th Indian Brigade, consisting of Gwalis, Jats, and Raj Rifles, and was ordered to take up a position covering the Bakri crossroads leading to the Muar River ferry. About a mile ahead was 2/29th Battalion, nursing its wounds after its unequal battle against a flood of Japanese storm troops. Their CO, Lieutenant-Colonel John Charles Robertson, had been killed on Sunday night.

The Japanese had swiftly laid down a roadblock, and now the enemy were between 2/19th and 2/29th Battalions. It was a desperate situation, but nothing to what was to come later. At 11 o'clock that morning, 'A' Company of 2/19th attempted to gain contact with 2/29th, but the attack failed. For the remainder of the day 'C' Company carried out aggressive patrols west and allowed a section of 2/19th carriers, under Lieutenant J. Howard, to get contact with 2/29th. This the carriers did in fine style, and brought back Captain Gibson of 2/29th for a conference with Colonel Anderson.

At 6 o'clock that night the dispositions of the British forces in the Muar River area were as follows:

2/29th Battalion forward in a perimeter with the Japanese pouring in more troops all around them.

2/19th Battalion a mile further back at the Bakri crossroads.

45th Indian Brigade half a mile behind 2/19th.

'B' Echelon (transport, mortars, etc.) of the 2/19th hidden in jungle and rubber country about a mile behind 45th Brigade.

This was the opening scene of Malaya's most heroic battle.

7

The 2/29th Come Through

AFTER a wild night, with heavy enemy shelling of our positions, the mists on the river rose to find the Australians still holding grimly to their posts. The only alteration during the night had been an enforced withdrawal of half a mile, owing to the Japanese gunners' accuracy, of 2/15th Field Regiment. The Australians were full of fight and still fresh, but overnight the Japanese had consolidated their wedge between the two Australian battalions.

Monday began with disaster. Earlier than usual, Japanese planes were roaring over the beleaguered Muar forces. They were out for the kill. As early as this the position looked hopeless. At 9.30 a.m. bombs landed directly on top of 45th Brigade Headquarters in a rubber gatherer's hut. Only three men survived – Brigadier Duncan, Brigadier Major Anderson and an assistant staff captain. All signals were destroyed.

At the same time, 'B' Echelon of 2/19th Battalion in the rear got the full force of a similar air blitz. And the Japanese had now got between the main 2/19th force and their 'B' Echelon. It was impossible to regain contact at that time. A carrier tried to get through, but there was a road block and a land mine in its way. The carrier forced the roadblock and ran slap on to the land mine. It was blown to smithereens. The crew escaped.

Imagine the position at this stage: practically every component of the British Australian force was isolated by immensely superior numbers of the enemy. The most striking feature of the whole Muar River action was that the Japanese, although fighting hard, seemed to take for granted that our forces were doomed to annihilation. How costly their mistake!

How gross their underestimation of the spirit of the AIF in Malaya!

Colonel Anderson now took command of the Australians. That afternoon he ordered 2/29th to withdraw and fall back on 2/19th. Up to this point the 2/29th, their commanding officer dead, had stood their ground and defied all efforts of the Japanese to dislodge them. How they obeyed Colonel Anderson's order to fall back to the 2/19th is a story of grim heroism on its own. They fought like tigers against tremendous odds. The Japanese had machine-guns on either side of the road and raked their flanks. But they made it; some of them directly by road; others through the jungle around the flanks of the Japanese.

The 2/29th—or the remnants of this gallant Victorian battalion—reached 2/19th after hours of dogged fighting. There were only 200 of them left out of more than 800. Japanese mortar and machine-gun fire had wreaked a terrible toll. A tattered force, but as full of guts and fight as when they sang their way across the peninsula to Muar River. Some others who were cut off by the Japanese eventually reached General Bennett's headquarters at Yong Peng days later after incredible adventures in the jungle. One party of a captain and seven men went into the jungle waist-deep in mud and slush, and reached 2/19th at 10.30 p.m. that night.

While 2/29th were battering their way back along the tragic mile, things had not been quiet with 2/19th. Our artillery had done excellent work, but most of it was shooting from the map. Then suddenly the Japanese launched a heavy attack on the south and captured high ground overlooking and within 150 yards of 2/19th Battalion Headquarters. 'A' Company went into attack. They retook the hill, but were heavily pressed. Colonel Anderson ordered 'B' Company to make a flank attack on the Japanese. It was very successful. The Japanese retreated, leaving at least eighty casualties behind them. 'B' Company had suffered only two wounded.

The 8th Division Signals wireless truck, manned by Corporal G. Bingham and two others, had been operating smoothly despite shells and bombs. They had kept in constant communication with General Bennett. And that afternoon a message had been received ordering Colonel Anderson to withdraw on Yong Peng.

As the quick tropic darkness blanketed the jungle and the rubber trees, the two Australian battalions and the Indians formed a night perimeter. The night was so dark that it restricted patrols, but Anderson was taking no chances. The sentries strained their eyes into the depths of the jungle, their fingers lightly on the triggers of Tommy-guns and

rifles with bayonets fixed. Nobody slept. In the event of trouble the men were ordered to use their bayonets as much as possible. Ammunition had to be conserved and, moreover, rifle-fire gave away positions. The Japanese were experts at 'noises'. They let off sham fusillades and then attacked from another direction. 'Make your killing quiet,' said Anderson. 'The bayonet. The bayonet every time. Those little varmints don't like it, especially at night.'

As he watched his men snatching a meal of 'hard tack', Anderson wondered what tomorrow would hold in store for them. At any rate now they were all together in one force. He saw clearly enough that they could expect little outside help; they would have to fight their own way out. Well, he had the fighters; Providence would have to do the rest. Something else was worrying Anderson. That day they had run out of liquid morphia; there were only a few tablets left, and every hour the number of wounded was growing.

General Bennett's headquarters were in a barn-like building under the rubber trees near Yong Peng.

The general, this morning, was standing in front of his 'situation map' and there was anxiety on his face. The 'doomed' Australian battalions had been placed under his command again, and it was his job to get them out of a seemingly impossible situation.

In the distance could be heard the 'boom' of Japanese bombs and the drone of Japanese planes seeking out his position. Strolling around the headquarters were three or four steel-helmeted Australian soldiers, grim-faced, stripped to the waist, with wicked-looking Tommy-guns slung under their shoulders. Their naked brown torsos dripped with sweat. As the general studied his map, an army truck drove up, out of it were pushed four blind-folded Chinese, or perhaps Japanese. They were hustled under some trees and there intelligence officers cross-examined them. Later they were taken away.

The drone of Japanese planes came closer. A 'spotter' cried sharply, '*Take cover!*' Headquarters personnel moved under the shadow of the rubber trees. Work proceeded in the building. The general studied his map. Outside everything was as still as death except for the drone of the bombers. A few bombs thudded down harmlessly and there was a splatter of machine-gun fire, and then the droning died away.

The general was worried because he had had no word from Colonel Anderson since 6.30 p.m. on the previous evening. From the wireless truck had come an ominous silence. The previous night he had sent a message in cipher ordering Colonel Anderson to destroy all transport

and withdraw on Yong Peng. Then silence. The General's anxiety was reflected on the faces of everyone at headquarters. The faces of the guards with the Tommy-guns were grimmer than ever. They knew that the battalions were trying to smash their way through those terrific road blocks and the chances of them succeeding were pretty slim.

Then later on in the day, suddenly, dramatically, a laconic message came over the wireless. 'We now east of roadblock stop most of equipment still intact.' It galvanised headquarters. A great load dropped from General Bennett's shoulders. The guards with the Tommyguns grinned and swaggered through the trees.

They've still got to force their way along that causeway thought the General, and after that there's on y the bridge at Parit Sulong.

As he strode up and down, a motor bike hurtled up to headquarters. Off it, unsteadily, got a burly provost corporal. There were streaks of blood across his face; his shirts and shorts were dirt-stained; he was shaken and he was panting.

'They got two direct hits on the crossroads, sir. Knocked out a Bofors and three Indians. There's a big crater in the middle of the road; no chance of transport getting through. Just missed me, sir; I dived into a ditch. The —— machine-gunned me.'

'Did you tell the Pioneers?'

'Yes, sir. They're repairing it now. Should be fixed in half an hour.'

'Good! Carry on, Corporal.'

'Yes, sir.'

After the corporal had gone the general suddenly wondered whether the last message from Anderson had been genuine. Better check up; one never knew with the Japanese—they were shrewd little devils. What if they had captured the wireless truck and were sending him bogus messages? It did seem incredible that Anderson's men should have forced those blocks. The general beckoned one of his staff officers to his side.

A little later a strange conversation took place between AIF Headquarters and the wireless truck that was dodging bombs somewhere along the Bakri road.

'Is that you, Geoff?'

'Yes.'

'We got your last message.'

'Yes.'

'How's Max?'

'He's all right.'

'How's Cyril?'

'Cyril? Who's Cyril?'

'What's the name of that street near the Petersham Town Hall?'

'You mean New Canterbury Road with that pub on the corner?'

'You'll do, Geoff.'

'Say, what's it all about, anyway?'

'Tell you someday, Geoff. Cheerio!'

'Cheerio! . . . Struth, did you hear that one? It was bloody close! Wouldn't it! . . .'

They went to the general.

'It's Bingham all right, sir.'

'Good!' said General Bennett. 'Good!'

8

The Long Road Home

THERE had been sudden tropic thunder during the night, and lightning spilling blue quicksilver across the Strait of Malacca, but the dawn came quietly along the roads that led to Muar River. The dawn comes quickly in Malaya; there is a small chill wind that rustles the leaves of the rubber trees; and then the dawn breaks like the sudden lifting of the curtain on a drama. One moment it is night; and the next moment it is day.

There was silence around Muar River, where the mists were rising and evaporating, but it was a menacing silence. Amongst the trees were sinister shadows; there was an urgency of movement everywhere. Swift clouds dashed across the flushed face of the sun; those clouds would soon hide the rushing silver wings of Japanese bombers, prettiest murderers in Malaya.

Long before dawn broke the wounded were made as comfortable as possible in trucks, and all other unessential equipment destroyed. This was to be the most dreadful day of all; this was to be Australia's greatest day in Malaya, to rank with Gallipoli, Greece and Crete.

At 7 a.m., on Tuesday, 20 January, the columns began the long road home—2/19th Battalion forward, then 2/29th Battalion transport and artillery, with Indians of 45th Brigade, under Colonel Anderson, covering the rear.

Now there were less than 1,000 Australians left, and an indeterminate number of Indians. On all sides of them were closing in 15,000 or more crack Japanese troops.

An hour later contact was made with the Japanese, at the 99 Mile

Post. The first of the road blocks was encountered – there were to be *seven miles of roadblocks* before the day was through. The first roadblock, consisting of rubber trees fallen across the road, was covered by a well-dug Japanese strongpost, on top of a cutting, with six machine-guns spitting death from it. 'Great difficulty,' says a bald official story, 'was experienced in taking the position.' The Australians charged with fixed bayonets. 'B' Company 2/19th Battalion took the north side of the cutting.

On the south side Colonel Anderson took it with seven men. He ordered 'A' Company to create a diversion elsewhere and then charged into action, a dynamic figure at the head of his small force. He put one gun out of action with a grenade, and with his revolver shot dead two Japanese soldiers manning the other machine-gun. That was the beginning of Anderson's Victoria Cross, greatest tribute to valour the British Empire can award.

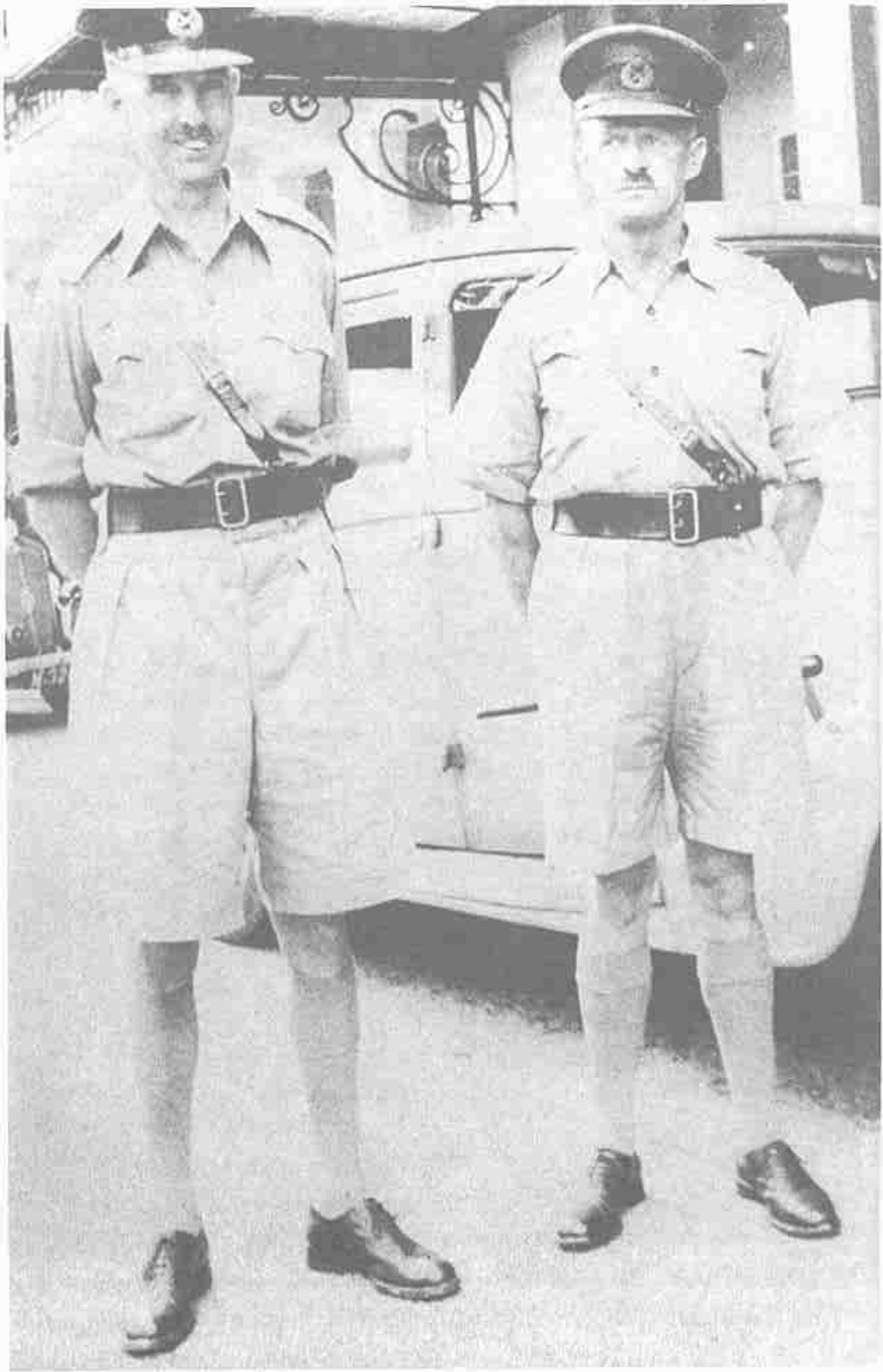
The 2/19th tell you Anderson won it five times over. His physical endurance was astonishing. Throughout the fight back to the bridge at Parit Sulong he was as lively as a cricket. He was here, there and everywhere. He had a word for everyone. He had tactical genius of a rare sort. He was cheerful at all times and he never lost his grip on the situation. His mind was as lively as his body. This, and his complete disregard of personal safety, inspired his men to tremendous heights. Anderson was on human safari; he was stalking the Japanese as he had stalked in Africa. All the troops would cheerfully have laid down their lives for him.

The whole composite force was on the main road now, and the roadblocks were almost continuous. The Japanese had worked fast and efficiently. Some of the blocks were composed of fallen rubber trees; others of jungle poles tied together.

Heavy Japanese shelling was directed on the Indians in the rear during the morning. Our motor transport began to move east again at 11.45 a.m. with infantry deployed in the adjoining rubber country. At times the hills were black with Japanese troops. One Australian officer at this stage killed fifty Japanese with bursts from a Vickers gun. There was no 'white shirt and sandshoes' about these enemy troops. They were hand-picked soldiers dressed in greenish-khaki tunics, slacks, half puttees and black hobnailed boots. They came on and on. The branches of the rubber trees seemed to be alive with snipers. They were hard to distinguish. They waited until the Australians went through and then tried to pick off the officers.

Some of them had wireless transmitters strapped to their chests.

NX55915 Private G. P. Mant on the troop train taking 8th Division troops to the *Queen Mary* for embarkation to Singapore in February 1941



Lieut. General A. E. Percival (left), G.O.C. Malaya, and Major General H. Gordon Bennett, G.O.C. AIF, Malaya. They did not always see eye to eye (*IWM negative no. 134877*)

The rear 2-pounder gun of the 13th Battery 2/4th Anti-Tank Regiment in action ahead of Bakri during the Battle of Muar (*AWM negative no. 11302*)

Two of the nine Japanese tanks knocked out by anti-tank guns forward of Bakri during the Battle of Muar (*AWM negative no. 11307*)

Lieut. Colonel C. G. W. Anderson, commander of the 2/19 Battalion AIF, who was awarded the Victoria Cross for his leadership and gallantry during the Battle of Muar (*AWM negative no. 73661*)

They wirelessed back positions and then the Japanese 4-inch mortars would crash down. There was an heroic Australian private who volunteered as a human target. He walked down the centre of the road alone, while his comrades with Tommy guns crept alongside amongst the rubber trees. There were a lot of dead Japanese snipers that day. The private was wounded, but fought his way on to Parit Sulong.

The Australians smashed their way through the second road block and neared where 'B' Echelon 2/19th Battalion had been assailed from the air. Colonel Anderson passed the word to his Company commanders: 'We will see some grim sights here; get the boys singing'.

So they sang 'Waltzin' Matilda' —it was the only song they all knew. 'B' Echelon area was a shambles of shattered motor vehicles and shattered bodies. Ghastly the sights that met the eyes of the enraged Australians. They charged with their bayonets, singing, but there was no joy in the singing, only a cold deadly rage. They took their vengeance at the point of the bayonet. All the vehicles of 'B' Echelon were out of action, and there was no sign of Lieutenant Varley's platoon which had been relieved at the Parit Sulong bridge by five Norfolk platoons.

Saddened by the loss of fine cobbers, the force moved on again at 12.15 p.m. to contact the Japanese in considerable strength, and to run into no fewer than six road blocks.

Fierce fighting continued all that afternoon as Anderson's men made superhuman efforts to force the Japanese positions. Success was only limited and casualties were heavy. Bayonet charge after bayonet charge was made, but the men were too tired to sing now. Their long ordeal was beginning to show on their haggard, unshaven faces, but they weren't beaten yet — not by a long chalk. Very heavy attacks were made by the Japanese on our rear, supported by intense artillery and mortar shelling. In a charge by Gwalis, which he personally led, Brigadier Duncan was killed.

By 5.30 p.m. the situation was critical and the force had gradually contracted into about 800 yards of roadway. Colonel Anderson held a council of war with his officers. He made no attempt to disguise their plight. 'It's a case of death or going through, gentlemen,' he said, in his precise way. '*And we're going through!*'

He decided on a dusk attack. As the shadows lengthened under the rubber trees, and the swollen sun slid down towards the horizon, the Australians made their supreme effort. Every man was fighting mad. Mortar shells were directed on to targets by infantrymen a few yards away. Gunners of 2/15th Field Regiment were fighting with rifles and bayonets and axes. The range was too short for their 25-pounders.

Yelling and cursing, the gunners grabbed axes, tackled the Japanese with them, ran the gauntlet of murderous machine-gun fire, and slashed recklessly at a block across the road. One 25-pounder crew pushed their gun around a cutting and blew a road block formed of vehicles to smithereens at seventy-five yards range. Bren gun carriers rattled forward to within five yards of a Japanese machine-gun nest and blew it to bits.

Beside the road was a house with concrete walls four inches thick. In it were Japanese with three machine-guns. Spurting death, they had been giving the Australians hell, but nothing could stand up to this onrushing tide of fighting mad Australians. Two carriers charged forward to within ten yards' range and raked the house with Vickers gun fire from ground to roof. Thirty Japanese soldiers rushed out and were cut to ribbons. Now there was only one roadblock left before the long ten miles' causeway to Parit Sulong. The capture of the concrete house was the turning point of the battle. A call was made for volunteers to force the remaining roadblock. Twenty men responded. They raced ahead with axes under a hail of machine-gun bullets and chopped the block to pieces. The Australians charged through with bayonets – and the day was won.

At about 6.30 p.m. the Japanese had had enough. Their dead lay strewn in hundreds across the roadway and sprawled under the rubber trees. They gave up the fight and retired. Colonel Anderson's column, its ranks thinner than ever, moved on and contact with the enemy was lost.

Colonel Anderson, as he marched indefatigable with his men, was proud of them. Badly as they needed rest and food, he had relentlessly to drive them on. There was a tight smile under the sweat and blood on his face. If they could stumble along the causeway during the night and cross the bridge at Parit Sulong before dawn, all would be well. From there it was only a few miles to General Bennett's main forces—and safety.

It was as well Anderson did not have in advance the heartbreaking knowledge that the bridge at Parit Sulong was no longer in British hands. It was as well that he did not know the Norfolks had withdrawn from the bridge and the high ground dominating it on the approach of a small force of Japanese.

Earlier that day the news had caused consternation at AIF Headquarters. The withdrawal seemed to seal the doom of the Australians who had come so far at such cost and were now almost in sight of relief.

General Bennett acted with characteristic vigour. First of all he sent out a party of tried guerillas under Captain Lloyd with orders to try and work their way around the Japanese and hold the bridge long enough to let the beleaguered battalions through. Then he got into his car and hurried some miles beyond Yong Peng.

There at intervals came three other staff cars. As Japanese bombers droned overhead, the four generals in whose hands was the destiny of Malaya, met under the cover of the rubber trees in a dramatic two hours' conference. They met actually on an estate, at the other end of which was then progressing bitter fighting. The generals were General A. E. Percival, GOC Malaya, General L. Heath, General Keys and General Bennett. Afterwards General Percival explained the position frankly to waiting British, American and Australian war correspondents.

The map was laid out on the ground and the general, the scarlet around his cap contrasting vividly with the green countryside, placed his finger on the bridge at Parit Sulong.

'We are going to counterattack at two o'clock this afternoon,' he said. 'We hope to regain the high ground here and capture the bridge. That will allow those gallant Australian battalions to go through. General Bennett has also sent out commandos to worry the Japanese by infiltrations . . .'

The conference broke up. General Bennett was smiling as he left. There was another chance for his beloved Australians.

But the counterattack never took place. At 2 p.m. it was postponed until 5.30 p.m. At 5.30 p.m. it was postponed until dawn on the following morning. At dawn it was postponed until 9.30 a.m. At 9.30 a.m. it was abandoned altogether for reasons that have never been shown as anything but trifling.

It was as well that Colonel Anderson and his men, battling along the Bakri road, were unaware of these things.

9

The Bridge at Parit Sulong

All through the night the tattered force trudged along the long stone causeway which ran in a dead straight line across the steamy swamp country.

An advance guard went ahead, then carriers trundled along at the head of the main body. Then came the trucks filled with badly wounded men, with armoured cars at the rear. The infantry troops marched in single file on each side of the road. The 'walking wounded' limped on through the night, some of them with blood-soaked bandages across their foreheads, others with arms in slings. Occasionally a man would help his cobber along. It was sheer fortitude that got them through.

It was a tragic cavalcade of gaunt bearded men, perilously on the edge of physical exhaustion, but the Japanese, licking their wounds from the savage encounter farther back and prevented by the swamps from staging any heavy flank attacks, allowed them along the causeway without much interference. At the rear, however, the enemy were pressing on and tightly closing any gap towards Muar.

At 3 a.m. Lieutenant Varley, who had been relieved by the Norfolks at Parit Sulong, rejoined his unit with fifty men. At about the same time a wounded Indian Sepoy strayed into the lines. He told Colonel Anderson that he had been fired on by Japanese that afternoon at Parit Sulong. It was a shock to Anderson to hear of the presence of Japanese in this area.

Two despatch riders were sent forward to check the Indian's report. The Don R's raced to the bridge. Their full headlights showed up a sandbagged barricade across the western end of the bridge. In the

glare of the lights they saw four coloured soldiers in pith helmets. The Australians were challenged in a foreign language, but were not fired on.

The Don R's hurried back and reported to Anderson, whose suspicions were now thoroughly aroused. He sent a patrol forward to the bridge. This time the Australians were fired on.

Dawn broke as the force came in sight of the little village of Parit Sulong beside the river. Colonel Anderson, bitterly disappointed by events, decided to attack the bridge at 7 a.m. The bridge over the river at Parit Sulong was a concrete arc about eighty yards long.

Colonel Anderson, Major Anderson (of 45th Brigade) and Lieutenant S. F. Burt (Intelligence Officer of 2/19th Battalion) went forward and met an English-speaking Malay. He told them that there was no need to worry about the bridge, it was held by members of the Johore Military Forces. The Malay led these three officers and their small escort into a Japanese ambush, but the trio fought their way out of it.

The bridge, definitely in Japanese hands, was ideally suited for defence, and the enemy had exploited it to the full. It was very strongly defended by machine-gun nests in adjoining houses. After bitter fighting, however, the western approaches of the bridge were captured, but further progress was found to be impossible without air support. The range was too short for our artillery and our mortars were ineffective against the houses.

At about 11 a.m. the Australian position was in the form of a triangular perimeter, with the apex at the bridge. After a heavy artillery barrage and intense machine-gunning of the road from the air, the Japanese launched another tank attack. It fared no better than other tank attacks they had made against the Australians. One tank was destroyed by small-arms fire and two others by accurate shooting by our anti-tank gunners.

A cheer went up when what seemed to be a squadron of British bombers soared overhead. Jubilation was short lived when the planes rained down anti-personnel bombs; it was discovered afterwards that they were American planes originally delivered to Thailand and the Japanese had used them to deceive us. There was no doubt about it—the Japanese were devilishly cunning fighters.

Fate was dealing heavy and decisive blows against the Australians now. Gradually the rear was forced in by vicious Japanese attacks and a mounting list of Australian casualties. As darkness came down the enemy launched yet another tank attack along the road, but it, too, was smashed. Lieutenant John Ross, Sergeant Bertie Tate and a 25-

pounder gun crew blew one tank to pieces at forty yards over open sights. Bombs and Mills hand grenades destroyed five other tanks. Ross was awarded the MC and Tate the DCM for this feat.

The Japanese fell back again. This small Australian force seemed indestructible, unconquerable . . .

For four days the wireless truck under Corporal Bingham had led a charmed life. Nerve-centre of the beleaguered battalions, it had functioned day and night. It had survived shells, mortar fire, bombs and machine-gunning. Bingham and his two assistants had stuck manfully to their tasks. There were only two of them now. One of the men had been wounded, but had refused to leave his post. Then a bullet from a Japanese sniper in a rubber tree had killed him. The other two carried on, receiving and transmitting vital messages.

At first, when they were allotted to 45th Brigade, they had a two-way wireless set, but later much of their equipment was destroyed. Undaunted, they managed to build up a composite set from the remains of various wireless sets in the area. At one stage messages were being transmitted by a key improvised by joining two leads together. But they could not build new wireless batteries, and now the precious batteries had begun to fade and messages were difficult to receive. Soon the batteries were useless.

And not long afterwards shells wrecked the truck altogether. Bingham (who was awarded the DCM) and his remaining assistant, Max Benoit (MM), had miraculous escapes from death. Benoit was wounded three times before the action finished, but refused to give in.

The plight of the wounded was causing Colonel Anderson more and more concern. Some of the men were in bad shape and suffering dreadfully. The festering tropic climate of Malaya was no place for a wounded man without proper medical attention. They had sufficient morphia now to deaden agony from jagged splinter wounds, but that was not enough.

Anderson resolved on a desperate mercy move. He selected fifteen of the most badly wounded and had them placed in two ambulance trucks marked with the Red Cross, and called for volunteer drivers and attendants from the slightly wounded men. There was no shortage of volunteers.

Just before dark the trucks were slowly driven up to the sandbag barricade at the bridge. They were not fired upon and a driver, carrying a white flag, was escorted to the Japanese commander in Parit Sulong village. Somebody was found who could speak English. The Australian

explained that the men in the trucks were so seriously wounded that even if they recovered they would never fight again. They had chosen that way so as not to cause any embarrassment to the Japanese. Would the Japanese commander allow them safe conduct to the British lines?

The Japanese commander was polite but firm. The ambulances were to remain in the middle of the road as a roadblock. He could not discuss terms of any kind unless the whole of the Australians surrendered unconditionally.

The driver returned to Colonel Anderson with the message. Colonel Anderson's jaw set. Hard as the decision was to the wounded men at the bridge, he knew that his men would never surrender now. They had come so far, had suffered so much. They would sooner all die fighting to the last. He refused to countenance the Japanese commander's proposal. He considered for a while the possibility of attempting a withdrawal towards the sea, but increasing pressure on the road at the rear by enemy tanks and artillery foredoomed that to failure.

Night came down on a fantastic scene like the defence of a covered wagon against Red Indians in the pioneer days of America. The Australians were clustered in a small perimeter around upwards of twenty-five trucks, including those marooned with the wounded at the bridge. It was a pitch dark night with pale stars stabbing the black velvet canopy of the sky. Away back along the road to Muar were blazing Australian trucks and blazing Japanese tanks luridly lighting the darkness. It was so dark otherwise that patrolling was restricted. The Japanese were active at the bridge and there were several bayonet flashes in the darkness.

At midnight, when there was a lull in the fighting, Lieutenant Richard ('Baby') Austin, himself badly wounded, and a private stole out into the darkness towards the trucks with the wounded at the bridge. They slid from rubber tree to rubber tree like shadows, and crawled along the road to the stationary trucks.

Austin reached the back of the nearest truck and whispered into it: 'Hang tight, boys, I'm going to let the brakes off!'

One after another Austin and his companion loosened the brakes of the trucks and guided them as silently as possible into the Australian lines. Darkness had been their protection; the Japanese were scarcely aware of the move.

'Good work!' said Anderson, putting out his hand. 'Good work!'

10

The Gap in the Circle

GENERAL BENNETT'S final message to the beleaguered Australian forces at Parit Sulong wrote 'finis' to an extraordinary feat of arms, an extraordinary epic of courage and self-sacrifice and devotion to duty, of which Australia and the whole British Empire should be proud.

It was despatched from Yong Peng at five minutes past eleven o'clock in the morning on Thursday, 22 January 1942, and it read:

'Regret that there little prospect any success attacks 78M–80M to help you Lloyd's party if successful should have appeared before this. Twenty of your men and many Indians already returned via river to mine then track to road which is present our possession 78M. You may at your discretion leave wounded with volunteers destroy heavy equipment and escape. Sorry unable to help after your heroic effort. Good luck. Gordon Bennett.'

Ironically enough, the message never reached its destination; by this time the wireless truck was incapable of receiving messages.

There was nothing else General Bennett could do except wish these brave men of his command good luck in escaping through the ever-increasing cordon of Japanese fire around them. The counterattack which might have saved them had never taken place; and Lloyd's commandos had not been successful.

Already survivors of the action, cut off by the Japanese somewhere along that road of death and destruction, were drifting into Yong Peng in small parties. They had appalling stories to tell, but proud stories. They were unshaven and gaunt, and their uniforms in a sorry mess

where they had plunged into swamps and morasses and swum rivers. Some of their feet were in a shocking condition. Some of them had raw, festering wounds. But they were all still unconquerable; they were all concerned chiefly about their cobbers, who were still out in the jungle somewhere trying to fight their way back. They were all loud in their praises of that remarkable man who had brought the force through to Parit Sulong, Colonel Anderson, of Muar.

The position of the Australians on Thursday rapidly became untenable after daybreak. The Japs seemed impregnably established covering the bridge, with a deadly phalanx of machine-gun nests. Heavy enemy artillery shelling began as daylight broke and caused more tragic gaps in the ranks of the Australians.

Nevertheless, a final attempt to capture the bridge was made by 'A' Company, 2/19th Battalion, reinforced by walking wounded of both battalions. They were cut to pieces on two Japanese roadblocks.

The Japs moved around to the right flank and attacked heavily. Some of their planes circled continuously overhead to drown the noise of their approaching tanks. Other planes machine-gunned the approaches to the bridge.

There was one bright feature that morning. At about 8 a.m. three British aeroplanes flew overhead and dropped by parachutes sorely-needed supplies of morphia, water and bully beef.

Colonel Anderson came to a quick decision. There was only one way out and that was to move north, swing east and fight their way through the Japanese towards Yong Peng. The remnants of them should go out as they had gone in—as a composite fighting force. Anderson gave orders for the destruction of all equipment, including transport and guns.

Half an hour before the bid for safety was made, gallant Major Anderson, of 45th Brigade, was killed by machine-gun fire from the air as he sheltered in a ditch. It was a sad ending to an Englishman who had won the unstinted admiration of the Australians. He had fought side by side with them, using rifle, Tommy-gun and hand grenades, with complete disregard of personal danger.

Sadly the Australians drew the trucks with the wounded into the side of the road. Eighteen-ton Japanese tanks had been reported coming up from Muar—they would have scant mercy on trucks in the middle of the road. There were farewells that morning that would be an intrusion on personal feelings to narrate. This was the hardest part of all; to leave good comrades behind after what they had gone through together these last five days. There were handshakes and husky farewells and

unashamed emotion on the faces of these haggard fighting men. There were messages to deliver 'if you ever get home, old man'. There were men who turned away because, physically overwrought, it was more than they could bear . . .

Company by company, the Australians moved out at five-minute intervals in deployed formation on a bearing of 340 degrees to a distance of 1,000 yards, and then turned east. The Japanese in that sector saw them coming and misinterpreted it to be a strong counterattack. They hurriedly withdrew and left a gap of 400 yards up the Sempang River, between the edge of the Japanese line and the river.

The battle of Muar River was over, and Providence had come to the aid of the Australians at the last moment. They hurried through the miraculous gap towards Bukit Incas. There were to be long hours of wading through swamps, of plunging through jungle and rubber, ahead of them—but they were safe, and the Japanese had let them slip out of the trap.

They formed a human chain in the creeks to get the wounded across. The Indians took off their turbans and tied them together for a lifeline. Night was spent in a jungle so dense that they moved at the rate of only 100 yards an hour. The swamps were sometimes waist-deep, the trees were laced with vines, their jagged spikes shaped like fishhooks.

The wounded, their unattended wounds suppurating, cried aloud in their pain. They were given water from the Malayan water vine, which grows in the jungle. In the open rubber country they were guided by friendly Chinese, who gave them food and fresh water.

And so those who remained, got through.

During the five days of fighting it was estimated that the Australians had killed anything from 1,000 to 3,000 of Japan's front-line soldiers. The rifle and bayonet had proved to be the decisive weapon. Infantrymen had averaged fifty rounds per man and eight out of ten shots had taken effect.

There were countless examples of individual bravery. There was a sergeant who lay in a regimental aid post with a bad wound in his neck; who grabbed a rifle and joined his mates in the battle line when things were critical. There was a red-haired ex-schoolmaster who rode his motor bike through hell and back, tearing along roads ringed with snipers, sometimes with gallant Major Anderson riding pillion behind him with a Tommy-gun stuck under his arm. There was a carrier corporal who fought all day with a wound in his back, got another wound in his leg and had to be more or less forcibly dragged from his carrier. There was a doctor who upheld all the finest traditions of his profession

under the most awful conditions. There was a young, smooth-faced Presbyterian padre whose courage the 2/19th Battalion will not easily forget. It will be tactful not to chronicle some of his exploits in the field.

There was a regimental sergeant-major nicknamed 'Hip-Hi', a giant of a man with tremendous physique and stamina who had spent most of his life in New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. A crack rifle-shot, 'Hip-Hi', when night fell, would go out alone stalking Japanese with conspicuous success. He was reported missing after Parit Sulong, but swaggered up a fortnight later, a great bearded figure of a man who had led a small party of Australians right across the peninsula to the east coast and safety.

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11

The Massacre at Parit Sulong

IT was eight and a half years before a horrified world heard about the fate of the wounded men, and other prisoners, who were left behind at Parit Sulong.

Then, in June 1950, at a War Crimes Court at Los Negros, Manus Island, ghastly details were given of one of the most cold-blooded massacres in the history of warfare.

In the dock was Lieutenant-General Takuma Nishimura, charged with the murder of 110 Australian and thirty-five Indian prisoners of war at Parit Sulong on 22 January 1942.

The accuser was Lieutenant Ben Charles Hackney, of 2/29th Battalion, sole living survivor of the massacre. He was twenty-six years old when the massacre took place.

Hackney, a Bathurst (N.S.W.) grazier in civil life, survived machine-gunning, rifle-fire, bayoneting, mass cremation and subsequent recapture and imprisonment. He became known as 'the man they could not kill'. He feigned death to escape and tell his damning story eight and a half years later.

He spent thirty-six days crawling about the Malayan jungle, with a bullet wound in his left leg, shell splinters in his back, right calf and behind his right knee.

He was recaptured by Malayan policemen and taken to Changi Goal, Singapore. There he wrote the story of the massacre and buried it in a shellcase. The shellcase was recovered after the war and its contents included in the six typewritten pages of sworn evidence given by Hackney at Manus in 1950.

The Parit Sulong prisoners, many of them badly wounded, were made to sit, some in the nude, in a circle ringed by Jap guards (Hackney's evidence ran).

About sunset, the prisoners, their hands tied behind their backs with rope or wire, were herded together and shot. The officers were tied together first, then other ranks in the same manner.

'Often a soldier who was more difficult to tie because of his wounds, was subjected to lashings, sometimes with wire, and kicked,' Hackney testified.

Later, Japanese soldiers poured petrol from tins over other prisoners, many of whom were still conscious, and set them alight.

In feigning death, Hackney displayed extraordinary fortitude, perhaps conscious that he must stay alive to assure that some day justice would be wreaked for this fiendish deed.

He was kicked on countless occasions on all parts of the body, especially on the wound in his back. He was battered over the head with rifle butts, prodded with bayonets more than twenty times to see if he were alive.

He survived it all and at Manus General Nishimura was found guilty of ordering the massacre, and sentenced to hang.

When sentenced, he said contritely from the dock: 'I am deeply sorry that, due to my carelessness, such an incident happened. I wish to give prayers with sorrow to those who were killed.'

Nishimura was hanged at Los Negros on 11 June 1951. Death was instantaneous and he was buried at sea because torrential rains upset plans for the cremation of his body. He thus had a far more merciful death than the victims of his atrocity.

12

The Fall of Singapore

MANY stories could be told about the death agonies of Singapore Island, but this is not the place to tell them. As an epilogue to this story of the bridge at Parit Sulong, let us rather use General Bennett's official narrative of the withdrawal across the Johore Causeway and the final surrender, a surrender that had been inevitable to those in authority some weeks before.

'After Parit Sulong,' said General Bennett, 'the Japanese concentrated on Batu Pahat, farther down the west coast. Here, as elsewhere along the west coast, they landed men in sampans they had seized. Troops who had just arrived from England and were quite unused to Malayan conditions had the sector here, and they were unsuccessful in their attempt to deny the enemy a landing at Batu Pahat. This meant that our main force at Gemas was almost cut off about sixty miles south of them.

'Our withdrawal from Gemas, which our men had so long and so skilfully defended, was one of the saddest events of the campaign from the Australian point of view. The men up there had resolved not to give any ground, and they had succeeded, but circumstances forced their withdrawal after they had so thoroughly proved their superiority over the Japanese.

'During the next week the whole force was gradually withdrawn, keeping a close eye on the Batu Pahat flank and the west coast generally, where the Japanese were still landing from sampans, to make sure that the Japanese did not cut the road behind it. This meant withdrawing the last two battalions—2/18th and 2/20th—from the Mersing position.

'The men were saddened by the realisation that they had to withdraw without testing the strength of the defences. On the way south, the 2/18th, 2/20th and 2/10th Field Regiment dealt out severe punishment to the Japs in a bold ambush near Jemaluang.

'Sadly, the men crossed the Causeway to Singapore Island. By the time the force had reached the island all our reinforcements had been absorbed and all out battalions were restored to their full numbers. But the new Australians were only partly trained. Our position was strengthened by the arrival of 4th (Western Australian) Machine-Gun Battalion.

'The seven Australian battalions were given the western half of the Island from the Causeway inclusive. The AIF had with it the 44th Indian Brigade. The 3rd Indian Corps, with the newly-arrived English division, occupied the north-east part, and Singapore fortress troops defended the only part of the island where defences had been prepared—positions on the south coast. The task of the Australians was to begin from the beginning, to build defensive positions along a very long front. It was then that they felt far more than before their serious weakness in the air.

'Previously enemy aircraft had not been able to do serious damage because troops had the concealment of rubber plantations and jungle. But when the men began to build beach posts for guns and machine-guns and beach lights, Japanese aircraft flew up and down, bombing and machine-gunning them, unmolested except by the fire of anti aircraft guns.

'The Japanese were able to observe Australian positions so closely from the air that they had maps, which we captured afterwards, showing the position of every one of our mortars, machine guns, searchlights and field-guns. When their bombardment began they destroyed every beach light and gun in the sector. They launched their attack in boats in the dark, and, by concentrating all their efforts on one section, completely overwhelmed the thin defence.

'The front was too wide to be held by so small a force. By continual pressure the Japanese were able to force back our depleted units. Our units received inadequate support from others now holding parts of the line. It must be remembered that many of these troops were completely exhausted after the long fight in Malaya, and the new formations were only partly trained and were quite unused to Malayan conditions.

'Even at this stage the AIF managed to form a strong perimeter, against which the enemy were smashed over and over again. But, over

and over again, retirements on our flanks forced withdrawals, until our line approached the city of Singapore itself. Then the enemy was able to concentrate his whole air forces and many of his guns on Singapore, which was gradually being reduced to a heap of rubble. Casualties amongst civilians were very heavy, the city's water supply was cut off, and circumstances developed which ultimately forced the surrender of Singapore.

'During the final stages our numbers were so depleted in the AIF that it was found necessary to use non-combatant troops to occupy positions in the firing line. These men—signallers, army service corps, and ordnance—did fine work. Everyone had his tail up at the end. We occupied the perimeter, from which we refused to budge, and it was in this position that we stood when the decision to surrender was made.'

Lieutenant-General Bennett's bald and factual official report on the fall of Singapore was written on the spot and published in 1942, at a time when words had to be judicious in order not to create dissension among the Allies or cause the Japanese to ill-treat their prisoners.

But after VJ Day (15 August 1945) no such reticence was necessary and much new light was thrown on the fall of Malaya and Singapore.

The Percival Report of 1948 set off a controversy about the conduct of the Malayan campaign that persists today and will persist into many tomorrows.

General Percival, this writer thought and wrote in the Sydney *Sunday Sun* at the time, was unfair in seeming to pass the buck to Australian troops for the loss of Singapore. It might, indeed, have been partly Percival's own mistake in (firstly) declining to allow the Australians to fight as a brigade and (secondly) when their remnants were at last together as a brigade, allotting them a long and thinly defended line on the west coast to hold, on the apparent assumption that the enemy would make his main attack somewhere else.

The enemy, on the contrary, attacked this very spot in the west where the line was so thin and where lack of reserves made the classic counterattack impossible. The Australians had no chance of holding on for long in their improvised foxholes against this major assault.

There were no fixed defences of any kind on the top of Singapore Island facing Johore, though God knows there were years and years before 1941 when they could have been constructed. But even the big guns of Singapore Fortress pointed immutably out to sea to sink imaginary hostile fleets, instead of to the shore where hordes of real

enemies closed in remorselessly.

Even in the last weeks something might have been done to bolster the defences of Singapore Island. There weren't many weeks, to be sure, because the Great Retreat covered 550 miles in fifty-five days.

It was obvious all this time that the last battle would be fought on Singapore Island. But the Singapore Micawbers of the High Command thought something would turn up. Something never did.

General Percival, in his report, had the gall to declare that Australia's civilian soldiers were 'a little out of date' on methods of war. It was, in fact, the High Command's methods that were out of date. It was the hidebound British textbook soldier who failed against the ungentlemanly and quite 'un textbook' Japanese.

There were to be many cruel months before Allied soldiers in other Pacific theatres of war fully learnt the lesson of Malaya—taught to them in heroic stupidity, blood and suffering. But they learnt it in the end and, looking back, the sacrifice was worthwhile.

Singapore's agonies ended at 8.30 p.m. on 15 February 1942. By then the city's water supply was exhausted. Civilians were being killed and injured by air raids quicker than they could be collected. Food was running short. The armies had no water, only three days' rations and no artillery ammunition.

General Percival was forced to walk out and surrender in person to the arrogant Japanese (three and a half years later he was to stand, a quiet and dignified Englishman, on the deck of the U.S. battleship *Missouri* in Tokyo Bay as a chief witness of Son of Heaven Hirohito's own abject surrender to the Allies).

13

The Glory

TEARS of frustration ran down the cheeks of many overwrought and exhausted Australian and British troops when the surrender came at Singapore. This was an humiliating end to something that might have been an epic disaster with an heroic Dunkirk to give them a chance to fight again.

But there was no Dunkirk for these men – and no understanding of their sacrifice by the outside world for years to come. Details of their sufferings were, rightly, censored by the various governments until the war's end, in order not to provoke the Japanese into reprisals.

Australian, British, Dutch and other prisoners of the Japanese were condemned to a captivity of such sadistic cruelty that it appals civilised imagination.

It was a more personalised savagery than the mass savagery of the Hitlerite German. A Jap guard might gloat over deliberately kicking the festering ulcers on a prisoner's leg, whereas a professional German assassin of Belsen or Dachau would unfeelingly push 1,000 prisoners into a gas extermination chamber as part of his daily routine.

The whole of the 8th Division, including its units overwhelmed on Timor, Ambon, Rabaul and other islands, were caught up in this evil web of Nippon ferocity.

For three and a half years they were lost to Australia, wiped off as failures and defeatists by soldiers of other AIF divisions who had won great reputations in other theatres of war where there were Dunkirks and a second chance.

Then, after the mushroom shaped clouds arose over Hiroshima, the

stories of the great victories of the 8th Division (we are concerned here only with Australians) in captivity were able to be published. These were victories of the spirit over the body—Dunkirks of the soul, but nonetheless real.

There was the Burma-Thailand Railway of Death, where someone died, they said, with every sleeper laid by the gaunt, emaciated prisoners, 60,000 of them.

There were inspiring stories of Australian doctors who operated with sharpened spoons along the railway, amputating limbs without anaesthetics and scooping away at gangrene and ulcerated sores. Names such as Coates, Fisher, Cahill, Fagan, Dunlop, Krantz, Hobbs and so many others.

There was another railway of death on Hainan Island, off the coast of China, built by Australian prisoners. Horror camps in Borneo and Java, and that most dreadful Sandakan death march which only a few survived. And coal mines in Japan and Manchuria, and hell ships filled with Allied prisoners sometimes unknowingly torpedoed by our own submarines.

As the Japanese considered it dishonourable to be taken prisoners themselves, so they treated their prisoners dishonourably. Starvation, beatings, tortures, blindings, beheadings, mutilations, humiliations beyond imagining—all these horrors were suffered and conquered. There were some shabby things, of course, among our own prisoners—IOU's signed in blood and hunger, the theft of food and medicine. But the good outweighed the bad, the nobility the baseness.

This was the ultimate battle they won and their glory, grim perhaps, but a glory just the same.

You'll Be Sorry

To the Fighting Men

The most common criticism about war correspondents is that they write far too much about themselves and far too little about the campaigns they are reporting. Few of the public could have seen the magnificent satire in a piece by Alan Dawes, one of the best and most courageous of Australian war correspondents, when he wrote, 'I was the last war correspondent to enter Lae . . .' Much of this criticism, however, is unfair because war correspondents have suffered a very heavy toll in reporting the war on many fronts. As I write [1944] thirty-seven have been killed.

This is by way of apology for the number of 'I's in this story. This is the personal record of a failure as a soldier and a war correspondent. The autobiographical method is used deliberately because it is the most convenient and convincing method of painting a picture of the Second AIF. It is not only my story; it is the story of hundreds of others, and I think it is a good thing that somebody should write it without self-consciousness and without sparing himself.

There is no profundity of thought in this book and no new light on why Singapore fell, because I am not in the confidence of the people who know, and neither is any other newspaperman. I anticipate some reviewer, on beholding the title You'll Be Sorry, *saying 'We are.' But I hope that amongst the inordinate numbers of 'I's' something has emerged of the spirit of the fighting men of the AIF, and especially the forlorn and forgotten 8th Division, to whom this story is dedicated.*

Many men of the Middle East divisions to whom I have spoken have the impression that the 8th Division in some way 'let them down'. Let them read this story. If through the 'I's' they can catch the spirit of which I speak, and the tragic forlornness of it, then this book has not been written in vain.

It is dedicated, too, to every division of the AIF, and the navy, and the air force. These are truly the volunteer fighting men of Australia, the men who in the last analysis will win the war by facing the enemy hand-to-hand in the deserts and the jungles, on the green and blue seas, and in the air.

Let them in the years after the war stick together in peace as they did in war, because if they drift apart something of Australia will drift apart with them. Let them seriously consider also that their responsibility does not end with the war. For having so freely offered their lives to the country in wartime, they must also be prepared voluntarily to offer their services to Australia in peacetime. It will not be enough to say when their arms are laid to rest at last: 'Well, that's that! Now I can go back to my office, my farm, and forget the war.' They must go on fighting, fighting the greed and the selfishness and the intolerance lest they lose all they have fought so valiantly to maintain. Let them remember this in the adjusting days ahead that are going to be so difficult for them. Let the colonel who is to become a bank clerk again, and the private who is going to become an employer of men again, remember all these things. Let them stick together and make Australia what they wanted Australia to be.

And let them not forget the 8th Division, to whom this book is so proudly dedicated.

1

Death of an Appeaser

This morning the British Ambassador to Berlin handed the German Government a final note stating that unless by 11 o'clock Germany was prepared at once to withdraw her troops from Poland a state of war would exist between us. I have to tell you now that no such undertaking has been received and that, consequently, this country is at war with Germany . . . You can imagine what a bitter blow it is to me that my long struggle to win peace has failed. Yet, I cannot believe that anything different I could have done would have been more successful . . . And now, may God bless you all. May we defend the right. It is the evil things we shall be fighting—brute force, bad faith, injustice, oppression, and persecution– and against them I am certain right will prevail.

THE date was Sunday, 3 September 1939, and the speaker was Mr Neville Chamberlain, prime minister of Great Britain. It was the voice of a tired, disillusioned old man with an umbrella. The voice was husky and broken with emotion.

A lot of hard and cruel things have been said about Mr Chamberlain. It has been said that he was simply the voice of Big Business; and his appeasement policy was dictated by the profit-motive of his bolt or screw factory in Birmingham, or whatever it was. I think I am one of the few men who understood Mr Chamberlain because most of my life I have been an appeaser myself. I am not an aggressive type; I don't like fights and arguments. If I can avoid a fight or an argument by an appeal to reason I will do so. Often by giving way on a minor

point or by appealing to the other fellow's reason one can gain one's point without bloodshed or loss of self-respect. Some people like to charge in like bulls and sometimes they end up by butting their own heads against a wall.

There comes a time, of course, when principle is involved and the other fellow will not give way because he is unprincipled. That is the time when appeasement must stop. I am prepared (and better prepared) to fight then, and so was Mr Chamberlain. I am not ready to say that the Munich Pact wasn't a dishonourable one, but I am ready to say that Mr Chamberlain, according to his lights, did what he thought was the best thing under the circumstances. Would Mr Churchill, knowing the overwhelming desire of the British people for peace, have taken any different course, had he been prime minister at the time? It is no lasting disgrace to Mr Chamberlain that he was hoodwinked by Hitler, and I wonder what history books will say about it 100 years hence. I am sure I understand his motives and respect them. And I don't think bolts or screws had anything to do with it. Maybe I'm a sucker, as the Americans say, to give Mr Chamberlain the benefit of the doubt. But it seems to me that if there was an overwhelming number of suckers in the world, they would be powerful enough to exert their will on the unscrupulous and disillusioned 'realists' and the world might be better off for it.

This Sunday evening Mr Chamberlain was followed by Mr Menzies, prime minister of Australia. He announced that because Britain was at war with Germany, so was Australia at war with Germany. He spoke in the cold, unemotional tones of an equity lawyer. He gave one of the finest summings-up of the events that had led to the European conflict that I have ever heard. It was brilliantly logical and legal, as all his utterances are, but it lacked, as it had to, the personal emotion of the British prime minister.

I switched off the radio and looked at Molly, my wife. We did not say anything because we were both thinking the same things. Outside in Rose Bay it was a warm spring night. There was a touch of fog and it seemed uncannily quiet as if the world had taken a deep breath before plunging to its doom. At Kings Cross crowds were milling around and cheering the news, but we felt no elation at the coming of war, only a deep depression. We were both thinking of our two children and what it would mean to them. Carol was six years old and Alistair was just over twelve months.

Neither of us knew then how much more it was going to affect our own lives than those of our children.

I was thirty-seven years old and Australian news editor of Reuters, the great British news agency. For that reason the war had little personal impact on me for some weeks: I was far too busy flashing cables to London about Australia's war effort. It was a story that I know warmed the cockles of the heart of Britain. It had been Hitler's dream that the Dominions would desert Britain in the Second World War, and much of their propaganda in Australia had been directed to that purpose—not without some success in high places. But the Teutonic mind was ever astray in judging Anglo-Saxon psychology. The Germans will never understand the British mind, whereas the British will always understand the Germans. And it is that sort of understanding that wins wars—the foreknowledge of what the other fellow is going to do under given circumstances. The German has always done what we thought he would do and has always made one or two gigantic blunders to offset our own blundering and stupidity.

I flung myself into my work and the 'phoney war' proceeded in Europe. The French and the Germans glared at each other across the Maginot Line and we blithely sang 'We'll Hang Our Washing on the Siegfried Line'. Soon there was to be a lot of dirty linen hanging in our own backyards.

I saw the first AIF convoy leave Sydney in March 1940. They were the toughest lot of troops I had ever set eyes on, and I thought: 'God help the first enemy they come across!' They were tough as they make them, as the Italians found out not very long afterwards.

War had come to Australia, but in a leisurely fashion. It was 'business as usual', by direction of the government. We had sent off a contingent of troops overseas; we were laying the foundations of the Empire Air Training Scheme and a munitions program—but otherwise our civil life was undisturbed. It kept pace with the 'phoney war' in Europe. We retained our Maginot Line war mentality; a completely static mentality.

But I began to notice that one or two of my contemporaries were getting into uniform. They were the adventurous ones; the sort of blokes one would expect to go tearing off to a war for the sheer excitement of it. One day, after an AIF march through Sydney, I ran into Ian Sabey, with 'Australias' on his shoulders and three stripes on his arm. We had beers in a bar in Hunter Street and I remember saying to him: 'Gosh, Ian, I wish I could do it too! But you know what it is with a wife and two kids.' I can't remember what he said, but later a lot of people said much the same thing to me, and some of them are still saying it. It gave me furiously to think afterwards because I had meant what I said.

I think it was about this time that Molly knew I was getting restive about the war. There were unmistakable signs that the 'phoney war' in Europe was going to give up being 'phoney'. The age limit for the AIF then was thirty-five years, but there was a lot of polite perjury by members of my generation. The number of men who confessed to thirty-four years and eleven months was only exceeded by those who put down thirty-nine years and eleven months when the age limit was raised to forty after the fall of France.

Things began to look black and desperate in France. The old concepts of static warfare were being exploded and infiltrated. Recruits were pouring into the AIF, and with them more of my friends, some of them distinctly not the 'adventurous' type. Reuters, of course, was a reserved occupation. It was indeed a vital part of the British propaganda machine. It was hated and feared by the Germans in the last war because of its reputation for truth and objective reporting. Its news service penetrated to every part of the world, and over the radio. As a medium for publicising Australia's contribution to the war it was unrivalled and invaluable. My job as Australian news editor was thought to be responsible enough for Reuters to pay me £1,200 a year with a three years' contract.

I suppose that £1,200 a year made me hesitate for a while. It's a lot of money—£24 a week. I was proud of the fact that only nine years before I had joined Reuters in London at £156 a year. I had served them in London, in Canada, and on two MCC cricket tours in Australia and New Zealand. I had come a long way and felt entitled to enjoy the first big salary I had ever achieved. It was a temptation to 'stay put' in a reserved occupation. But deep in my heart I knew that the easiest way to enlist from a reserved occupation in those days was to resign from the reserved occupation and enlist afterwards. In those early days of war the list of 'reserved occupations' was quite ludicrous; later it was really to include only those essential to the war effort.

I grew more and more unhappy as my friends got into uniform. I was a pacifist at heart, as nearly every Anglo-Saxon is. We are a peace-loving race; that is no platitude. But I was a militant pacifist. I thought war was wrong, futile and beastly. It was indeed the 'Great Illusion' of Sir Norman Angell. But war was no illusion now; it was a stark reality. And, being a stark reality, how could one continue to be an illusionist? The plain fact was that Australia was threatened just as much as Britain was threatened. Nobody but a mental illusionist could reason otherwise. How, then, could any man with a family be

a practising pacifist under those circumstances? It was a family war; Nazi ideology would destroy the very basis of Anglo-Saxon life. Pacifism had to go overboard for the time being in face of the *fait accompli*. Afterwards, when the dirty mess had been cleaned up, then we could begin again and learn from our mistakes of two wars and try to convert the whole world to pacifism.

I was not the only man who was being torn between loyalty to his family and loyalty to his country. No country has any right to allow its citizens to be confronted with this decision. If there is any meaning in 'all-in war effort' or 'equality of sacrifice', then every able-bodied man and woman should be called upon to do their part in their proper turn. It should not be left to the individual to make this tormenting decision.

So I always advocated conscription if only because of the dreadful unfairness of the voluntary system. I thought, for one thing, that it was a shameful reflection on the young manhood of the country that they should have to be forced to fight for it, even admitting that many of those adolescent in 'depression' days had precious little to fight about from the purely selfish point of view. It seemed to me a shocking waste that the cream of the country's volunteers should be killed, while others, either from selfishness or lack of official direction, should stay behind. How intolerable that those who had scurried to the shelter of 'reserved occupations' should enjoy any benefits from the promised New Order after the war!

I think from the beginning Molly had resigned herself to the fact that I would go sooner or later, so we did not talk about it very much. Whichever way you looked at it, it was the manly thing, the right thing, the only thing to do. And yet . . . £1,200 a year . . . a wife and two children . . . no need to go until you're told to . . . you're over age anyway . . . Reuters is a reserved occupation. . . .

How I felt about it as the months went on is best illustrated by the following article I wrote for the Sydney *Sunday Sun*. Nothing has happened since to make me change any of my arguments very much. It was entitled 'Too Young, Too Old, to be a Digger', and it read:

'I am one of the 1902 class. In other words, I am 38 years old. Because of that for every day of the present war an appalling mental conflict has gone on within me.

'I call myself one of the "Missing Generation", because I missed the last war by less than two years. I was going on for 17 when it ended and made two ineffectual efforts to enlist.

'My brother had gone, my eligible relations had gone, my friends senior to me in years had gone. Many of them had been killed.

'Like every other youth of my own age in 1918 I was breaking my neck to go, too; making ridiculous attempts to grow a moustache, and resorting to all sorts of rather silly subterfuges in order to look older than I really was.

'The tragedy is now that the "Missing Generation" remembers vividly the last war without having been in it.

'I remember one scene in particular—it has haunted me for 22 years. It was in Martin Place during the last year of the war. A returned soldier was speaking from a recruiting platform. He broke down as he appealed for reinforcements, tears running down his cheeks. . . . "For God's sake," he said. . . .

'The scene haunts me still.

'I remembered with some bitterness then, as I remember now, the men who didn't respond to that appeal . . . It's no use pursuing that aspect now, but I vowed to myself that I would not be left out when my turn came.

'Well, my turn has come now, and I AM out of it. I am out of it, not merely because the military age limit stops at 35—a little polite perjury would easily pass me in as 34. I am not out of it because I don't want to go—I want to go with a kind of helpless desperation."

'I am 38 now. I am married with two small children, and I am earning a salary of over £1,000 a year. You may say at once this is a paradox. You may say, "But you can afford to go".

But can I? Through unavoidable circumstances I have not been able to put away any capital, except a life insurance policy. When I enlist my salary ceases.

'Am I justified in asking my family to accept heavy sacrifices before they are obliged to?

'It would be better, I think, if I were earning £500 a year. Then, at least, one could argue with oneself: "After all, the gap between my salary and the Army allowance for wife and children is not so unbridgeable"

'I have no doubt the married member of the 1902 class on £500 a year has the same argument with himself, reduced to terms of £250 a year. And so on.

'Wise, sensible people counter this at once by saying: "My dear fellow, there's no need for you to worry about it. After all, you're married with children. Nobody wants you to go. The single men must go first. It's grossly unfair to your family for you even to consider

it. If things get worse your turn will come."

'It doesn't stop the worrying. It doesn't rid you of the curse of being 38. You KNOW they are right; you KNOW you can't do it . . . and yet there's the gnawing urge to do what you wanted to do in 1918, when you were only 17.

'Nowadays, at 38, lots and lots of your friends are men of 40 and 45. You are on equal terms with them —until they start talking about the last war. You want, in extenuation, to say—and, of course, British reticence curbs you—'I just missed it by two years". You feel, well, you never know, although I'm only 38, my head's becoming a bit bald and I may look 45 . . . maybe I'd better keep quiet. And yet you'd like to tell them you wanted to go, and couldn't. You think . . . if only I didn't remember the last war; if it was only history to me . . .

'The worst part of it is watching—and, try as you will, you can't drag yourself away—the public marches of the AIF through Sydney streets.

'I'll be frank. There's still a certain "glamour" in war to men with red blood in their veins, say what you will. Apart from elemental patriotism—and, being Anglo-Saxon the deadliest sin of all is to admit anything of that sort—sheer excitement and the desire to see strange countries at the government's expense is still an irresistible attraction.

'It's a ghastly ordeal for a 1902 man to have a drink with a couple of Diggers after an AIF march. We are horribly "out of it".

'Of course war is brutal and horrible and wickedly unnecessary, but what memories those fellows (those of them who came back unscathed) have! What abiding friendships, impossible to make in peacetime, they made!

'Perhaps it is only fancy that makes one wonder, as one drinks with them, whether they are thinking: "Well, you haven't got much to say . . ."

'I hope some of them read this, and understand. The last war was a long time ago, long enough for us 1902 men to become bald-headed . . . The spirit is willing, honour bright!

'I hope I have not given the impression of glorifying war. I hate war. God knows, I want to be left in peace with my wife and family. But I am a simple soul with a simple philosophy.

'As a member of the "Missing Generation" I retain my idealism, up to a point. I resist Communist, pacifist and so-called intellectual propaganda about this war. I believe in the justice of it. Of course I have been disillusioned, but not altogether disillusioned.

'They sneer at the failure of the last war to "save the world for

democracy". But we still HAVE democracy—not the great idealistic goal we all wanted, but a brave, conscious freedom, compared to countries like Germany.

'You can't get away from that. That was worth fighting for. Those people who fought for it didn't fail. Why are so many otherwise intelligent people so prone, almost eager, to debunk and scoff at these things?

'I have the strangest old-fashioned beliefs. I believe Germany wantonly invaded Belgium. I believe Germany wantonly invaded Poland, Denmark, Norway. These are cast-iron facts. Perhaps I don't believe Hitler was solely responsible for this war. But I do believe he could have prevented it from starting.

'You can't throw dust over my eyes by trying to cloak Germany's savage acts of 1914 and 1940 with stories about international "armament rings", "unscrupulous financiers", and plots with the enemy for self-aggrandisement and gain by our own leaders.

'For the life of me, I cannot accept the picture propagandists would have one envisage of a table with great armament manufacturers and bloated capitalists sitting round it, solemnly saying: "Hurrah! Now we've got a war at last! Now we can kill millions of men and women and children, and make fat profits for ourselves!" I simply don't believe it.

'I reject, also, loose thinking which says, in effect, "What a shame these boys are going away to fight for a lot of war profiteers". Who said they were going away to fight for war profiteers? They are doing nothing of the sort.

'They are intrinsically fighting for themselves, for their families, for their country—and some of them because they like fighting.

'I am disgusted myself by the blatant war profiteering of certain Australian concerns. But, if I went off to fight, it would never occur to me that I was fighting for them. Let them make their filthy profits—I don't care.

'I can even be illogical enough to declare that all this doesn't matter two hoots, anyway. The point is Australia is threatened just as directly as Great Britain is threatened.

'I do not propose to sit back until this country becomes a battlefield like Norway. I want to go away and fight it somewhere else.

'But none of this gets me anywhere, and the dilemma remains unanswered. This article may provoke self-conscious sniggers, or it may strike responsive chords somewhere. I'm glad I've got it off my chest, anyway. I hope I have made it clear why I'd give anything in the world to be 25, or 45, instead of 38.'

The upshot was a number of interesting letters. Most of them seemed to think that my ideas were refreshing and a contradiction of the opinions usually expressed by men of my age. One letter was different. It was from a woman. She was married with two children and her husband had chucked up his job and enlisted. She didn't agree with me at all and argued that if her husband could do it so could I. Of course she was perfectly right and I had known it all the time.

I cursed again the unfairness of the voluntary system that was to separate fathers from the children, and more than likely leave them fatherless altogether. It seemed to me damnably illogical that women would be widowed and left to support young children, while young unmarried men stayed behind and enjoyed themselves. The thing didn't make sense.

I told Molly one night: 'I'll have to enlist. I can't stand it any longer.'

She had known it was coming. She just looked straight at me and brought forth the arguments I had already settled with myself.

'My dear, you're thirty-eight. Do you think you can stand up to it?'

'I had eight years in the bush, you know. I'm pretty strong physically.'

'That was a long time ago. You've had fifteen years of office life since then.'

'I'll soon harden up again.'

'What about the children?'

'What about the children if Hitler wins this war?'

There was no answer to that one.

'Do you think *your* going will make any difference?' she asked.

'If everybody said that nobody would go. Besides, my going may influence other men to do the same thing.'

'Yes, I suppose that's true. But what about Reuters?'

'An older man could do my job.'

'Who *is* going to do your job?'

'*You are!*' I said.

We talked late into the night. Before she had married me Molly had been a pharmaceutical chemist. She had had no real journalistic training, but inevitably had assimilated the mechanics of news agency work by being with me on various Reuters jobs. My plan was this: I would write to Sir Roderick Jones, chairman of Reuters in London, and ask him to release me from my contract for the duration of the war. I would tell him my feelings about the war and try to explain to him the uncomfortable position of my generation in Australia. I

would suggest to him that Molly should carry on my job at a very much reduced salary. I knew it would be more of an appeal to sentiment than to business reason, but I had a feeling Sir Roderick would understand.

Knowing now how utterly I failed in all I set out to do, I realise today that I had no right to ask so much of her. And it was asking a great deal of a woman with two young children to take on a strange and responsible job like news editor of Reuters. It was not a job that ended at 5 p.m. News waited for no man—or woman. News 'beats' these days were measured in minutes; you didn't get scoops of a week like the New York correspondent of Reuters got with the assassination of President Lincoln. At all costs you tried to be 'first with the news'. It meant sticking by your telephone twenty-four hours a day seven days a week. There was no let up. But Molly was to have her little triumphs. Her greatest was the day she 'took' Tobruk—*that* story comes later.

When a married man of thirty-eight decides to go to a war, he doesn't rush in blindly like a youth of nineteen. He has many things to consider. So before I wrote to Sir Roderick I thought it all over dispassionately again. I thought of the £24 a week I was proposing to give up for 6s. a day. I have never been the most provident of men. I had less than £50 in the bank and no shares or anything like that. I lived on what I earned from Reuters. If I enlisted it would most certainly mean moving to a cheaper suburb and probably mean sending Carol to a cheaper school. It would mean a complete reorientation of my family's lives.

I thought also of the possibility of being killed or, worst of all, maimed or blinded. It made me feel slightly sick—not the actual death but the blood and torn flesh that would go with it. Moreover, I did not want to kill a fellow human being; at the last moment I would probably be too soft-hearted. Most of all, I worried over the fact that I was pretty sure I was a physical coward. That worried me a lot. I knew I had plenty of moral courage, but when it came to physical courage I knew I lacked it. The trouble was I was too introspective. I worried a lot, not so much about the actual cowardice and fear I might show on a battlefield, but about the fact that other people would witness and condemn it. If I was nervous of so many everyday things, what in heaven would happen to me when I came under shellfire or dive-bombing?

Thunderstorms terrified me. I was a bundle of nerves. I hated and feared the sea. I have been fated to travel nearly 300,000 miles by sea across nearly every ocean in the world—and have hated every moment

of it, especially at night in a storm. In sleeping cars of trains at night I have lain awake tensed for an accident. Heights petrified and unnerved me. Travelling beside the fast driver of a car was purgatory—and yet myself at the wheel was no loiterer. What in the hell sort of soldier would I make? . . .

Damn the voluntary system! Damn the small-minded isolationists who spouted 'equality of sacrifice' in one breath and 'no conscription of manpower' in another! Of course this deep-seated objection to conscription was really directed against overseas service, which seemed uncommonly short-sighted to me. Apparently there was something to be ashamed of in Australian troops fighting in the Middle East or Burma. Surely if you helped to fight the battle against a common enemy on foreign soil it was better than making a battlefield of your own country? Few people seemed to recognise that the real issue of the conscription controversy which has torn Australia in two wars was not the alleged negation of democracy in conscription, but the gross injustice and inequality of the voluntary system.

I think it was sheer anger that overwhelmed all my introspective fears; anger about the bombing of London, where I had spent so many happy years and had so many dear friends. I was conscious of a blazing anger against Germans, unusual in an even-tempered appeaser like myself. I wonder if Mr Chamberlain finally got into the same frame of mind?

I wrote to Sir Roderick Jones.

2

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BY the time Sir Roderick received my letter, events had moved so swiftly that his reply became a matter of urgency for me. France fell and the miracle of Dunkirk occurred. And, most significant to me, the age limit for the AIF was raised to forty. It removed the last practical obstacle to what I wanted to do. I felt I could not wait a moment longer.

I followed up my letter to Sir Roderick with a cable pleading for my release. It did the trick. Sir Roderick cabled his acceptance of my proposition and that cable was my password into the AIF. It was a fine gesture on his part and the firm also generously offered to allow me to continue my payments into the Reuters superannuation fund.

In going into the army I did not want to 'pull strings' of any kind. I like to go my own way and I don't like 'job wangling' and getting things done by influence. Nevertheless, when a newspaper friend asked me to see a certain captain, ADC to a general who was expected to get a new division then being formed, I took his advice. I knew nothing about soldiering but felt that my journalistic knowledge and experience in various parts of the world might fit me for some specialised job. That is a mistake the civilian always makes. Soldiering is a job of its own, to be learnt from the beginning.

'What exactly do you suggest?' asked the Captain.

I didn't know.

'You're too old for a commission, of course. I could put your name down for the Divisional Orderly Room.'

'What does that mean?'

'Well, a sort of clerk. Preparing Routine Orders and so forth.'

'I might just as well stay with Reuters. Don't you think so?'

'Frankly, I do.'

'What you mean is, I've got plenty of qualifications but none that are any use to the army.'

'Well . . .'

'Oh, well,' I said, 'I guess I'll take pot luck in the infantry. Please don't think I wanted to get any kind of cushy job from you.'

'I'm still prepared to put down your name, but there are about twenty chaps ahead of you. Some of them are quite prominent men.'

'In that case,' I said, 'I'd sooner stand on my own feet. Sorry I bothered you.'

Sometimes I think I was over-sensitive and too full of patriotic fervour, and maybe would have done a better job in the Divisional Orderly Room—but never mind.

A couple of days later I enlisted and, apart from the fact that for the first time I became aware that I had two 'hammer' toes, I sailed through the preliminary medical examination. This was not surprising as all I had to do was touch my toes (hammers and all) once or twice and say a couple of 'ninety-nines'.

Molly was waiting outside the drill hall in Paddington.

'Sorry, my dear, but I got through easily,' I said. 'Let's go and have a drink somewhere.'

At home we were in the throes of moving into a cheaper house. It made my heart bleed to leave the vegetable garden. We lived on the Rose Bay slopes of Bellevue Hill and I had spent a fair amount of money buying black soil to replace the sand in the garden. The green peas were just podding and the crisp silver beet was almost ready to pick. The man next door had a nice garden, too. He was a member of the state parliament and he was in the Middle East already. If he could give up his garden, so could I.

Molly, as usual, was left to grapple with the actual move. If all else fails, that woman can take it up as a profession. She has spent most of her married life moving from one house to another, from one country to another. Even Carol had been round the world twice before she was two years old.

On 2 July 1940 I was called up for a final examination. Unless I had some incurable disease, I was as good as in the army. With me went my friend 'Blue' Greatorex, a famous Australian Rugby Union footballer and then Sports Editor of the Sydney *Sunday Sun*. We said good-bye to Molly and (as Carol always called her) 'Blue's Betty', and

took a taxi to Paddington. It was queer going off to a war in a taxi with suitcases in our hands. I would have laughed, if I had felt like laughing at anything. It was only 9 o'clock in the morning, but as we drew near the pub opposite the Paddington Town Hall, Blue looked at me and I looked at Blue, and with one accord we told the taxi-driver to stop. We had two double brandies and felt a lot better after them. We sensed that it was the end of an epoch in our private lives.

That morning I had my first introduction to what, in the next year or two, was to become the normal and exasperating procedure of an infantry private. (After a month or two you lost the sense of exasperation and learnt to accept it with a sort of stupefied resignation. You learnt, amongst other things, that if you were to shift camp at 0800 hours, you would be dragged out of bed at 0400 hours and be all ready to move by 0600 hours, and would spend the next two hours picking up dead matches and stray bits of paper around the camp, hounded by sergeants and sergeant-majors. You learnt cunning then and became expert at dodging behind tents or being called to the latrine. One ingenious stratagem, which I hesitate to reveal, was to walk about briskly and importantly with a sheet of paper and a pencil in your hand. The idea was passed on to me by a warrior from the last war, and I found it worked admirably for a while. Even the CO would probably think you were doing some job for the orderly room or the adjutant.)

In other words, Blue and I 'mucked about' from nine in the morning until seven at night. We stood in queues. We sat down in queues. We answered our name about a dozen times. Fellows in uniform passed us and said pityingly 'YOU'LL BE SORRY!' Before the end of the day we were. About a week later we were roaring out to other new recruits, 'YOU'LL BE SORRY!'

Blue makes friends quicker than I do. Soon he was on familiar terms with the large Warrant Officer who was in charge of the recruits. Effacing ourselves like old soldiers, we took the WO to the local pub and poured a couple of pints into him. We were a bit worried that we might miss the war, but the WO assured us that we would get there in good time. All armies, even the enemy's, he said, worked like the mills of God – exceedingly slow.

'Where are They going to send us?' asked Blue.

'They' in the army are the powers-that-be. You never say 'We' are going to do something. It is always 'They', the great omnipotent hierarchy of the army.

'I am sending a hundred of you to Walgrove camp,' said the WO, 'and there are 150 of you. The rest will be day-boys.'

This, you will remember, was the time when thousands were flocking to the colours. France had fallen and Britain looked to be on her knees. The Germans must have thought the war was won. But for God or Churchill or the hesitation of Hitler it probably was. It was a time when, if you could see beyond Bondi Beach, every fit man must have wanted to fight. Enlistments into the AIF were so embarrassingly large that they were suspended a few weeks later. Camps were so full that many of the new recruits became 'day-boys'. This meant that they lived at home and reported each day to the nearest training depot.

Neither Blue nor I wanted to be day-boys. We felt that it would be far better to break once and for all with our families, whom we had left in a pretty miserable frame of mind. We explained all this to the WO; bought him another pint; and were assured that he would 'fix it'.

When we got back to the drill hall our comrades were still 'mucking about', and we joined the queue again. Gradually we went through all the mechanics of joining the army, but first of all we had to pass the manpower officer. I think he had had a disappointing day because he pounced on me delightedly when he saw my papers.

'You can't go,' he said. 'You're in a reserved occupation.'

I waved Sir Roderick Jones' cable triumphantly. 'What about this?'

He scratched his head, and after some hesitation said, 'Oh, well, if you must, you must. With your qualifications you'd better join the Signals.'

'I'd prefer the infantry, sir.'

'Just as you like,' he said. 'You may regret it at your age. Still, we give you the choice. PBI—you know what that is?'

'No, sir.'

'Poor Bloody Infantry! And by God, it's true, too! *I know!* Tanks and new-fangled things won't make any difference. It's still the PBI that will do the job in the end—you see! . . . Pass along, sonny, and good luck!'

The rest was easy.

We went through a much stiffer medical examination. Another doctor peered doubtfully at my feet. Our 'specimens' were tested. Blood pressure was taken. And I came out of it all 'A' class. (All Molly's hopes would be blasted now.) We had our chests X rayed and our photographs taken full-face and side-face like criminals.

We mumbled the oath to serve His Majesty at home and overseas for the duration of the war and twelve months thereafter—and NX55915, Private Mant, G. P., and Private Greatorex, F. N., picked up their suitcases and went to war.

'There's something horribly definite about this, Blue,' I said.

'Yes, we've done it now,' he replied.

'Maybe we're mugs,' I said. 'Prize mugs. But somehow I'm glad we did it.'

'Me, too . . . I hope that WO does the decent thing. You know I'd hate to go home now. It would be too much of an anti-climax.'

The warrant officer was as good as his word. Omnibuses drew up at the drill hall and a list of names was read out. An expansive wink from the WO came when he duly called our names for Walgrove. Afterwards he was surrounded by the day-boys complaining bitterly that they didn't want to be day-boys. Blue and I felt that we had made an auspicious start and never forgot the lesson—at least when we had enough money to buy WOs pints, which was seldom.

At half past nine at night, in pitch darkness, we arrived at Walgrove. We must have looked a rabble, but an interesting cross-section of the community. We were short, tall, thin and fat. We were all ages. The difference in our dress accentuated the difference in our social status far more than any difference in our talk. Those of us in collars and ties were instinctively inclined to draw together. The man with the open-necked shirt was inclined to withdraw into the background. Two or three days later when we were all dressed in the same 'giggle suits', the gap was bridged naturally and swiftly. From then on the only distinction between us was the distinction of rank as exemplified in stripes and 'pips'. We were all one together because we all wore the same clothes. It was a striking lesson in social relations. I wonder if there were any 'class distinctions', except the primeval distinctions of strength and weakness, in the days when our ancestors wore no clothes at all?

Walgrove was the headquarters of the 54th Militia Battalion and we were the first AIF recruits to go there. The militia-men peered curiously at us in the darkness, but I must say they had prepared a very good meal for us. Their own mess orderlies waited on us and we thought life in the army was good. That is the reaction when you are ravenously hungry and food is forthcoming.

Afterwards we were allotted eight to a tent, and Blue and I managed to stick together. We were as raw as it was possible to be and felt as miserable as two small boys going to boarding school for the first time. We were given empty palliasses and directed towards a pile of hay in the darkness. I learnt very quickly that the lord or anybody else doesn't help those who don't help themselves. There was a wild rush into the gloom, but, as I have said, I am an appeaser by nature,

and by the time I reached the straw there wasn't any left. This was one of the moments when I thanked heaven I had Blue with me. 'I'm a shrinking violet, as you know,' I had said to him earlier, 'and I hereby appoint you my bodyguard.' As his name implies, Blue has bright red hair, is six feet high, and weighs about fourteen stone. Blue put his head down like a good Rugby forward; there was a lot of scuffling in the darkness; and the next thing I knew my palliasse was half-full of straw.

There was a shortage of hurricane lamps, too, but once again Blue managed to scrounge one from somewhere or other. I could see that Blue was going to get on in the army. In the next tent a violent altercation was in progress about the possession of a hurricane lamp. Finally a peeved voice cried: 'Why don't you ——s draw straws for it? Gawd knows there's enough of the —— things lying around here!'

In the flickering light of the hurricane lamp we took stock of our companions and bedded down for the night. Darky was a half-caste ironworker; Chiller was a lift-driver from a well-known Sydney store; Monty was a young and burly professional prize fighter, often on the bill at Leichhardt Stadium, who was treated with considerable awe; Fred was an unemployed farm worker whom nobody could understand because he had just had most of his teeth out; Bill was a gawky lad from the backblocks who had this day seen Sydney for the first time; Jack, Irish and about forty years of age, was employed by the Sydney County Council as an electrical linesman and had apparently spent most of his life crawling around in tunnels underneath the streets of Sydney or in being thrown out of pubs of which he had an impressive and extensive knowledge, chiefly around Bondi Beach. Jack, who turned out to be a good cobber, also had an inherent and abiding hatred of policemen, especially what he termed 'military jacks'.

There were eight of us in a tent at Walgrove in midwinter; eight men of contrasting types and temperaments whom only a war could have flung together. We were together for the duration of the war and one year thereafter and we all realised it and expressed it, all except Fred who didn't have any teeth.

It's a considerable shock suddenly going from a warm, comfortable feather bed to a thinly filled straw palliasse laid out on a wooden board at Walgrove in midwinter. At thirty-eight you don't contemplate this sort of thing with the youthful exuberance of a Boy Scout going camping for the first time. You just feel plain damned uncomfortable. You're pretty sure you'll wake up with a bad cold or something. It was Chiller, the lift-driver (thirty-nine years and eleven months and

a veteran of Gallipoli) who came to our rescue and showed us how to fold our blankets into a sort of sleeping bag. 'The secret is, always have plenty *underneath* you,' he said.

Rather self-consciously we undressed, got into pyjamas, and crawled between the blankets. Somebody blew out the hurricane lamp and there was a chorus of 'goodnights'. In the next tent, the heated brawl about the possession of the lamp was still in progress until an enraged voice from another direction suddenly quelled it with '*Get a bag, you ——s!*'

The theory of Chiller's sleeping bag was sound enough, but there weren't enough blankets to make it a practical success. It was nearly midnight by the time we got to bed, and by then a chill wind swept across Walgrove. In spite of Blue's efforts, there was precious little straw in my palliasse, and after a while it all seemed to gather in one place. The floorboard drove into my hipbone and left a bruise there for days. I tossed and turned and shivered, and by the sound of it Blue was doing the same thing. All the others were fast asleep. I thought of my warm, soft bed at Rose Bay and then thought in a kind of lascivious retrospection of all the luxury hotels I had patronised at Reuters' expense. The Royal York in Toronto, the Australia in Sydney, the Shelton in New York, the Galle Face in Colombo, the Regent Palace in London. I nearly said to Blue, 'You know in the Royal York, there's central heating and the sort of beds you simply sink down into'— but thought better of it. And turned on to the other hipbone with a groan. And finally fell asleep . . .

A bugle woke us. I crawled out of the 'sleeping bag', chilled to the marrow and stiff and aching in every limb. Blue was in the same condition.

'They said we'd be sorry,' said Blue ruefully. 'My God I'm stiff!'

'What annoys me,' I said, 'is thinking of some of the fellows we know who are lying in warm beds at this very moment with some nice wench bringing them in morning tea. Some of them will do that for the duration of the war. I nearly woke you up last night to tell you about the beds at the Royal York in Toronto.'

'Oh, shut up!' growled Blue.

Chiller was up already, his blankets folded neatly on his palliasse, and down at the wash basins. Routine dies hard in old soldiers. He came back cheerful as a cricket. 'Well, how did you sleep? . . . If you hurry you'll get a pannikin of hot water from the cook for a shave. I'll show you how to fold your blankets afterwards. Better hurry; there's a parade this morning.'

First thing after breakfast we were lined up and addressed by the

colonel commanding the militia battalion. He gave us what I thought was a gratuitously insulting speech, saying that if we caused any trouble with the militia we would be severely punished. Apparently he thought we were a collection of thugs. He went to some pains to tell us how self-sacrificing the militia had been before the war started (which was perfectly true) and we were not to think that just because we were the AIF we would be allowed to make trouble in his camp. We were the guests of the militia and he expected us to behave as such. There was never any trouble between us and the militia, but if anything was likely to cause it, it was a speech like that. Actually for the next month we were trained by young militia non-coms who were rattling good chaps and knew their job from A to Z. Nearly all of them were preparing to transfer to the AIF.

The hundred or so of us were a sort of lost legion at Walgrove for a few weeks. We belonged to no AIF unit and were just marking time until the 8th Division was formed. In the meantime the militia NCOs took the rough edges off us. We were issued with 'giggle suits', those shapeless khaki blouses and slacks and other working clothes. This meant more 'mucking about', long hours in queues, and surreptitious 'two-up schools' behind latrines and the YMCA hut. You were lucky if you got anything that fitted you because equipment of all kinds was desperately short. It was some weeks before we got a complete uniform to wear on leave, and then there were no slouch hats, only forage caps. You had to buy your own 'Australias' and bronze buttons. As for rifles, they were almost unheard of; the militia lent us some to practise with, and a few antiquated Lewis guns.

The young militia NCOs did the best they could with us until our own AIF officers and NCOs arrived. They took us for PT in the mornings and tried to take the rawness off us. Even if you remembered, as I did, the old cadet drill of 1918, it was not much use to you now. There was no 'form fours' or 'form two deep'. Everything was in 'threes'. The old basis of squad drill had been changed. You even 'about turned' by a different method. The young NCOs put us through it with infinite tact, patience and keenness. But after all we were all eager to learn, we wanted to get to the war as quickly as we could. But we were a lost legion just the same.

Day after day we trudged about learning our squad drill. We tended to and 'broke in' our boots, as good infantrymen should. Our boots were to be almost more important than our rifles. We learnt the rudiments of the Lewis gun. When there were enough rifles to go round (Australia had lent 100,000 to Britain after Dunkirk) we went through the

movements of rifle drill. There were a few impotent 1914 hand grenades for us to practise with. We were lectured about the importance of saluting officers—it wasn't the officer you saluted, it was the King's commission. It fell on stony ground; nobody saluted officers on leave, unless he happened to be your own colonel.

They were long, back-breaking days for a raw recruit like me. 'They' called for applicants for a non-coms. school, and I was urged to put down my name. But I knew too clearly that it was not for me. I had joined the infantry with the deliberate intention of trying to gain a few stripes; I figured out that a sergeant's rank was the ideal rank to attain in the army. But a few weeks had taught me my limitations. I knew I wasn't the type to command men. I was too much of an appeaser and too soft-hearted. I didn't have the right kind of authority. I might be able to run Reuters Australian news service, but I couldn't run a platoon of hard-bitten soldiers. I was far too nervous and temperamental and I couldn't assume the proper note of command in my voice. Moreover, the first few weeks showed me that I could not recapture the physical stamina I had enjoyed so many years ago in the bush. I was making heavy weather of it. I saw that the right kind of officer and NCO could not possibly ask his men to do something he could not do himself.

I was dreadfully tired at night and would flop down on my palliasse before supper while the younger fellows kicked a football around. I realised for the first time the difference between the twenties and the late thirties. One day 'They' 'weeded us out'. About twenty names were called out and ordered to go back to the Showground for regrouping. Mine was amongst them. This sounded like a complete failure. I pleaded earnestly with an officer and eventually got my way.

I kicked myself into feeling a little less sorry for myself and plunged into infantry training again.

3

A Battalion is Born

OTHER AIF recruits arrived at Walgrove, including large drafts from country training camps and a New Guinea contingent of eight.

One day we were all gathered together and the 22nd Infantry Brigade came into being. We were given the choice of joining 18th, 19th, or 20th Battalions. By this time we were being trained by AIF non-coms, and one or two very popular officers. The officers were joining the 2/19th Battalion so our little company joined with them.

We were practically the only 'city blokes' in the battalion for 2/19th had, I think, the biggest proportion of countrymen of any battalion in the AIF. It was to all intents and purposes a Riverina battalion. You could see it in the way they walked, the way they talked and in the squint of their eyes. Pitt Street and Bondi Beach were foreign to them. Their hunting grounds were at Gundagai, Leeton, Griffith, Wagga, Narrandera, and Lockhart. They told the yarns bushmen tell; about sheep and drovers and cocky farmers. Many of them (thirty-nine years and eleven months) had served in the Light Horse in the last war. Even the CO, Colonal Duncan Maxwell, came from Cootamundra; the 2/IC, Major Anderson, from Young. The colonel's batman, 'Young' Jimmy Larkin, had a milk round in the colonel's home town and had been a prisoner of the Bulgarians in the last war. The New Guinea men, because of their small number, were more alien than we were and clung together. Their stories were about Rabaul and Salamaua and Samarai. They talked about copra and gold and Burns Philp and Carpenters.

For some reason or other I found myself suddenly seconded to the intelligence section. This was a great surprise to me as I was beginning to wonder if I had any. However, there it was, and soon the eight of us who were to form the section were established together in a tent and eyeing each other off warily. We were to be together a long time.

There was our officer, Lieutenant Stuart Burt, another grazier from Cootamundra, whom the battalion magazine once described as 'yon Cassius has a lean and hungry look'. Thin as a rake was Stuart Burt, but full of nervous vitality and highly trained as an intelligence officer. We were a contradictory lot which was why we got on so well together . . . Gordon Smith, a public servant in his late thirties. A giant of a man and a champion walker who held one or two New South Wales records. Centuries ago Gordon would have been a buccaneer. He never quite belonged to the modern world: his eyes were fixed on far horizons and he was a nudist at heart because clothes irked and imprisoned him . . . Stanley McAlister, a little red-haired gnome whose eyes were perpetually twinkling and whose good humour never failed him. Stanley was in his late thirties, too, and a commercial artist by profession. He and Gordon and I were the old men of the section. Stanley was a well known Sydney marathon runner; where he packed his amazing stamina I don't know . . . Morrie Brennan, our sergeant from the militia, a young dark haired country schoolmaster who had the hard job of teaching us something about the army . . . Graham Bartley, slow spoken countryman from Wyalong . . . Harrie Gibbons, surveyor from the Rural Bank of New South Wales . . . Bill Tozer, another disgustingly healthy and perfectly built giant of a boy from Kempsey, who was also a Rural Bank surveyor down Goulburn way . . . Vernon Benjamin, dark, dapper and neat, manager of a wool firm in Leeton . . . Jack Rescorl, a rising young economist with the Bank of New South Wales, a degree from Sydney University to his name.

There we were – schoolmaster, economist, surveyor, public servant, artist, bushman and journalist – eyeing each other off and summing each other up. Apart from we three 'old men', all the others were in their twenties. They had all given up good jobs to be privates in the army. I don't know whether Stuart Burt deliberately chose such a diverse crew or whether it was mere chance. But if he did, it paid handsome dividends because between us we could speak with authority on an extraordinary variety of subjects, which was valuable from an intelligence point of view. For instance, Stanley became one of the best mapmakers in the brigade, while Bill and Harrie needed no

instruction on compass work. Each of us was able to contribute something to the pattern of our section—even I, to my great delight, found that journalism gave me a flying start in the writing of field messages and intelligence reports.

We eyed each other off for a long time before we got really intimate. Those of us who had any civilian smugness—and I suppose I was one of them—had to lose it first. Smugness does not last long in the army.

First and foremost we had to learn to be infantrymen before we could really get down to our specialised intelligence training. That meant the 'bull ring'. The bull ring sounds cruel, and it was. We were the tormented bulls and the army instructors were the matadors. The bull ring consists of instructors placed in a rough circle around the training ground who progressively take a group of men for about half an hour each. You go from one matador to another. You begin, for instance, with a peaceful and interesting lecture on map-reading. You recline on the ground in the sunshine and pretend to be interested in what the Corporal is saying . . .

Half an hour later you are suddenly presented with a rifle with a bayonet on the end of it. The new matador works himself up into a perfect frenzy of hate and belligerency. '*On guard!*' he roars. '*High port! . . . Think there's a German on the end of it! . . . On guard! . . . High port! . . . Blast your eyes, can't you put some kick into it? . . . Think there's a German on the end of it! . . . On guard! . . . High port! . . .*' You absorb some of his enthusiasm. You rush forward and lunge at imaginary Germans. (There were no Japanese in the war at that time.) As the weather grows warmer, the sweat soaks your giggle suit. Your section is split into two opposing factions. You charge towards each other and narrowly miss your opponent's ear with a bayonet thrust. The instructor's eyes gleam with approval. '*On guard! . . . High port! . . . Whacko! . . .*'

You have a spell and move on to squad drill. You march and march in a dreary section, the dust rising from your 'unbroken-in' boots. '*Right turn! . . . left turn! . . . about turn! . . .*' You do it over and over again. There is always somebody out of step or always somebody who turns in the wrong direction. You plod on and on and on. You think it's all so damned silly. '*Right turn! . . . left turn! . . . about turn! . . .*'

You progress to an antiquated Lewis gun. This is better. You squat down in a circle and according to the temper of the instructor or the temporary absence of officers, are allowed to smoke. You learn about the mechanism and about 'stoppages'. You are quite thrilled, as a matter of fact, when you are allowed to lie behind the gun and

pretend to fire it. It feels like being a soldier.

On again, around the bull ring, and another accursed rifle is put in your hands. You do rifle drill. Your slope arms, order arms, present arms, pile arms, examine arms. You do it over and over again. You think, 'Why the hell didn't I join the artillery?' The rifle gets heavier and heavier. You think: 'I hope the hell we don't get any more bayonet drill after this!' . . . But you begin to get the 'feel' of your rifle; you begin to slope and present arms automatically. You don't think of it until many months afterwards, but you are learning an instinctive familiarity with your weapons that will stand you in good stead later on, and maybe it's not so damned silly after all.

You progress round the bull ring. You throw hand grenades, and if you ever played cricket you show a certain talent for it. You listen to lectures on this and that. You finish up hearing the battalion MO, who is new to the job and a bit self-conscious, talk about venereal disease.

The bull ring goes on week after week. You kill thousands of imaginary Germans. You slope arms automatically and the rifle feels lighter. One amazing day you are issued with a rifle of your own. You care for it as you care for your boots—tenderly and with affection. You are aware that your rifle and your boots are your chief possessions in the infantry. 'They' are still forcing you into interminable squad drill, but it is promoted to platoon drill. You've been issued with real ammunition now and 'They're' teaching you 'lying loads' and 'standing loads' and what have you. You slide to the ground and shoot imaginary Germans as well as bayoneting them. You throw more grenades. You listen to lectures on 'ground' and think you are back in the Boy Scouts again. Inevitably you finish up with squad drill again; it's a form of premeditated torture. The dust rises from your feet as you trudge back and forth. '*Left turn!* . . . *right turn!* . . . *about turn!* . . .'

The greatest advantage of joining an army in wartime is that you at once forget all about the war during your training period. When you were a civilian you bought a paper anxiously each day and worried yourself stiff about Dunkirk and the ultimate fate of the British Empire, and the world. Now you only buy a paper when you are on leave and the war seems unimportant and remote. You are much too busy and tired learning to be a soldier to bother about the war. You pity the poor civilian with his little war nerves. You are much more concerned about really important things such as leave, food and beer. Those three things are the cornerstones of your existence. Moreover, you are losing

whatever smugness you had and seeing other people lose it, too. Some things still worry me personally. The utter lack of privacy in the latrines is a torment that I never overcome. But I am learning to conquer other sensitivenesses. I can bully my way into the mess line-up now. On the first day I was shoved out of the queue somehow and could not fight my way back into it. I remember one red-headed recruit who jeered and taunted me. I suppose I should have had it out with him, but I was just too bewildered. Now the red-headed recruit and I call each other by our Christian names. He'd let me into the line like a shot now. We are all beginning to know each other. Even the Riverina boys are finding some virtues in us 'city blokes'.

The only common language we talk is bad language. In the army bad language comes naturally to you. It's frightful, appalling language, but you use it because there are so many things to swear about. It becomes a habit you conquer only when you go on leave. It's all very wrong, and every now and again the army issues routine orders threatening severe punishment for foul language. It doesn't have the slightest effect and the army know it. A private in the infantry has more to swear about than anyone else in the world, and should be entitled to it. Some of the Riverina boys were artists at it; there was more poetry and imagination to their swearing than the repetitive swearing vocabulary (consisting mainly of two words) of the city blokes . . .

There are routine orders at this time also about the necessity of saluting all officers when you are on leave. Like the routine orders on swearing, nobody takes any notice of them, except the soldier who trapped an unpopular officer on Sydney Central Station with both hands full of parcels and a lighted cigarette in his mouth, and saluted him and gloated over his physical embarrassment.

At the same time you expose a fallacy handed down from the last war. You had a vague idea that the Australian soldier was 'undisciplined'. If the 8th Division of the 2nd AIF is any criterion, you were wrong. You find yourself, while on duty, under the strictest discipline of any army in the world. It surprises you mightily. You begin to perceive that the original AIF warrior of 1914–18 might have been a wild and woolly customer on leave, but nevertheless a highly disciplined soldier in the field, otherwise he could not have been the great fighter he was. When you think it over, you understand how a small disciplined force will always be superior to a large rabble of soldiery, but you kick against it just the same. You are learning lots of new things. For instance, a great to-do is made by a senior officer about the fact that in this war every soldier is to be told beforehand the tactics of

the commander so that each man will know exactly what is going to happen, instead of feeling like an automaton. *You*, not being a professional soldier, smile to yourself because you remember that another great commander named Napoleon won the battle of Austerlitz in 1805 by the same means.

Your education as a soldier progresses in many important ways. You learn to make friends with the cook and the quartermaster-sergeant. They can do more for you than anyone else in the army. A lot more of your smugness goes when you become a mess orderly; serve an abusively hungry mess-hut full of soldiers with stew; stay behind afterwards to clean up the tables and mop down the floor. It gives you a golden opportunity to curry favour with the cook, but just the same you think, 'What the hell! A few weeks ago my own maid was waiting on me . . .' Later on, when you have lost *all* your smugness, you thank God this has happened to you in time, and think of all the other people you would like it to happen to . . .

Suddenly we are moved to Ingleburn. We are scheduled to break camp at 0900 hours, but 'They' get us up at 0400 hours. As I said earlier, we spend hours picking up dead matches from the parade ground to fill in time. I go with the main party by rail, but Jack Rescorl, the young dark-haired economist, is cursing because he has to ride a bicycle the twenty-odd miles across country from Walgrove to Ingleburn. We inherited the bicycles from the 1914–18 war, or perhaps even earlier. They were as stoutly built and as indestructible as the warriors who rode them then. I *know* because we tried for months to destroy them and failed dismally. We hurled them over barbed-wire fences with malice aforethought; we kicked at them in blind fury; we tried to lose them. But it was no good; they were that kind of bicycle. Later on we got modern bicycles.

At Ingleburn, more squad drill. More bayonet exercises. We are still training more or less in separate companies, but there are rumours of a battalion route march. It will probably take place, say the last-war cynics, after a vaccination or something. The army does it that way, either by design or stupidity. The cynics are right, which shows that armies never change. We are still in the 'mucking-about' queue stage. We go through a series of minor medical ordeals, three TABs, two anti-tetanus and a chip out of our ears for a blood test. There are seven inoculations altogether, but fortunately they leave the vaccinations for smallpox until last. Then the dentists get to work on us. Because practically all the battalion come from the country, nearly

all of them lose all their teeth. Australians notoriously have the worst teeth of any people in the world (hence the number of dentists) and country teeth are the worst of all. It all means hours of queues. While we are all still a bit dazed from injections the first route march takes place. It isn't a very long route march but it's an ordeal just the same. We march along the hard bitumen road to Campbelltown, and it's tough on the feet, to city man and country man alike. On the way home the rifle feels like a lump of lead and the collarbones ache excruciatingly. 'Changing arms' only makes the opposite collarbones ache. We have a band in the making, but it is too self-conscious yet for a public appearance. All we have in the way of martial music is 'Piccolo Pete' with a penny whistle. Even that helps the lagging feet. Then an officer says, 'Get them singing!' Many months later the same officer was to say, 'Get the lads singing'—but then it is a different song and a different road, the last road many of 2/19th trod and the *crump* and *thud* of bombs was the accompaniment.

This day, under the warm winter sun on the Campbelltown Road, we sang 'Oh, Gawd Blimey How Ashamed I Was!' It's a rude song and it gets anatomically ruder with each verse. It begins:

I touched her on the knee
(How ashamed I was!)
I touched her on the knee;
She said, 'You're rather free.'
(Oh, Gawd blimey how ashamed I was!)

It's astonishing how a song will quicken the feet and resurrect the spirit. We marched along, singing and with the singing came a sort of comradeship. We chaffed the CSM, which isn't usually done with impunity. We sang the songs the AIF were singing in 1940 and it is extraordinary how many of them were the songs of 1914–18. We sang 'Tipperary' and 'I Went to Mow a Meadow' and 'Keep the Home Fires Burning' and 'Australia Will Be There' and 'The Quartermaster's Store', which was sung to the tune of a very old hymn. And a song called 'Dinky Die', which I can't remember but I think was very indecent too.

The rough edges were being taken off us. We were learning to be soldiers. 'The Retreat' was played each night and we stood to attention and faced the setting sun in tribute to the fallen. We mounted a guard. At first we did not do it with anything like the precision of a guard at Buckingham Palace, but it was impressive and stirring just the same. One day the band plucked up enough courage to make a public appearance. They were a little out of tune, but it was *our* band. Soon

they were playing us to the formal early morning parades. There was beginning to be some semblance of polish to our rifle exercises as a battalion. We could 'fix bayonets' and come to the 'present' without more than half a dozen soldiers grappling belatedly with their bayonets and cursing under their breaths. We were beginning to march with our rifles at the proper slope and our arms swinging rhythmically. You could see the CO was pleased and proud.

At night we stormed the showers, rinsing the blinding dust and dirt of Ingleburn from our bodies. Afterwards we crammed into the YMCA hut or the Salvation Army hut and listened to concerts or picture shows. Never were entertainers more appreciated than the amateur concert parties that came to Ingleburn so regularly and so nobly. Some of the pretty girls, and especially those whose frocks were a trifle *décolleté*, must have been embarrassed by the chorus of whistling and shouting that greeted their appearance on the stage. Actually it was the sincerest form of welcome they could have received. We were getting to the stage when in a woman a soldier glimpses all the tenderness and gentleness and lovingness of the world. A woman to us was something lovely and remote from a forbidden world beyond the camp confines. We spoke of them perhaps coarsely and crudely, but underneath it all was something infinitely tender. We wanted them to sing not 'Tipperary' or 'Roll Out the Barrel', but 'When You and I Were Young, Maggie' and 'Mother Machree' and 'When the Lights of London Shine Again' and that haunting 'Maori Farewell'. Some of the rough Riverina boys, I swear, had tears in their eyes and blasphemed loudly to hide them . . .

The 'I' section was a part of battalion headquarters. Traditionally we were known as the 'odds and sods' because besides us there was the band, the batmen, the stretcher bearers, the orderly room staff, the provost corps, the butchers, the cooks and a few other odds and ends. There were a couple of fights each night in our hut. Just when we wanted to go to sleep, a cornet player in the band would decide to practise or a stretcher bearer would reel in from a clandestine visit to the Crossroads Hotel. Within a few minutes there was pandemonium with palliasses and kitbags flying in all directions and roars of protest from the adjoining hut. Only the arrival of the orderly sergeant would quell the riot.

We of the 'I' section had begun our own training in earnest now. It was intense and thorough, for the military manuals say that in the 'I' section are the potential officers of the army. I despaired because

of my atrocious knowledge of mathematics and geometry. It took months to rid me of the conviction that north must always be at the *top* of a map and south at the *bottom*. I could not understand contours. Compass bearings baffled me.

'Dammit, Gil,' said Stuart Burt—I was 'Gil' to everyone now—'You might have to guide the battalion some day.'

'God help the battalion if I have to guide it,' I said despairingly.

But I learnt it in the end. The boys—Gordon, Morrie, Jack, Bill, Stan, Graham, and Harrie—spent persevering hours getting it into my thick head.

We had to learn all about the composition of an army; all the technical details of weapons, including artillery. We achieved a passable efficiency in semaphore signalling. We absorbed strategy and tactics. We were taught 'bush sense' with Stuart Burt a cross between a Boy Scout and a Red Indian. We learnt to travel by the stars at night and by carefully remembered landmarks in the daytime. We learnt to conceal outselves and to uncover the enemy. We learnt to interpret aerial photographs. We learnt to make reconnaissances. We learnt to make maps simply and accurately. We learnt other things of which I cannot speak.

Nobody could say we did not earn our 6s. a day. At night, after a gruelling day learning to be ordinary infantrymen, we went out on 'stunts'. We did compass marches and lay on our bellies in the darkness taking bearings. We trudged up the steep hills around Ingleburn, and one night we barged slap into a paddock of bulls. It is debatable who got the biggest fright.

The worst of being in the 'I' section, thought Jack Rescorl and I, was the presence of Gordon Smith, the champion walker, and Stanley McAlister, the marathon runner, in it.

Daytime or nighttime, Gordon and Stan looked upon compass marches as events in the Olympic Games. In timbered country precautions against noise kept them at a moderate enough pace, but once out in the open they headed for their objectives like whoever it was who took the message to Garcia or like Dick Turpin riding to York. Jack and I usually stumbled in half a mile behind the leaders.

These memories came back to me kaleidoscopically now; flashbacks four years old. Jack and Gordon and the others may be remembering the same things somewhere in a prison camp in Malaya.

The leaves we had from Ingleburn. I still had the car then and used to park it behind the officers' mess. On Saturdays at midday we used to pile into it and make for Sydney at top speed, with stops at the

Crossroads and another pub at Burwood for pints of beer.

When I got home I usually borrowed a pound from Molly. I had allotted her everything except 1s. a day, but it was a form of social credit—economically unsound as she soon found out. On my first leave I remember she said, 'Brown never suited you, Jimmy'. How like a woman!—and I so collar-proud in my new uniform and forage cap.

Molly was grappling with the Reuters work and looking after the two kids at the same time. I spent most of my leaves in the office by her side. Someday someone should give that woman a medal. Home was incredibly, stupendously beautiful. To sink into a feather bed at night; to sit down at a table with clean white linen on it. To romp with the kids in the garden. These material things were precious beyond words. There were spiritual things, too . . .

Molly said afterwards she used to cry when she heard my heavy military boots clomp-clomping along the footpath towards the bus at the old South Head Road on Sunday nights to get back to Ingleburn by 2359 hours. There was something forlorn and pathetic about it, she said . . . All I know is it hurt like hell to lie down on a straw-filled palliasse with a knobby kitbag for a pillow after that bed at Rose Bay. But then the cornet player having had an equally stupendous weekend, would suddenly play the opening bars of 'Roses of Picardy' at one in the morning and pandemonium would break loose again.

And you were back in the Army again and . . . wouldn't it?

4

Final Leave

WE progressed from route marches to bivouacs. That meant lugging a full pack and accessories to Narellan and back. We deployed over backbreaking Mount Leppington and camped for the night beside the water channel.

The 'I' section was on trial now. We studied our maps by shaded flashlights and led the battalion to their camping grounds. We made our reconnaissances at night under the stars, keeping in the shadows of the hills and gaunt gum trees far beyond the farthermost sentries. We were the eyes and ears of the battalion and Stuart Burt drove us hard. Before dawn we 'stood to', and as the sun came over the horizon launched imaginary attacks with smoke bombs for the illusion of warfare.

The countrymen were in their element now. They would have been happier on horseback, but they had instinctive 'bush sense'. They took cover naturally and cunningly. The work of their section leaders must have warmed the heart of the CO, an old Light Horseman himself. He must have known that the lance corporals and the corporals were the backbone of his battalion.

Days later we dragged into Ingleburn, the dust rising again around our feet. We stormed the showers again and expected weekend leave as a just reward.

There was no leave. We learnt that there is no reward in the army except ultimate victory. The bull ring began all over again the next day. Bayonet drill. Rifle drill. Interminable squad drill. '*Right turn . . . left turn . . . about turn . . .*' Gawd blimey, we learnt all this three months ago!

Another route march to Liverpool range for real shooting with rifles and Lewis guns. The reverberating *ping* of rifle bullets and the stuttering tattoo of machine-guns. Somebody got a bullet through his hat when the squad behind fired prematurely.

Then a brigade parade and exciting news from the brigadier. We were going to march through the streets of Sydney. This could mean only one thing—we were going away! The latrine wireless (Station 2WC), whence all rumours originate, provided allegedly authentic news on the subject. We polished our boots. We shone our bayonets. The band spent agonising hours of practice. We were driven into an orgy of marching and sloping arms. '*Correct those slopes!*' pleaded the company commanders.

The latrine wireless was premature about our swan song, but we marched through Sydney in the full pride of our 'Australias' and new colour patches. It was one of the best but stiffest marches of the war. Sydney, never demonstrative at the best of times, wanted to shower cigarettes and bottles of beer on us. We were warned in advance not to accept for the prestige of the brigade, but there were many before the march who said, 'By cripes, if anyone hands me a bottle of beer, you just watch me!'

The beer was forthcoming, and it was a hot day, but we marched in unbroken, disciplined ranks, our rifles correctly sloped beyond the wildest dreams of the company commanders, and the sun glinting on our bayonets. I remember a woman in the crowd in George Street shouting at me: 'What are you all looking so serious about? . . . Why don't you smile? . . .' Madam, this was September 1940. In the skies above London Winston Churchill's most famous phrase was being written in smoke and flame.

One incredible day the whole brigade was paraded again and marched to a valley near Ingleburn.

We sat on our haunches and marvelled at the manoeuvres of *one* Bren gun carrier and a couple of antiquated light tanks.

My word, the AIF was being mechanised all right!

As the weeks went by we got to know each other better and better. We were a happy battalion. Unexpected comradeships were formed. In the rest periods we smoked and yarned together. There were no social distinctions between us, but the gap was wide and unbridgeable between officer and man, as it must be for discipline, I suppose. Sometimes I thought it was a little too wide. The almost complete

power a subaltern is given when he gets his commission is a heady and dangerous thing at any time. Later, battle experience becomes the great leveller, and there are no distinctions except life and death.

In the ranks we were all one. We hardly ever talked politics, and if we did it was only to express a universal contempt for politicians. I suppose I was brought up in a 'capitalistic' atmosphere, but I always had radical leanings. I suppose at the same time I was something of a snob. The army strengthened the radical and abolished the snob. When you got to know as an intimate friend the ironworker, the shearer, the labourer, the coalminer, the factory hand, you were forced to the conclusion that much of Australia's industrial troubles was not transient but inherent from days when the employer of labour was actuated by motives of greed and exploitation, and especially from the Depression days of the 'thirties which were still green in the memory of the victims of it. Admittedly things were changed in some respects now, but the memory of early struggles for emancipation was inbred in these men; there was always the ingrained suspicion that the 'boss' was still out to exploit them.

Unhappily it was still true in many cases. It seemed to me that there was too much suspicion, and too little understanding, on either side, rather than any lasting or practical grievance. Neither side was helped by its professional agitators. If every employer of labour could spend a year in the ranks as a private I am bold enough to say that there would be few industrial disputes.

After many months, too, you found out for a certainty why all these men had enlisted. They did not tell you, of course, but you found out just the same. Some of them had enlisted for the sheer adventure of the thing; these were mostly men who had failed in civil life and often they became first-class soldiers. Others had enlisted because they were out of a job and saw free food and clothing and good pay. Others enlisted because they wanted to escape from unhappy homes and nagging wives.

But the bulk of these men—and it applied to the whole of the 8th Division—had enlisted because their country was in deadly peril in July 1940. Men do not give up farms and families for lesser crusades. The percentage of married men in 2/19th Battalion was staggering, cruelly so. But had a stranger told these men they had enlisted for patriotic motives they would have gaped at him in the horrified silence that greeted Mr Martin MP, in *Stalky and Co.* when he dramatically shook the Union Jack in front of the school. Perhaps the muted patriotism of the Briton is another thing the Hun will never understand.

In the rest periods and in the (dry) canteens at night we talked of many things. We told dirty stories and whistled at every woman we saw. We determined to go to the Domain next Sunday and wreck the platform of the Communists who were calling us 'six-bob-a-day murderers'. This was in the days before the war had become for them a 'holy war'. We were all becoming more and more socialistically inclined but it was a domestic socialism. Some of us were learning with a shock that there were far too many inequalities and injustices and intolerances in our own country; we determined to right them after the war. In the meantime, however, we were dangerously threatened by a ruthless outside enemy, and anyone who tried to sabotage our efforts was our enemy too. We suspected anyone who worked himself into a fever about why the war started and openly did his utmost to stop us winning it. This was a fight to the finish and we resented bitterly anybody who obstructed us from motives that were less altruistic than ours.

We chaffed the Militia as they gradually transferred to us and called them 'Chocolate Soldiers'. Morrie Brennan, our sergeant, used to rise to the bait every time and we pulled his leg unmercifully. It is a great pity that in the public mind the term 'militia' is now synonymous with the called up soldier. In 1940 we knew the militia as those who had voluntarily joined up before the war, when many of us were not heedful of the march of events in Europe. They persevered with their training, in the face of some mockery, while we played tennis and cricket. To the militia officers and NCOs must go the full credit for training the original AIF divisions; without them we would have been a ragtime army indeed. They were keen and efficient and nearly all of them transferred to the AIF when war broke out. Many of the officers, I understand, were prevented from transferring to the AIF by the military authorities for a considerable time.

'Chocolate soldier' to us was merely a term of good natured banter. Towards the 'Universal Trainees', conscripted soldiers, our feelings were somewhat different, and time and battle service did not temper them. We called them the 'UTs' and did not like being confused with them. For that reason the 'Australias' on our shoulders were our most cherished possessions. We had to buy them ourselves, but even that did not qualify our pride in them. Why private firms were able to sell metal 'Australias' while the army had no stocks at all is something I have never been able to fathom.

So the days went by and an early summer came to Ingleburn. It was the year of the drought and the winds swept yellow dust across the burnt hills. The route marches were becoming longer and harder

and the sweat poured off us as we tramped along the Campbelltown Road. We dreamt of iced bottles of beer and stormed the hotels when we got weekend leave. We heard that the 7th Division had sailed and knew it was our turn next.

We were on the move again – this time to Bathurst.

When we first heard of the move, we remembered with horror that not long before the 7th Division had had to *walk* from Ingleburn to Bathurst, 150 miles or so. Stuart Lurt passed on with glee the news to Jack Rescorl and me. He knew we did not like walking; what he did not know was Jack and I had gone privately to a foot specialist in Sydney and learnt that he had bacly ingrowing toenails and that I had fallen arches and something wrong with the metatarsal bone. We were patched up, but it was never really a success.

It was a furphy. We went to Bathurst by train. The camp at Bathurst was an improvement on Walgrove and Ingleburn. It was out in grazing country, and when we went there the countryside was green and inviting. At Bathurst we trained as a brigade. We got to know, for the first time, the men of the 2/20th and 2/18th Battalions.

We bivouacked as a brigade over the rolling hills and into the mountain country. We had our quota of Bren gun carriers and transport now. The brigade went out for days on end in advanced exercises and fought mock battles. The 'I' section had its own truck and new bicycles. We were guiding the battalion now with some degree of certainty. Along Campbell's River we fought imaginary enemies (they were still Germans) and made our night reconnaissances. We dug a complete trench system with much sweat and bad language.

By Christmas we felt we were soldiers. We had been training hard for six months. Our whole existence was orientated to Army life. We talked an Army language outsiders could not understand. We and civilians had little in common. A palliasse was no longer uncomfortable; we slept equally well on the bare ground in the mountains. We learnt to 'scrounge' little comforts. We learnt to carry all our worldly possessions in a kitbag. We learnt not to rail against discomfort but to appreciate comfort when we got it.

And we became a living, breathing battalion. You could sense that, for instance, at church parade on Sunday (having failed in all known stratagems to dodge it. Agnostics, or persons with religious scruples, are absolved from church parade. The first Sunday twenty men fell out. The next Sunday, the 'agnostics' were detailed off as mess orderlies. The next Sunday there was only one, and he was genuine and treated

as such.) Yes, as the battalion marched on to the parade ground in companies behind the band, there was a difference to the days when we straggled around Walgrove. We marched now with an unconscious swing and steadiness. There was a unity of purpose and a pride in our bearing.

Indeed we looked like real soldiers at last. Those of us, like me, who had come in soft in mind and physique had toughened up. You had to be tough to survive. The infantry private is the lowliest in order in any army and the grandest in spirit and endurance; he has to be. As you looked around at church parade, while the Padre made a fruitless appeal against bad language, you marvelled at the change that had come over these men. You marvelled at the miraculous way such a clash of temperaments and characters had welded into one body. Some of them had undergone as complete a metamorphosis as I had done. Some of them had come into the army with questionable private records. Some had come in unshaven and dirty in habits. Now they were 'crimed' if they did not shave. In time they smartened themselves up and took a personal pride in it. They washed their clothes every day and polished their boots. Some of them learnt to clean their teeth for the first time. They learnt hygiene and discipline, did the 'Dead End Kids' of the battalion, and in battle they were to prove second to none. In all the months I was in the AIF I never lost a thing, although I am careless enough by nature. We had thieves (some of them were professionals in private life), but they never thieved from their fellows; for one thing retribution would have been swift and terrible.

We worked hard at Bathurst, and at the weekends the buses took us at breakneck speed into town. We were not plaster saints and the Provost Corps was busy at times. We were a hard-drinking, hard-swearing, hard-bitten lot, but when finally we left, I think Bathurst was sorry to lose us. We never tried to pinch the carillon, and what damage we did in town was minor. There have been worse 'licentious soldiery' than we were.

We gave Bathurst its quota of harmless fun, too. Consider, for instance, the exploit of one private whom we called 'The Wizard of Oz'. One Sunday morning he had a frightful hangover from the night before. The Wizard was one of those fastidious people who like the best of attention at all times. He hired a taxi and drove to the Bathurst Hospital. There he solemnly rang the bell and said to the matron: 'Look here, matron, I'm terribly sick. Could I go to bed here for a while?' He was put to bed for the rest of the day and fed on tea and aspirins by pretty nurses, arising in time to return to camp by midnight . . .

After much agitation and controversy we had 'wet' canteens at Bathurst for the first time. We were no longer being treated like children, and it removed the unequal and galling advantage the officers' mess had enjoyed over us.

We yarned and told stories over our mugs of beer after dismissal for the day and listened to tales of Peter Assheton. There have been many claimants to the title of the youngest soldier in the AIF, but if anyone can dispute Peter's claim to being the oldest, I shall be glad to hear it. Peter, according to his own estimate, was seventy years of age at Bathurst and celebrated his seventy-first birthday on the troopship when we went oveseas. He didn't look anything like seventy, and he was as fit as a fiddle and had a wife in her twenties. He became a sort of legend in the 2/19th.

The story went that he was a brigadier in the last war and there was a photograph of him with an imposing row of service ribbons on his chest. Peter was an Englishman and a recital of the wars he had fought in read like a history of the British Army. They included the Sudan, one of the Zulu wars, the Boer War, and the Great War. He was some kind of an 'observer' during the Russo-Japanese War, and was probably mixed up in the Boxer Rebellion. He fought in the Spanish Civil War (I'm not sure on which side) and probably some other wars I have forgotten.

An incredible, unforgettable character, was Private Peter Assheton, with an inexhaustible quiver of stories about people and places. You will forgive me, I know, Peter, when I say we didn't believe *all* the stories you told over our mugs of beer. How Peter bullied his way into the AIF only he and the examining doctors know. Peter had been a professional actor and a concert singer and representative in a European capital of a famous London newspaper. One day in a Bathurst hotel as a radio broke into the opening bars of *Pagliacci*, Peter suddenly threw back his head and sang a passage with clear, liquid notes that could only have come from the throat of a trained professional tenor; while the crowd in the bar listened in an amazed, breathless silence. He was also a poet and a prolific one. Peter would probably still be in the AIF if it hadn't been for an accident in Malaya. The truck he was riding in capsized and Peter was thrown out on his head. He was invalided home and discharged. Within a few weeks this astonishing seventy-one-year-old warrior was back in the Army, a corporal in the DRO or the DFO in Sydney. Old soldiers never die, and there isn't the slightest chance of Peter Assheton even fading away.

The Latrine Wireless was whispering '*It won't be long now!*' but it was only a whisper. We were getting restless. We listened in to the radios in our huts to Wavell's sweep through Cyrenaica and cheered when the 6th Division took Bardia. We wanted to be in it ourselves. We called ourselves not the AIF but the IAF ('In Australia Forever'). We gave it another twist and called the UTs the FIA ('Forced Into Action'). That was the mood we were in; champing at the bit and impatient. We got Christmas leave and went back to baking days across the Bathurst hills.

Then the whisper from the Latrine Wireless became more than a whisper, it became an excited shout, supported by a torrent of confirmation. The QM's store had a stock of 'tropical shorts' and 'sea bags'. Identification discs were to be issued.

'Where's Nigeria, mate?' said the man adjoining me in the latrine.

'West Coast of Africa.'

'What the hell do they want to send us *there* for?'

'Search me! Who said we were going there anyway?'

'One of the batmen heard an officer talking about it. It's dinkum all right. We're sailing on Thursday, so they reckon.'

Presently I went in search of Jack Rescorl. 'We're leaving on Thursday for Nigeria,' I said. 'I got it straight from one of the batmen.'

'Oh, yeah?' said Jack. 'Well, *I've* had it straight from the padre's batman that we're going to Fiji. He told me the padre has a whole pile of Fijian Bibles. Seriously, Gil, here's something really interesting. Some of the cooks have gone away for a special course on tropical cooking. And I was trying to get a new shirt from the QM's store and I saw a pile of weird-looking shorts that button up above the knee.'

'Which all adds up to the tropics.'

'Sure. It may be Nigeria and it may be Fiji, but it's the tropics all right.'

'And it may be Singápore,' said I, which wasn't original because already the word was beginning to drift around the latrines.

It was interesting and frightening from the Intelligence point of view to watch how everything added up in the next few weeks until we could tell almost with certainty the day of our embarkation and our destination. We all knew the *Queen Mary* and other ships were in the harbour (so did the Japanese consul-general who lived within telescope distance of Garden Island). Then somebody knew somebody else who was in the ships-chandlering business. He brought back the news that certain ships' stores had to be aboard the *Queen Mary* by a certain

date. Somebody else's girl friend's father worked in the railways—special trains were ordered for Bathurst on a certain date. This 'Enemy Listens' warning becomes deadly serious when your own life is at stake.

Well, this time the latrine wireless was right; its habitués gloated over its unusual triumph. One day we were handed our Final Leave passes with dire penalties for anyone who overstayed it. *Overstay it!* What were 'They' thinking of! This was one leave we wouldn't overstay. This was the culmination of eight months' hard work. If it was really Singapore, well, we'd show 'em!

We went off on our final leave like excited schoolboys leaving for the Christmas holidays. Personal feuds were forgotten for the time being. We shook each other by the hand and roared out farewells to the sergeant-major. The trains tore off towards the Riverina and out to the west. The rest of us piled into the trains for Sydney, uproarious and shouting like children.

We didn't mention the words 'going away' on that final leave. We didn't even tell the children. But it was there in our hearts all the time; your heart gave a lurch every now and again when you thought what it really meant. We acted as if it was ordinary weekend leave, but we did not fool ourselves. You thought of it suddenly when you were watching Carol and Alistair tumbling on the lawn. What if you were never going to see all this again? . . . We had a little farewell party on the lawn. Jack Rescorl and his fiancée, Betsy, was there. And Tom Goodman, who was in the artillery. And my brother John who made a little speech and toasted us in beer. It was very jolly, but underneath, deep underneath, there was a desperate fear at leaving all these things and all these people.

And harder still was the parting with my mother, who was saying goodbye for the second time to a son going to a war.

The last night had come. The children before they went to bed were told that I would not be there in the morning. They were used to that; I always seemed to be going off on cricket tours and things. It passed right over their heads, thank the Lord.

Then we were alone as we had dreaded, and even then we tried to put on a false front. We talked of everything except *that*, but there were empty silences. Only once did we speak of it.

'I wish you weren't going, Jimmy.'

'Don't let us talk about it. It *is* the right thing, isn't it?'

'Sometimes I'm not sure. Sometimes I think you shouldn't be leaving the children when they are so young.'

'I couldn't have stayed behind. You know that. It would have been impossible. When they grow up they'll be glad I did it, too. It's the right thing; it's always the right thing . . .'

Molly drove me to the station and we parted in Central Square. It was the best way. We just said goodbye on the footpath as if I was going to Bathurst for the weekend. I picked up my kitbag and waved as I went into the station. It was the best way; realisation of the enormity of the parting came later. I'm glad she didn't go up to see the train out. The platform was packed with relatives and friends and some of the farewell scenes were heart-rending enough, even to watch. It is not a pleasant thing seeing men go off to a war; there is not much pageantry about it, only sorrow in those left behind. No; I'm glad she wasn't there. It was better the way we did it.

And yet—emotional anti-climax—I was to see her twice again, but once only in the distance. For back at Bathurst we were given one really final weekend before the camp was 'closed'. Thanks to dear Valerie Glasson, Molly went up from Sydney and we spent the last hours together at her home . . .

The trains had 'BERLIN OR BUST!' and 'LOOK OUT, ADOLF!' and 'HERE WE COME!' chalked on the sides of the carriages. The trains fled across the western slopes towards the Blue Mountains. In the carriages we unstrapped the heavy packs from our shoulders and put our rifles on the racks. The trains caught some of our excitement. Their whistles hoarsely shouted our coming as we neared inhabited places. We waved and cheered every human being we saw. The trains slid down the Blue Mountains until we could see the smudged smoke of Sydney in the distance. The people in the bigger mountain towns caught the infection, too; they waved and shouted as loudly as we did.

Now we were in the suburbs, and it was time to fix on our packs and our respirators again. It was raining when we reached our destination. We were the first AIF troops to embark in shorts and shirts, and the drizzle of rain soaked into them. We clambered out of the carriages and slung our kitbags and seabags over our shoulders. I wondered if I would ever lug everything to the troopship without mishap. Almost at once I dropped my rifle crash in front of a brigadier. As I bent down to pick it up down went my kitbag and seabag. The Brigadier helped to rescue me from my mental and physical confusion.

'*Come on, Mant!*' roared a sergeant. 'Pick up that ruddy rifle and get a move on!'

As we got to the side of the troopship those who were already

on board greeted us with the familiar cry: '*You'll be sorry!*' One of our chaps looked up and shouted to a mate: 'How are they bitin', Joe?'

Somehow I carried and dragged my mass of equipment into the troopship. She was an old friend, that troopship, and I recognised her at once. I don't suppose there were many in that contingent who knew her as well as I did. I had travelled in her *first class de luxe* from New York to Plymouth less than three years before. As soon as I saw her I thought: I want to see that mural in the cocktail bar again, but I don't supppose I'll be allowed to. I wonder what General has my old cabin?

She was the *Queen Mary*.

The battalion commanders, we were told, had tossed up for positions in the ship. We always said our CO used a double-headed penny because he drew 'A' deck, one of the best on the ship. There were only ten of us in a normal two-berth cabin, and we had a private bathroom! Old soldiers from the last war will snort. However, some of the other battalions whose COs didn't possess double-headed pennies were not so fortunate and slept in hammocks in the bowels of the ship. I went along, for sentimental reasons, to look at my old cabin. It was only a short distance from my own quarters. Sure enough, there was a high-ranking officer in it, and his batman wanted to know what the hell I was hanging about for; didn't I know it was out of bounds for privates?

On the afternoon of 4 February 1941, the *Queen Mary* began her stately passage down the harbour towards the Heads. We swarmed along the deck railings and up amongst the rigging. There were thousands of us, from all states in the Commonwealth, the cream of the 8th Division. We cheered and we waved and we coo-eed to the flotilla of ferry boats and smaller craft that escorted us to the Heads and some of them out to sea. It was a brave farewell with flags flying and bands playing. I saw Molly far in the distance in a motor launch and wished she hadn't come. The bands played 'Auld Lang Syne' and the haunting 'Maori Farewell', and it left, under the cheering, a contracted feeling in the throat. We slipped past Rose Bay and I could almost see my home. We were out near Middle Head now and the great liner swayed as she forced through the ocean swell. An escorting warship, slim and grey as she slashed through the water, overtook us and led us through the Heads.

Now the cheering had died away. We stood on the rails gazing back. We could see the cliffs near the lighthouse black with people. For all we knew it might be our last glimpse of Australia, and we wanted

to photograph it in our minds. The last glimpse of something intangibly precious. A glimpse, to the Riverina man, of gum trees and the smell of burning gum leaves and the quietness of the bush. A glimpse to the city man of Randwick racecourse and picnics at Clifton Gardens on Sundays. A last glimpse of wife, best girl, and good cobbers.

These things some of us thought of as the ship drew away from the gnarled coastline into wider expanses of ocean. I looked along the deck. Many of the men, at sea for the first time in their lives, had gone to explore the *Queen Mary* like thrilled children. But there was one young boy, gazing back, and he was crying. Not far from him was an older man with last war ribbons on his tunic and he was looking steadfastly back to the blurred smoke of Sydney. I could only guess of what he was thinking.

5

Singapore Bound

THERE is a story told about the voyage of the *Queen Mary* in a publication compiled by Military Intelligence, AMF. It says, 'This happened before Russia entered the war. A certain troopship, laden with Australian troops, left Sydney at 2.20 p.m. on the 4th February, 1941 bound for Singapore. Pursuing a normal or near to normal course northabout at her normal speed, she would reach Singapore at about midnight on the 10th February, or in the early hours of the 11th.

'At 7.18 p.m. Eastern Standard Time on the 11th February, 1941, Moscow Radio broadcasted in English the interesting news that this particular troopship had "arrived in Singapore laden with Australian troops". The authority given by Moscow for this item of news was, "it was stated by travellers arriving at Singapore."

'Well, the announcement by Moscow was made only 18 or 19 hours after the vessel could reasonably be expected to have tied up at Singapore, so there is nothing remarkable in that. Unfortunately, however for the correctness of the Moscow broadcast, the troopship with its load of Australian troops was at Fremantle at the time Moscow broadcast the news of her arrival at Singapore until more than a day later. Shortly after leaving Sydney she altered course and went southabout to Fremantle, instead of direct to Singapore.

'Now how did Moscow, or other more interested people outside Australia, come to possess information prompting this broadcast? The obvious inference is that someone outside Australia was informed of the hour and date of this troopship's departure from Sydney, her freight, her destination, and the apparent northabout course, and that the

informant was somewhere in or about Sydney. All that was then done was to calculate the possible date and hour of arrival at Singapore and to publish the news of the arrival some 18 or 19 hours after that calculated hour.

'How was the information concerning the transport's departure from Australia, and its destination transmitted from Australia to Moscow? It was not broadcast from any licensed Australian station, and, of course, did not appear in the Press. Investigation showed that it could not have been by air communication. Possibly it was flashed from some neutral vessel which had been in port at the time the transport left Australia. Another possibility is that the information was conveyed by means of an illicit short-wave transmitter located in this country . . .'

On the Queen Mary, of course, we were unconscious of the intense interest being taken overseas in our journey. In fact we still weren't quite sure where we were going, and our officers kept a discreet and baffling silence. The latrine wireless network at sea was much more active than it was in camp. There were still wild rumours of West Africa, and one ingenious and exciting story that we were off on a goodwill tour of the United States (it wasn't explained why we had to wear shorts for such a mission in February). The latrine wireless indeed kept us on considerable tenterhooks. One night we were chased for fifty miles by a pack of submarines; another night skilful steering by the commander took us through a minefield. Then somebody was said to have heard the German radio claiming to have sunk the *Queen Mary* 100 miles west of Fremantle. As we were then somewhere between Sydney and Fremantle, the claim was preposterous or a 'fishing expedition', but we worried about the effect it might have on our relatives. And obviously the authorities could not deny it without giving away to some extent our whereabouts.

Apart from these alarms and excursions, we fell quickly into shipboard routine. There were so many of us that we had to go on deck in relays for physical training, rifle drill, and lectures. We thought it was unreasonable that the officers were given such a large proportion of the ship for their exclusive use, and at least one padre agreed with us. A certain amount of minor souveniring had gone on in the ship, but it was creditable to see that the beautiful inlaid woodwork was untouched. I am told that very little damage has been caused on the *Mary* on all her voyages as a troopship. We had good food and plenty of it, and there were wet canteens open for certain hours of the day. Beer was 5d. a pint, but you took your own receptacle to the queue

which stretched far along the deck. Pannikins, dixies, and even large biscuit tins came into use. Beer syndicates were formed and the ship was ransacked for suitable utensils. Heaven knows where he found it, but one opportunist turned up one day with a blue china bed chamber. It held a satisfying amount of beer. The owner was known as 'the man with the blue po'.

In the recreation rooms at night old soldiers spread out crown and anchor cloths they had used in 1914–18. Two up schools and 'housie' schools flourished nightly. Crown and anchor was officially barred, and the officers raided us occasionally. But the crown and anchor kings had their paid spies posted cunningly at the entrances and other strategic places so that they were seldom surprised. You'd hear a shout: '*Here they come!*' and you grabbed desperately at your money before the cloth was swept away.

When we got into the tropics the atmosphere inside the recreation rooms was indescribable. The *Mary* was utterly blacked out with every porthole painted black and closed. We were hermetically sealed down and the 'floating palace' transformed into a 'floating hell'. From the deck you could not see a sign of the other ships in the convoy; they were swallowed up in the night. You felt your way along the deck towards the room at the aft end of the ship. You opened the door and staggered back as the atmosphere struck you almost like a blow between the eyes. Through the cloud of stale smoke you saw dimly a vast beer queue stretching around the room like a snake. You heard above the uproar: '*Sixty-six – clickity click!*' mingling with '*Two bob he 'eads 'em!*' You sloshed across the floor wet with spilt beer and forced your way through the crowd to a crown and anchor table. The heat was overpowering; the stifling atmosphere of sweat and beer nearly knocked you over. Everyone was stripped to the waist with the sweat literally pouring off them; some of them carried bath towels with them. You were going well if you could stand half an hour of it; what with the smoke and the heat and the sweat and the noise. In many ways it was disgusting and unnecessary when you considered the great amount of space at the other end of the ship which you were not permitted to enter. But we went back for more night after night like the gamblers we all were.

When the roll was called the first morning at sea, the 2/19th found itself with a stowaway. His name was 'Joey', and it was a baby kangaroo belonging to a Riverina bushman. He came aboard in a Red Cross box supposed to be full of medical supplies for the MO. There were holes bored in the box for air, and I think it was a case of the Doctor

Who Didn't Tell. Joey took to shipboard life in the manner born and was a prime favourite to the British crew of the *Mary*, few of whom had seen a kangaroo outside a zoo. Joey hopped along the deck for exercise each morning, and became adept at keeping his feet when the *Mary* began to roll. His owner had brought a supply of wheat aboard, on which the kangaroo seemed to thrive. We got him off the ship at Singapore by the same means, and once again the Doctor Didn't Tell. Poor Joey did not survive to fall into the hands of the Japanese; months later he was chased by small Malay boys and broke a leg when he fell into a concrete drain. A veterinary surgeon set the leg in a plaster-cast, and for a time Joey looked like recovering. But he pined away and died, maybe from homesickness for the Riverina plains. He is buried somewhere in Malaya, the AIF's first casualty there.

We took our southabout course (the latrine wireless humming with news that we were going to occupy the Antarctic regions), and said goodbye to Fremantle and Australia. We felt the approach to the tropics and the atmosphere in the 'gambling hells' became stickier and stickier each night. Our days were occupied with lifeboat drill and lectures. Once or twice a day we had our turn on deck in the blessed sunshine and watched the flying fish flash over the water like flat stones thrown across a pond by small boys.

Peter Assheton celebrated his seventy first birthday by appearing in a boxing-tournament. He fought a well proportioned boy of about twenty who was almost diffident about going into the ring with such a veteran. He got the surprise of his life. Peter stripped remarkably well and he shaped up in the traditionally orthodox manner of Jem Mace. Nobody had seen anything quite like it before, and there was a titter until Peter's straight left shot out like a snake. That straight left kept shooting out so accurately and competently that the boy found difficulty in getting a punch to land anywhere vulnerable on Peter. It was a lesson many modern fighters could profitably absorb. Peter retired after a couple of rounds, untouched but winded; it was only lack of stamina that found him out.

'Of course, old boy,' he said afterwards. 'I won the championship at Sandhurst once.' After seeing him in action at seventy-one, it was one of those things you simply couldn't disbelieve.

That night Peter and I and Alan Cocks carried on the birthday celebrations. We managed to get hold of a large biscuit tin, and by pooling our funds filled it three or four times. Alan (another stout-hearted thirty-nine years and eleven months romanticist) was a fellow newspaperman whom many old Sydney *Daily Telegraph* men will

remember. He was a fellow private and worked in the battalion orderly room. Alan had as wide a variety of stories about people as Peter had; he had been a political and a police court roundsman on the old broadsheet *Telegraph*. It took a bit of persuasion to drag Alan away from the crown and anchor table, but after a disappointing half hour amongst the smoke and sweat, the lure of the biscuit tin, brimming with beer, was irresistible. The three of us sat on the floor just outside the canteen, our backs against the bulkhead with the loving cup between us, and soon we were joined by two grease-stained stokers from the bowels of the ship. One of them was so Scottish we could hardly understand a word he said, and the other was a Lancastrian, equally unintelligible except to Peter. As high water mark on the biscuit tin gradually receded, Peter and Alan got into their stride. I am an uncommunicative person by nature, but a good and interested listener, and so were the stokers who sprawled there open-mouthed.

Alan was telling how years ago he had attended two hangings for the *Telegraph*; the macabre details held us breathless. Peter followed it up swiftly with a story about hacking a Dervish to pieces in the desert in the Sudan when he fought under 'K. of K.'

'It's his seventy first birthday,' I explained to the stockers.

'Oo-aye!' said the Scotsman.

'Aye, by goom!' said the Lancastrian, ready to believe anything by this time.

The biscuit tin went off for a refill. Alan said: 'Did I ever tell you about the time I covered a hanging for the *Telegraph*?' Peter gave us, with sweeping gestures, some excerpts from a highly dramatic play he had appeared in in London. As the contents of the biscuit tin sank again I asserted myself and managed to tell a few anecdotes about the bodyline tour. It was a tactical blunder, because the Lancastrian almost got aggressive and waved a tin mug in the air. 'Aye, Lol Larwood's got a chicken farm a few miles from my brother Tom. Aye, and you bloody Aussies started the bloody thing when Macdonald were in England.'

'Tell us about the hanging you went to,' I said hastily to Alan. In the next hour we heard stories about New South Wales politicians and barristers; about young Oswald Mosley falling out of a window at Sandhurst; nearly all the judge's summing up verbatim in the Dean murder case; about Toscanini and Caruso interspersed with long passages from one of Shakespeare's plays; about J. H. Archibald and Henry Lawson; about Ernest Hemingway in the Spanish Civil War; about a hanging Alan once attended. Then I asked did they know Flecker's 'War

Song of the Saracens', and the three of us excitedly rushed into the surge of opening lines:

'We are they who come faster than fate; we are they who ride early or late:
We storm at your ivory gate: Pale Kings of the Sunset, beware! . . .'

By then not only was the biscuit tin feeling the strain but our resources were at the end of their tether.

'We ought to sing "Happy Birthday to You",' I suggested.

'Oo, aye!' drooled the Scotsman.

'Aye, by goom!' agreed the Lancastrian heartily.

We sang 'Happy Birthday to You' at the top of our uncertain voices. It was too much for Peter, ex-concert singer. He joined in and led us with his remarkably youthful and vibrant tenor voice. When it was finished he broke into something lively from *The Barber of Seville*, and sang it so compellingly that a crowd collected around us. Then, as it was getting late, an officer appeared on the scene and shooed us away, biscuit tin and all.

I have seen some stirring and moving scenes in a lifetime of wanderings over the world, but nothing has stirred me more deeply than the day the *Queen Mary* left the convoy somewhere in the Indian Ocean. We had been warned in advance that something was afoot, and for once the whole contingent was able to crowd on to the decks, where batallion bands already had taken up their positions. The day was perfect with bright sunshine floating down on to the smooth, deep, dark blue of the Indian Ocean. There were other famous ships in our convoy, great in size and reputation, but despite their presence one had a feeling of immense loneliness in the vast expanse of dark ocean that lay around us.

The convoy reduced speed and formed a new alignment. The *Queen Mary* altered course, leaving a widening swathe of cream in her wake, and began her stately course past the other ships which had arranged themselves in line. The bands played their loudest and the ship's sirens 'cock-a-doodle-dooed'. We broke into cheers, the massed thousands of us. We came to the last ship, a liner as illustrious as ourselves, and came so close we could see through glasses the faces of her troops. They were New Zealanders on their way to fame in the Middle East. They were cheering as madly as we were as they packed the decks and clung to the rigging. We could hear their own bands. 'Coo-ees' punctuated our cheers and echoed away across that lonely ocean. You thought what a pity it was only ourselves and a few undemonstrative

albatross were witnesses of this occasion—if only hundreds of thousands of people could have lined the Indian Ocean and applauded as the ships marched past!

Then we took to our heels and ran for Singapore. The impatient engines of the *Queen Mary*, harnessed up to now to the pace of the slowest ship, throbbed eagerly underneath us as she gathered the speed that won her the Blue Riband of the Atlantic. Away on the horizon we saw the grey shape of another warship that had come to escort us in to Singapore.

The secret was out at last. We were Singapore-bound, to what fate we knew not, but we felt that sooner or later we would be fighting the Japanese.

The lectures we listened to now were all about Malaya, of which we knew nothing. I had read a few romantic novels with a Malayan background and they seemed to consist chiefly of rubber planters staggering around with a bottle of gin in one hand and a black concubine in the other. Our ignorance was abysmal and there were few in the ship who could enlighten us with first-hand knowledge. We would have to find out for ourselves. I remember questioning to myself the wisdom of sending Australian troops to garrison a country with a large native population. The Australian, nurtured on the White Australia policy, might throw a few spokes in the wheel of Imperial relations unless he were properly educated in advance. However, I was only a private and it was none of my business.

Our enthusiasm for the tropics was tempered when we were told of the diseases we were likely to encounter there. In practice we did not meet them all, but the intention was to frighten us into taking hygienic precautions, and it succeeded until we grew careless. The diseases included malaria, dengue, dysentery, hookworm, yellow fever, cholera, ringworm, sandfly fever, enteritis, snakebite, venereal disease, and a number of skin diseases. There may have been some more but I have forgotten them. The severest emphasis was placed on two diseases—malaria and venereal disease. Our own CO, Colonel Maxwell, a doctor in civil life, was able to drive home the lesson with authority; he quoted us staggering figures of the incidence of VD in Malaya.

'Beware of mosquitoes and women' was the warning that had been driven into us as we packed up our kit the day before we reached Singapore. Ahead of us was a year of garrison duties, and it was not the mosquitoes and the women that bit into us—it was frustration and bitterness about our lot.

6

Malaya

THE 2/19th travelled all night along the narrow-gauge FMS railway, and early in the morning were greeted at Gemas by men of the Gordon Highlanders who brought us cups of tea and sandwiches on the platform.

There was a lot of good-humoured chaff, and the Gordons, answering the inevitable questions, told us they were 'fed up' with the blarsted tropics, or words to that effect. They had been in Malaya for four years and were just about due to go home. (Poor devils, they are still there.)

From dawn the train had rocked through mile upon mile of rubber plantations and rice fields with women working knee-deep in them. Occasionally we saw patches of jungle, but nothing to what we were to see later. The dark vivid green of Malaya held the Australian bushmen, coming from a brown sunburnt country, spellbound. The green of it almost dazzled the eyes. Everything fascinated us. Few of the men had ever come into contact with coloured races before, and they were as absorbed in the people we saw as if they were watching a Fitzpatrick travel film. But the green dominated everything, and the steamy, humid air of the tropics. We were only a few degrees north of the equator, and it felt like it.

Some hours later we were ordered to put on our equipment, and soon the train pulled up at a long platform with the name SERIMBAN on it. It is pronounced, as all Malay names are, with the accent on the second syllable—SerEMban. We crawled stiffly from the carriages and fell in on the platform. 'I know you're all damned tired', said

an officer, 'but this will be our home town for a while. You haven't got to march very far, so try and show the locals what you can do . . . Platoon, 'SHUN! Slope arms! . . .'

Only a handful of Malays and Chinese saw us swing out into the street behind our band. 'They don't seem too pleased to see us by the crowd,' Jack whispered to me. I don't know why it's stuck in my memory, but I remember that also standing outside the station was a tall, slender and beautiful Englishwoman with flaming red hair. I remember a sergeant roaring at me to keep my 'eyes front' as I stared at her.

We marched to the sports ground of a school that was to be our home for the next two or three months. Its name was the King George the Fifth School, but it was known throughout Seremban simply as 'KGV'. Other companies took up quarters at St. Paul's School. The green of the grass made us blink our eyes as we lined up on the cricket ground and were allotted to various parts of the buildings. Down on the coast at Port Dickson, some twenty-five miles away, 2/18th and 2/20th Battalions were also settling into their new quarters. We relieved the Gordons, who were pleased enough because they thought it meant they were going home.

Well, we had made our landfall, and for a while the colour and new excitement of the East held us too enthralled for introspection. We were fortunate in being allotted to Seremban because in many ways it was a model town of its kind and bore on the surface the imprint of careful and just British administration. Only later were some of us to discover something struggling for expression underneath it all. Seremban was the capital of Negri Sembilan, one of the Federated Malay States, and was picturesquely situated in a hollow between hills. It was a lovely town with sheer white administrative buildings contrasting vividly with the green. There was a placid ornamental lake fringed with trees. At the back of KGV a quiet little Anglican church stood amongst the trees, like a church in an English village. Its padre, strange to say, came from Bathurst, in New South Wales, the site of our last camp in Australia. Even the streets of Seremban seemed cleaner than those usually found in the East, with the exception of the market, which stank to heaven of bad fish and food and of the misdemeanours of naked little native boys.

The AIF was set to work at once to learn the technique of jungle fighting. My letters home to Molly, however, were filled for a long time with superficial impressions of Malaya:

'We are quartered in a large white building with high ceilings and

wide concrete balconies and porches. There are twelve in our room, which has a large electric fan in the middle of the ceiling. It used to be the European masters' room. We sleep on white canvas stretchers underneath mosquito nets. We wear our ordinary Australian shorts in the daytime, but at sundown change into those three-quarter length horrors which tuck into our stockings and protect us from mosquitoes. We are the worst dressed soldiers I have ever seen. Actually, I have seen only about three mosquitoes so far, which shows that in the towns anti-malarial precautions are wonderfully efficient.' . . .

'The weather is the weather of Colombo in a monsoon. The temperature is usually around 80 deg., and seldom goes over 90 deg., but it's an exhausting kind of damp heat for anyone doing hard physical work as we have to. We work to a tropical routine with reveille at 6.30 a.m. The mornings have been quite cool, but it quickly hots up and the sweat begins to stream out of you. It streams out all day until one's clothes are warmly wringing wet. We have two or three cold showers a day and two changes of clothing. Washing is a problem as clothes take so long to dry in this atmosphere. So we sweat like hell and, while we're sweating, down comes the rain. It may, without warning, come down three or four times a day. And yet we don't seem to catch cold. We change our clothes again and wash the wet ones. Of course, all the "comfort" of real beds to sleep on and cold showers won't last—soon we'll be out in the jungle on bivouacs and then watch out!' . . .

'Our first ceremonial parade was picturesque, and we all felt like Bengal Lancers. We marched in companies on to the cricket ground to the strains of the band playing "Waltzin' Matilda". The Colonel took the salute and we presented arms in our best style. The hill above the ground was packed with natives, chattering and gesticulating. I think they were somewhat surprised at the precision of our movements because they had been told we were a rabble. I suppose it was what is called "showing the flag". After we were dismissed today I did my washing and walked out on the balcony. The town lay below me and green was the prevalent colour everywhere. But reaching almost on to the balcony were two large trees covered with masses of scarlet flowers. They are called "Flame of the Jungle"; sounds almost passionate, doesn't it? The clash with the green is stunning. In the street below two Chinese rickshaws are passing by. The rickshaw men wear pointed straw hats and some of them look as if they are near death. Sometimes we take pity on them and get out of the rickshaws going up hill. Some Chinese women have just passed in beautifully cut coats and

trousers. All day long you hear the "clip-clop" of wooden and leather heel-less sandals which the entire population wear. There are plenty of motor cars about and almost as many bicycles as we saw in Oxford and Exeter. In the distance are tall coconut trees from which a local and very potent brew is made . . .

'We are generally followed about by an assortment of small boys, but otherwise everyone is very polite. We were puzzled at first by the fact that whenever we appeared in the streets the Chinese women took to their heels with an alarmed look in their eyes. It appears that stories had circulated that Australians were a brutal and licentious lot and a fate worse than death awaited every woman. The ladies are not quite so timid now, but still have an apprehensive look in their eyes . . .

'While I was in town today I got into conversation with a Malay boy of about 10. After a while he said in careful English: "My father drives the ambulance at the hospital. Now I think I can show you something that will interest you very much at the hospital. The nurses are Indian, Eurasian, and Chinese, and are off from 4 to 7 o'clock. Now I will meet you at the hospital gate. They are *very* fond of Australians"—and he added proudly—"*they are all virgins!* And if you don't like them I will take you to a house where there are five sisters who also like Australian soldiers. You will have a nice time there." I asked him if the five sisters were virgins, too, but he said he didn't know for sure . . .

'We were in town last night and wanted to find a pub where we could get a decent drink, so we approached a bearded Sikh policeman. We asked, "Where is an English hotel?" He knew very little English and had trouble in understanding us. Then suddenly he put his hands on his hips and laughed like a schoolboy, his beard shaking with merriment. He nodded his head vigorously and beckoned us on. We finished up at a rather shabby little cafe where the policeman had a long and earnest conversation with a Eurasian woman who looked like a character staight out of *The Rains Came*. Presently the woman, who was thirtyish and spoke excellent though pedantic English, said, "I am extremely pained indeed, but this establishment is under different management now. I would like to help you, but all we have here now is beer and sandwiches. The women have all gone! I am extremely sorry indeed, but I do not know where you can find one of those establishments!" . . . Our policeman was *most* disappointed. We apologised to the woman and stayed there and drank some fine Danish beer.'

In Malaya revolutionary changes had to be made to the training the AIF had absorbed in Australia. Here indeed was a very different terrain to the bare hills of Ingleburn and Bathurst, and tactics had to be altered accordingly. Much that we had learnt so painstakingly would stick by us, but in some ways we had to start all over again. In Australia the arrival of our first Bren gun was an exciting event; in Malaya we made acquaintance for the first time with a Tommy gun. The 2/19th was lucky to have the experience of Major (afterwards Colonel) C. W. G. Anderson at its disposal. He had fought in the East African campaign in the last war and had been decorated for bravery. He knew (and loved) the jungle, and with rare insight made the basis of all his teaching the phrase, 'Don't let the jungle frighten you'. He knew the immeasurable loneliness of the jungle, and the fear of unseen enemies, man or beast, was its greatest protection; once you conquered the loneliness and the fear of unseen things, you conquered the jungle itself.

No branch of the Army had to begin all over so completely than the various 'I' sections. Contour maps were difficult to interpret in thick rubber country and jungles. The compass seemed to play tricks on you also. Some of the big scale ordnance maps were first class, but the smaller local maps were hopelessly out of date. Maps of their estates held by rubber planters showed roads that no longer existed and not new roads. Hundreds of tracks in the jungles had never been mapped at all. A complete knowledge of these roads and tracks, with their capacity for troops and motor vehicles, was essential, and it was the task of the 'I' sections to supply it.

The troops began their new training in the rubber country and graduated later to the jungle. It was all new at first, and absorbing. They watched the ubiquitous Tamils tapping the rubber trees, and saw the white latex trickling down into a cup fastened to the tree. There was great excitement when the first cobra was killed, and an unfounded rumour that an AIF colonel had been chased by a tiger. The story raced through the latrine wireless which was functioning even better in Malaya. They learnt to be wary of all snakes and the Malayan scorpion, a tremendous angry-looking beast. They found out to their surprise that, although Malaya had most varieties of pests, there were practically no flies except sandflies on the beaches. They were astonished at the millions of large periwinkle shaped snails that crawled across the countryside and were crushed in hundreds by cars travelling along the roads—and more astonished than ever to be told that twenty-five or so years ago there were no snails at all.

They learnt a smattering of the Malay tongue which is the easiest

of all to pick up and gradually became familiar enough with dollar currency to promote successful two-up schools. They grossly overpaid the Chinese rickshaw men to the chagrin of the local inhabitants.

The 2/19th lines were swarming with cocoa-brown Malay youngsters delighted that we had commandeered their school. They were jolly children, with merry eyes and flashing teeth, and they spoke English excellently and gravely. Real friendships were made between some of the men and these boys, and they cried when we left. They taught us Malay and collected Australian postage stamps avidly. We never saw a Malay 'running amok', for indeed the Malays, as a race, have now abandoned their lawless roving habits, though once they were pirates and the terror of the coasts. The Malay today is a somewhat mild, patient and good-natured gentleman with a great love of his home. They have an innate courtesy towards each other and towards strangers, and nowadays pursue such peaceful pursuits as fishing, agriculture, and silver-crafts, at which they are very clever. There was a lot in the Chinese saying—'Malaya is a country inhabited by Malays, run by the British for the benefit of the Chinese'. It was explained to us that when a Malay 'ran amok' it was merely a Malay form of suicide, and not a callous attempt at mass murder. Whereas European suicides desire to kill only themselves, Malay suicides, in their disgust with life, are altruistically determined to end it for as many other people as they can while they are about it. There may be something in it as a philosophy.

Colonel Maxwell and Major Anderson had no mercy on us in working hours. They drove us hard in the realisation that troops had to be tough to fight on the equator. They set out to toughen us up, and did not spare us in the process. The same thing was happening to AIF troops in other parts of Malaya.

7

Jungle in Johore

IN March combined defence exercises were held in Malaya, in which British, Indian and Australian troops took part. The AIF's war stations were at Mersing, considered by strategists to be the most likely invasion point should Japan decided to enter the war. Mersing lay on the east coast of Malaya and was the junction of a good bitumen road along the coast to Singapore and another good road to the west through Kluang with its railway and airfield. On paper it was the logical place for an enemy landing from the sea, but unfortunately later events proved that the Japanese did not conform to 'paper' rules of warfare.

The Japanese were helped by a magnificent intelligence system throughout the entire East Indian archipelago, and there is no doubt they were kept fully informed of our exercises while they were actually in progress. The Japanese intelligence system in Hawaii and the Philippines is now familiar to everyone; in Malaya it followed the same pattern. Every town had its Japanese hairdresser and photographer. Nearly all the non European hotels were thinly disguised brothels, and amongst the ladies of easy virtue there were sure to be some young and attractive Japanese girls who spoke English. For years and with infinite patience, the Japanese hairdressers shaved and cut the hair of Europeans; the Japanese photographers developed films and despatched to Tokyo any prints that might dovetail into the mosaic of military and naval information being so meticulously collated in preparation for 'the day'.

It was an experience to have your hair cut by a Japanese barber. The establishments were scrupulously clean and tidy, the Japanese proprietor bowing and polite and an expert at his trade. There was

one little man at Seremban who was obviously a man of high breeding and intelligence. For a while he would say nothing, and then, as his scissors clipped neatly and almost soothingly, he would murmur: 'You are at KGV?' It would have been absurd to deny it; you nodded. The scissors clipped on. 'Australians are brave fighting men,' he would suggest. 'What do those colours mean on your hat?' You were on guard now; you pretended you did not know. He smiled and did not persevere with his questioning, but you felt him gravely studying you from a military point of view and you knew he was potentially dangerous. You knew with horrible certainty that from some people, including careless soldiers, he would be clever enough to extract information of importance. You felt also that you wouldn't like to be lying back in his chair being shaved; without compunction, he would skilfully cut your throat, but he would do it with excessive politeness and with a bow. After he cut your hair he massaged the back of your neck and your shoulders until it gave you an almost sensual and drowsy pleasure. He bowed again and smiled as you paid him. I have not the slightest doubt that that hairdresser at Seremban was a high-ranking Japanese officer, and I wouldn't be surprised if he were Governor of Negri Sembilan by now. We knew them all, of course, including the prostitutes, and we kept a close watch on them, but while Japan was neutral, there was no hope of preventing information being sent out of the country. The Japanese must surely have had a complete picture of our defence preparations in Malaya, including numbers of troops, types of armaments, numbers of planes and ships, and even our plans for resisting an invasion. Troops were forbidden to take films for developing to Japanese photographers, but they got what they wanted just the same.

The combined defence exercises were made the occasion of our first bivouac in Malaya. It was a vast difference to our comfortable quarters in KGV, and from then on hatred of soldiering in the tropics got into our blood. We carried regulation war equipment and bivouacked the first night in the rain. The rain drenched us. We lay on groundsheets on the edge of a swamp and cut saplings whereon to drape our mosquito nets. As we lay there in the rain with our heads pillowed on a hard pack, we thought enviously and angrily of the men we knew who were snuggled down in nice warm beds in Australia. Jack was mumbling furiously to himself about some young man he knew in North Sydney who was probably taking a girl to the pictures at that very moment. We had sentries out who stood miserably under dripping trees and tried to keep the rain out of their rifles. They stared into the dark

velvet night, and the more imaginative ones fancied they saw black panthers slinking through the wet undergrowth.

We were in malaria country and took proper precautions. We smeared our faces and hands with mosquito repellent ointment and tried to prevent our stockinged feet from sticking out of the end of our mosquito nets. Malaria is caused by the bite of the anopheles mosquito. In Malaya there are forty varieties of anopheles mosquitoes, but only four varieties are able to carry malaria, and they must themselves first be infected with the malaria germ. Malaria is not contagious like influenza. The mosquito must first have bitten some human being with malaria parasites in his blood and then live ten days before it can convey the infection to another person. This person will develop the fever eight to ten days later. The anopheles bite only at night, and we learnt to distinguish them by their 'dive-bombing' tactics. They did not stand on you and bite leisurely, they came down headfirst and bit with their feet and wings held ecstatically in the air. The administration in Malaya had tackled the malaria problem with remarkable success by treating or destroying breeding places of mosquitoes. Special anti-malarial organisations were responsible for the protection of all towns and large villages, rubber estates and tin mines. This protection extended only a mile or two from inhabited places, however, and there was a lot of malaria in the rice fields, small kampongs (villages) and on rubber estates. There were anopheles in the jungle itself, but because of the absence of human beings, malaria did not seem so prevalent there.

I don't know how successful the manoeuvres were from the official point of view, but I imagine they were only partly successful because we were still raw to Malayan conditions and had by no means mastered jungle technique. I know that one body of troops got hopelessly lost and came up hours late to meet a theoretical attack by the enemy. It all went to show that new troops, however efficient in other types of warfare, were useless in the jungle without proper training as was proved in more tragic circumstances less than a year later. In Malaya you had to learn to fight the country before you could hope to fight any human enemy. The AIF learnt a lot from their mistakes during those exercises. One thing we learnt was that we were carrying too much equipment for swift movement in the jungle: you had to travel light to travel fast.

At the end of the exercises the troops moved back to their peacetime quarters, but the 'I' section of 2/19th Battalion stayed behind to map portions of the jungle country between Kahang and Jemaluang, near Mersing. Kahang was a straggling little Chinese village on the main

road to Mersing, and at the time a company of a Punjabi regiment was stationed there. They were camped in long huts made of dried palm leaves with dirt floors, and one of these huts was given to us for the period of our stay. There were no white officers with the Punjabis, and we seldom came into contact with their Indian officers. At first they were very shy with us, but we soon broke down their reserve. They seemed amazed by our happy-go-lucky ways and our eagerness to get on familiar terms with them and learn their philosophy and way of life. They were not used to Europeans treating them as equals, and if by doing so we broke down something inherent in their training, I, for one, see no reason to regret it.

There was a preponderance of Sikhs among the Punjabis, for the Sikhs come from the Punjab and have a fighting tradition that goes back into time itself. They fought against the British in 1845, but after the Punjab was annexed to British India, they became the Crown's loyalest and fiercest soldiers. Not only did they refrain from joining the rebel sepoys in the Indian Mutiny, but lent material assistance in quelling the outbreak. They were magnificent looking men, scarcely a man of them less than six feet tall, with black beards and moustaches. In the early morning they walked about the camp in long white shirts with jet black hair falling below their shoulders until they looked positively Christ like. There was nothing feminine about their long hair and they did it up and held it together with a comb set at a jaunty angle and a tiny dagger stuck in it. On duty they wore khaki shorts, shirt and a khaki turban, and their drilling was a joy to watch for its precision and discipline. They had white teeth beautifully formed which flashed as they laughed. They laughed a lot, like children, but were temperamental.

The Sikhs were extraordinarily austere and modest in their habits. They did not smoke or drink and observed the strict morality of Baba Nanak, the founder of Sikhism who was born in 1469. Nanak rejected the institution of caste and idolatry and superstition and preached the existence of one spiritual God. A man is not born into Sikhism, but initiated. Sikhism now recognises all, or nearly all, the Brahmanic tenets, caste included, but the Sikhs we lived with at Kahang must have been a throwback to earlier forefathers.

After a while we got on like a house on fire with them, but we had to be careful not to offend their religious susceptibilities. For instance, the only safe drinking water in the camp was carted by the Indians from a nearby rubber estate and kept in a large canvas tank. Had we touched the water with one of our own utensils it would

have been contaminated in their eyes. So after some parleying we agreed upon a system whereby we could take a kerosene tin near the water tank and fill our tin from their tin provided the two tins did not come in contact with each other. Therefore, we made our own fire and kept our cooking arrangements entirely separate.

We caused the Sikhs and the other sects in the company a great deal of merriment when we bathed in a stream that flowed near the camp. Scrupulously clean in their habits, the Indians bathed there each night themselves, but always with their lower portions covered by a pair of silk pants. We stripped off all our clothes and bathed and washed our clothes naked. The Indians thought it the most comical thing they had ever seen. I can see now a big-bearded man rocking with laughter as he watched me plunge into the water. Well, I didn't blame him, anyhow, because I'm no Adonis. Sometimes Chinese women passed across the bridge near where we washed, averted their eyes and fled giggling towards the village. This caused the Indians a great deal of amusement, too.

After dismissal at night, we watched the Punjabis playing volleyball, a kind of tennis played with a medicine ball. Their skill was amazing, as we found out to our cost when we played them one night. Our prestige went down a bit that night. It was surprising to find how many of them knew of the deeds of the AIF in the last war, and I think it was an unconscious kind of warlike brotherhood that drew them towards us. They were professional fighting men; it was in their blood; they respected a fighter beyond all other attributes. One of them who spoke English said to us one night: 'Italians no good. Germans no good. Australians and Indians — best soldiers!'

In the camp at night, under a black pincushion of a sky, we listened to one of the Punjabis calling his followers to prayer in a high-pitched chant. It seemed to go on for hours and made us restless until in the end we grew so accustomed to it we hardly noticed it. There were three goats at the camp, and they soon showed a fondness for the bread we bought from a Chinese baker in the village. We used to curse them but dared not chastise them for fear of giving religious offence. It was just as well we didn't as it turned out. For one night the 'calling to prayer' seemed to have a new significance and some of the Indian soldiers themselves began to wail and moan. Then the goats began to bleat, and they bleated so piteously that we hardly slept all night. In the morning there were only two goats. We asked one of the Indians what had become of the other goat. He grinned and swept his hand across his throat in a bloodthirsty gesture. There was

more wailing and moaning and bleating the next night – and only one goat. It went on until the goats ran out, and our breast was never touched again. The religious festival must have been conducted by other than Sikhs, because under the old Sikh religion sacrifices were rejected as superstition.

Every morning at sunrise we set off for the jungle in our truck with enough bully beef and water to see us through the day. We split up into pairs and agreed to meet at a prearranged camping place for lunch. (We made sure that 'Speed' Gordon Smith, the walking champion, and Stan McAlister, the marathon runner, were paired together, and actually Gordon and Stan made some remarkable treks through the jungle, coming across elephants and crocodiles). So we moved along the edge of the jungle by the roadside looking for tracks. Some of them had not been used for years; the undergrowth had grown over the entrances so that we had to force our way in with parangs (a heavy knife like a cutlass). But once inside the jungle the tracks became clearer where animals had used them and ran into a bewildering jigsaw puzzle. Knowledge of these tracks, we figured, would be invaluable in warfare, and we set them down faithfully on our maps. One man would go ahead with a parang and a prismatic compass; the other behind with a loaded rifle in case we met with wild beasts. This was Johore jungle, and deep inside it were tiger, panther, and elephant. The man in front took the compass bearings and measured distances in paces and the man behind put them down on paper. Back at camp that night we would make our own maps to scale.

The jungle was literally honeycombed with tracks; some of them ran an erratic course for miles. We plunged on, and the further we went the deeper grew the silence. It seems paradoxical to say so, but the jungle was full of noises and yet the great silence dominated everything. The noises simply broke the silence because when they ceased for a moment, the silence was overpowering and gripped you like claustrophobia. Monkeys chattered and screeched as they swung from the trees. Squirrels whipped up and down the trees like lightning and leapt across to other trees like children on a flying trapeze. There was a din of locusts and one or two birds we could not identify. One made a droning noise such as you hear when you press your ear to a telegraph pole. Another barked like a dog. But we saw few birds and none with the vivid plumage we expected. The birds we did see were completely unafraid, and perched within a few feet of us, holding their heads on one side as their bright eyes watched us. We did not

see any brightly coloured flowers, but some superb butterflies fluttered lazily past us. One brown beauty of great size had five grey pearls glistening on each wing.

We trudged deeper and deeper into the jungle, the sound of our footsteps on fallen branches almost startling us as the noise reverberated through the forest. No, it was not a silence; it was an immense stillness. There was no wind and only a few shafts of sunlight penetrated the towering trees overhead. The track was only wide enough for one man, and you could not have moved off it without the aid of a parang, so dense were the trees and the undergrowth. The trees grew straight and tall and soared hundreds of feet above us. You never saw a crooked tree, for it could not survive to reach the sun. There were great cedar trees of tremendous girth laced together with vines as thick as a man's forearm. We learnt to quench our thirst by slashing a water-carrying vine with the parang.

The water was cool and satisfying. There were giant pythons amongst these trees but we did not see one, and did not want to see one. We came upon swamps that were alive with mosquitoes and leeches. The leeches attacked us *en masse*, even got through our puttees and the eyeholes of our boots. Our legs were frequently covered in blood when we got home: the leeches didn't often get a chance to feed on white blood. We learnt to make them lose their grip by pressing a lighted cigarette on them. In the swamps we came upon elephant pads and watched out warily.

The tracks turned and twisted and joined other tracks until sometimes we had trouble in retracing our steps and feared we were lost. We had arranged to fire three rifle shots if such a thing happened. We trudged on; sank ankle-deep in mud as we crossed streams. The atmosphere was steamy and stinking and suffocating. The sweat streamed from our bodies until our shirts stuck warmly to our backs. Every twenty minutes or so we were glad to have a spell and sat down on a log and listened to the great stillness. Sometimes it rained and the trees dripped it down on us. The rain made the heat more humid than ever, and a sort of steam rose from the undergrowth.

Once, sharply through the stillness of the jungle, we heard the sound of axes. We followed a track leading in that direction and eventually came to a Chinese timber-cutting camp. The Chinese were considerably startled to see two khaki-clad figures in slouch hats armed with a rifle and a parang, appear from the depths of the jungle. There was a lot of jabbering and gesticulating, but we persuaded them that our intentions were strictly peaceful. The Chinese were cutting and hauling rich cedar

logs to the main road. In the jungle the Chinese used water buffaloes, great beasts with scimitar shaped horns, for log-hauling. (The water buffalo disliked Europeans by instinct, and it was safer to keep out of their way even when they were rolling in their favourite mud bath off-duty. We were told of one species of jungle buffalo, which, if a hunter stalked him, would double back on his tracks and disconcertingly begin to stalk the hunter.) Sometimes when the terrain was suitable, the Chinese built tracks made of round saplings, greased in the middle so that the logs would glide down. The timber gang wore sandshoes and dragged the logs to the road with ropes slung around their shoulders. As they made precarious steps from sapling to sapling they chanted a haunting tune like 'The Volga Boatman'. To hear it in the distance sung by ten men coming closer and closer was peculiarly enchanting. The Chinese were all small men and we heard they worked in the jungles on contract for six months—and then presumably went to town and 'blew' their cheques. The timber they cut and hauled was worth thousands of pounds, and each foot meant extra royalty to the fabulous Sultan of Johore.

So our days passed and we gradually superimposed on the ordnance maps an accurate network of tracks and roads from Kahang to the coast. In one or two cases we even changed the course of streams and rivers. We were glad to get back to the camp and shock the Indians by our nude bathing. I would far sooner walk five miles in Australia than one mile in Johore jungle. There was one memorable occasion when a rubber estate manager named Baxter invited us to his bungalow for an evening meal. Seldom was hospitality so appreciated, and it was a delight to talk to an Englishwoman again. More memorable still was the occasion when the assistant manager of the estate invited Bill Tozer and me to have a hot bath at his bungalow. *A hot bath!*

One day we had bully beef and tea at an old timber-cutter's camp beside a stream. After a siesta we prepared to split up and go into the jungle again. Harrie Gibbons bent over to pick up his rifle which was resting against a log, and as he did so he was bitten on the wrist by the horridest black spider I had ever seen. It was as big as an Australian tarantula, but livelier and more vicious looking. We were frightened of poison so applied a ligature, split open the puncture with a razor blade and doctored him with snakebite antidote. A few minutes later Harrie fainted. When he came to he vomited. We carried him to the truck and raced for the camp.

Our arrival created a tremendous sensation. Indian soldiers appeared like magic and formed a chattering circle around Harrie, who had lapsed

into semi-consciousness. We laid him on his bed and summoned the Punjabi's medical officer, a little Mongol-eyed Gurkha lieutenant. The doctor did not seem to know anything about the spider, whose body we had in a tin, or what treatment we should give Harrie. We were getting seriously alarmed when an Indian soldier in a flowing white robe appeared carrying a hurricane lamp and a green rubber-tree branch. Our interpreter, whom we called Charlie, said would we let the Indian see what he could do?

The Indian squatted down beside Harrie's bed muttering low incantations. He took the kerosene from the hurricane lamp and rubbed it over Harrie's hand and arm. Then slowly he moved the green rubber branch down Harrie's arm towards the wound and kept doing it for ten minutes. Charlie told us in an awed tone that the Indian had become God for the time being. He had the power to kill or spare. With the branch he was drawing out the poison towards the ground. In doing so (said Charlie) he was taking a frightful risk of absorbing the poison into his own body, but he was prepared to do it for the Sahib's sake. Meantime the Gurkha doctor (medical science versus Christian science) watched the scene with obvious scepticism.

According to the Man Who Was God, we made a terrible mistake in killing the spider because the act would lessen the victim's chance of living. Whereas if the spider had been allowed to live, God would undoubtedly have allowed Harrie to live. However, he would do the best he could—but we should not have killed the spider. The incantations went on and Harrie, although still slightly delirious, showed some signs of recovering.

Then suddenly: '*Snake! Snake!*' from a dozen throats. Almost above Harrie's head, from amongst the dried palm leaves on the roof of the hut, slithered a wickedly slim snake. Pandemonium! Half a dozen excited Indians slashing away with sticks and a babble of voices. The snake never had a chance. It was quickly despatched, and according to Charlie was a particularly deadly variety, guaranteed to kill in sixty seconds. Poor Harrie! It was fortunate he did not quite realise what was going on.

The Man Who Was God continued with his treatment when the hubbub died down. It was a weird scene. The shadows were lengthening through the rubber trees. Harrie lay on a wooden Chinese bed in the grass hut. Around him were grouped a dozen bearded Indian warriors with the Gurkha doctor scratching his head in the background. They watched in a kind of tense interest. Every now and again one of them would shake his head doubtfully—it was a pity we had killed the spider

because otherwise our friend would not have been so sick . . .

We never found out what kind of spider it was, and we will never know whether it was the Man Who Was God who cured Harrie. Later that day we took him in to the Kluang Hospital for observation. He was back with us in a few days and has been wary of spiders ever since.

A week or so later we piled our belongings into the truck and set off back to Seremban. We were sorry to leave the Punjabis, grand comrades and grand fighting men. They waved and smiled and saluted as we left. Charlie, the interpreter, was almost in tears, and we promised to write to him. Charlie was very proud of the fact that he spoke and read English.

8

'. . . Who Only Stand and Wait'

THE months passed. Battalion headquarters alternated between Seremban and Port Dickson, noted beauty spot on the coast facing Malacca Strait. At Port Dickson we were quartered in long grass huts, but there was electric light and wooden stretchers to sleep on, so we had nothing but minor worries to complain about. The sea was at our doorstep and we were able to bathe in it.

Exercise and bivouacs were the order of things now and we were learning to find our way about the country. Several Chinese generals from China came to observe one exercise and seemed to be properly impressed. We did a twelve-mile route march with full war equipment. It doesn't sound a long route march to Australian ears, but it was so gruelling in the tropic heat that a number of men (especially those over thirty-five) did not see out the distance. Picked men were sent out into the mountains with only rice for rations and limited supplies of water. They used elephants for transport purposes and were the nucleus of the commando troops who paid back the Japanese in their own coin when war broke out.

The Japanese hairdressers still attended to their customers and the Japanese photographers still canvassed for films, but Japan itself kept up a pretence of impassive neutrality. It looked to the AIF in Malaya as if they were anchored there for the duration of the war. They became desperately unhappy at their lot. They were deeply affected by the tragedies of Greece and Crete, where many of them lost brothers and cobbers, and the unhappiness gradually turned into bitterness. A few white feathers in letters from Australia set the seal on this bitterness. Dozens tried fruitlessly to get transfers to the Middle East.

The tropics were eating into their blood, too. The unchanging summer and the hot, steamy atmosphere that rotted leather in a few months so that we had to abandon our leather watch straps and substitute them with linen ones. The sudden tropic thunderstorms that drenched the whole countryside. The never-ending manoeuvres that had you lying sweating on your belly in a stinking swamp at night shooting at imaginary Japanese or forcing your way for hours through the undergrowth of a dank, suffocating jungle. What was the use of it all, when nobody was going to attack the bloody country, anyway? It was difficult to make the bushman from Gundagai for instance, understand that his presence in Malaya might be deterring the Japanese from attacking that country or that Singapore was a fortress guarding the Murrumbidgee. That same bushman had to withstand insidious enemy propaganda which whispered, 'All you're doing is protecting rubber estates belonging to big British capitalists'. It is to his everlasting credit that he withstood these advances, but he hated his circumstances just the same. Because he felt he was performing a useless task he grew acutely homesick for Australia.

The AIF grew introspective and super-sensitive. They raged when journalists and cameramen came from Australia and wrote them up. They overlooked the many sympathetic references these journalists made to the hard tropical conditions they lived under and saw only the colourful pieces about them cavorting with 'taxi dancers' and pictures of officers wearing gaudy sarongs in their huts. When they read that they were eating a kind of Malayan fruit that 'tasted like rose petals', they threw up their hands to heaven and screamed with wrath. Some stupid wives in Australia saw something sinister in their husbands dancing with Chinese girls and told them so. In their unhappiness the AIF interpreted this publicity to mean that they were being looked upon in Australia as 'glamour boys' leading a life of ease and prodigality in the mysterious East, while the other AIF divisions were fighting doggedly against overwhelming odds in the Middle East. I felt the same way myself at the time and wrote furious letters to Molly. I know now that those journalists had meant to send home an authentic picture of us, but how were they to know the mood we were in?

Our only desire was to get away from Malaya and get to grips with a real enemy somewhere. Wasn't that what we enlisted for? Our unhappiness was expressed in the satirical notices we placed outside our huts at Port Dickson. 'MENZIES' GLAMOUR BOYS', 'WE CAME HERE FOR GLORY AND ALL WE GOT WAS GLAMOUR', 'WHEN DO WE FIGHT?' were typical of them. Outside one row of huts was a notice reading 'PANSY ALLEY'.

Outside another was 'NEWTON'S PETS', Newton being the name of their officer. In a bored moment one member of the pioneer platoon built a little garden edged with stones outside their hut and hung a staghorn over the door. Some of the comments on the following day by other members of the battalion were unprintable, but one burly, hard bitten soldier minced up to me, bowed solemnly, and presented me with a bunch of greenery, 'with the compliments of the Orchid Platoon'. It sounds childish now, but underlying it at the time was something far more significant; it was a satirical expression of frustration and dispiritedness. One night at a picture show in Seremban a newsreel was shown of Mr R.G. Menzies then prime minister of Australia, inspecting AIF troops in the Middle East. Australian soldiers in the audience greeted Mr Menzies' appearance with a chorus of hoots. It was not directed against Mr Menzies personally but because he represented the authority who had sent them to Malaya. Nevertheless, the spontaneous demonstration astonished Chinese and English members of the audience and may have been considered more significant than it really was by any Japanese agents present.

It would be folly to overlook the fact that the AIF in Malaya were mentally sick during their long waiting period. They had a hatred of Malaya almost amounting to a phobia, and they loathed their standing as garrison troops. Soon physical sickness struck at them. It was not so much fever as skin disease that laid them low. Prickly heat one took in one's stride, and many men were literally covered in it. The more you sweated the worse it got. There was only one thing to relieve it, and that was 'baby powder'. *Baby powder!* This was the last straw to our sufferings, but we swallowed our pride and wrote home for as much of it as our relations could lay their hands on. What will they take us for, we asked ourselves?

It was tinea that worried the MOs most of all. Not irritating little attacks of 'athlete's foot', but a virulent germ that literally ate into the men's flesh. It attacked not only the feet, but under the arms and the ears, and sometimes the face. I saw one man with such a filthy sore on his belly that he had to be packed off to hospital. The flesh rotted away and the disease spread with alarming rapidity. Every morning and evening there were long queues outside the RAP, and at one stage at least a fifth of the battalion was out of action with it. The extraordinary part was that local doctors had never seen anything like it amongst Europeans in Malaya before. In one way the explanation was fairly simple. Rubber planters, for instance, usually dressed in light tropical clothes, and were able to change them frequently and take

baths when they wanted to. It was a very different matter with us. When we went out on bivouacs we carried full war equipment, weighing about sixty pounds. We carried a change of socks and shirts, but they were liable to be drenched with rain several times before we returned to camp. We were always bathed in sweat as we plunged through rubber estates and the jungle and our feet sweated most of all. We stank when we got home, and the tinea germ had got a grip on the oozing flesh between our toes. Once it got a grip it seemed impossible to eradicate it without lying up altogether and letting the air get to your feet.

Our medical officers did everything they could to combat a disease that was disturbingly keeping many battalions below fighting strength, but they did not have much success. Special showers were set aside for men suffering from tinea. The sores were treated with mercurochrome. According to one well-known English civil doctor in Malaya whom I met, they ignored what he considered was the prime cause of it all—and that was diet. There was an abundance of pineapples and bananas in Malaya, and yet we seldom saw any, except what we bought ourselves in the native villages where they were absurdly cheap. The official explanation was that transport problems made it unpracticable to supply so many troops. The only green vegetables we ever saw were unpalatable stringy beans, but that was not the Army's fault because green vegetables, except in tins, are a luxury in Malaya. Fresh salads are something exiled Europeans dream about. The Malayan climate rots away growing vegetables in the same way as it rots away flesh and morality. Malayan lettuces are ludicrous to Australian eyes and are as heartless as the climate. We never saw any fresh fish, only tinned herrings, which we grew to hate. When I told my doctor friend that frequently we were given hot meat stew for breakfast, he was horrified and said we deserved all the tinea we got. 'You must not eat a lot of meat in this country,' he said. 'It heats the blood and that it why you are getting these things. I'd tell your medical officers if I dared, but I feel it's none of my business and they would resent my interference.' There were other skin diseases, such as dhoby's itch, which struck at a very sensitive part of the anatomy. And perhaps the worst of all was 'Singapore ear' that several of the men contracted while swimming at Port Dickson. It was a type of tinea, and so excruciatingly painful that the victims sometimes cried with agony.

My own share of troubles was typical of many members of the unit. One foot was rotten with tinea and some blisters on my heel which a stupid RAP corporal had lanced with an unsterilised safety pin had

turned septic and were so raw and festering that I could not put on a boot for three weeks. Everything festered in Malaya. My civil doctor friend cured my heel, not by trying to dry up the infection in the army manner but by moistening the sores with an ointment. Then I went down with dengue, the first fever case in the battalion. The MOs pounced on me with unfeigned delight and bunged me off to hospital. They were dreadfully disappointed when it wasn't malaria, but they had a lot of fun just the same. Dengue is not as dangerous as malaria and does not recur, but it's an unpleasant disease. It is caused by a mosquito bite and accompanied by the same high fever and shivering fits. On a hot tropical night I lay under three blankets and could not sweat and had such shooting pains across the back that it was painful to lie down. I spent a fortnight in hospital, where they also probed out big lumps of dead flesh from my tinea infected feet. The worst part of dengue is the black depression it lays on its victims after the disease has run its course. I came out of hospital in the depths of despair and was a nuisance to everybody for weeks. Damn Malaya! What goddamn bloody fools we were to enlist anyway and be stuck in this godforsaken country doing nothing to win the war except moan about our silly little diseases, when fellows we know are getting killed and maimed and blinded in the Middle East! Damn! Damn! Damn!

I mention my own introspections because everybody else felt the same way about it. We were caught in a net of unwanted circumstances, and could not fight our way out of it. The AIF authorities were well aware of the temper of the men and realised that the situation was potentially dangerous from a morale point of view. They did everything in their power to combat the boredom and frustration. Weekend leave was granted to Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and other towns. Organised sport was encouraged and there were interbattalion contests for football, cricket, hockey, athletics, tennis and swimming. Comforts, long overdue, began to arrive from Australia. There were NAAFI canteens at Seremban and Port Dickson, manned by Chinese. The European women, including many Englishwomen, rallied round magnificently and established voluntary canteens at many towns. The Chinese community at Seremban opened an 'Oriental Garden' where we could buy steak and eggs, and fresh fish and Australian beer.

But the boredom and frustration still ate into our hearts. In the battalion magazine the CO wrote: 'Our role at present is here, and here our duty lies, but some find it hard to remember that "They also serve who only stand and wait"'. (Alan Cocks wittily pointed out in the next issue of the magazine that this was also the motto

of the NAAFI Canteen Workers' Union.) In the same issue of the magazine a stretcher-bearer wrote the following poem:

Not ours the fury of the battle din,
Not ours to play high stakes with fame and fate,
And sing the triumph song of those that win.
Not yet! Not yet! We only watch and wait.

We watch and wait, ready our part to play
Whene'er the foe may choose. We do but ask
The meeting. Let him fix the time and day.
If not, still hold we to our task.

But if the glory is not ours to share,
With those our brothers on the distant field.
The lustre-lacking burden that we bear
Still hath a useful harvesting to yield.

We keep the foeman from this British shore,
Which now his bloodstained foot dare not defile.
We guard Australia's gate—Why ask we more?
To guard our homes? Is not this worth our while?

Throughout this difficult waiting period I say without hesitation that the behaviour of the AIF was remarkably good, considering all the circumstances. Like Mae West, we were not angels. There was isolated trouble now and then, but nothing more than needed battalion discipline. There were fights in the brothels sometimes and a few drunken brawls between ourselves. The incorrigibles were shipped back to Australia and discharged. If men got drunk on leave, who could blame them? Only a few pious people back in Australia who always turn up their sensitive noses at drunken soldiers and then go home and win wars in their comfortable armchairs. If some of these people had a day or two in a jungle they'd probably want to go out and get drunk themselves. Yes, the boys came through it well and discipline in the field was never impaired.

We of the 'I' section were lucky in our friendships in Malaya. We always seemed to be meeting Good Samaritans. One night we were eating in a Chinese restaurant when a young Scottish rubber estate manager named Bill Taylor came up to help us with the language. After the meal he took us along to the Sungei Ujong Club, one of the best European Clubs in Malaya, and affiliated with the Savage Club

in Melbourne. This was sheer heaven to us. We sat on a balcony in cane chairs with electric fans overhead and looked across velvet green lawns towards a towering mass of mountains on the horizon. Every now and again white-clad Chinese stewards brought us gin in long glasses tinkling with ice. Bill insisted on paying for everything, which was fortunate because none of us had more than a few cents in our pockets.

We met a tall, bulky and cheerful young Englishman who might have been a character out of one of Kipling's early Indian tales. He was the local magistrate and Protector of Chinese Women and Children (or some such title) for heaven knows how many square miles of country. We told him his duties would probably increase because of the Australians' arrival. He laughed and then gave us a friendly warning. He said the authorities had recently tested a group of young Chinese girls chosen at random for venereal disease. The test showed that over 90 per cent were suffering from gonorrhea and a large percentage from syphilis. He attributed this staggering incidence to an old Chinese belief that if you were suffering from gonorrhea the only cure was to go to bed with a young Chinese virgin. He also told us about the miraculous properties of Malayan pawpaws. Very ripe pawpaws were alleged to cure constipation and very green pawpaws were used by the natives to bring on abortions. As they cost only about 7 cents apiece there should be fortune in it for someone after the war.

Bill Taylor was going to make us honorary members of the club, but before he could put it into effect the Sungei Ujong Club was placed out of bounds for other ranks and made a closed preserve for officers. It has always struck me as one of the most perplexing anomalies of democracy that certain hotels and clubs should be barred to other ranks of a volunteer army. We were also beyond the pale of the greatly overrated Raffles Hotel in Singapore. A private was quite within his rights in meeting an officer in a private house (any hostess would have been thoroughly indignant had it been otherwise), but a clubman was apparently not considered competent to judge the respectability of a private soldier he might wish to invite into his club. The assumption that a private would promptly 'wreck the joint' and make a nuisance of himself was insulting and bad-mannered. Members of an ex-officers' club in Sydney will forgive me, I hope, when I suggest that they should also give some thought to this problem. I lunched many times at this club before the war, but the moment I put on the King's uniform as a private, those doors were closed to me. As it is strictly an officers' club, I have no quarrel with that aspect of it. What I did, and do,

The 'I' section in their 'giggle suits' at Ingleburn in 1940. Left to right: Stan McAlister, Maurie Brennan, Gordon Smith, Jack Rescorl, Gilbert Mant, Graham Bartley

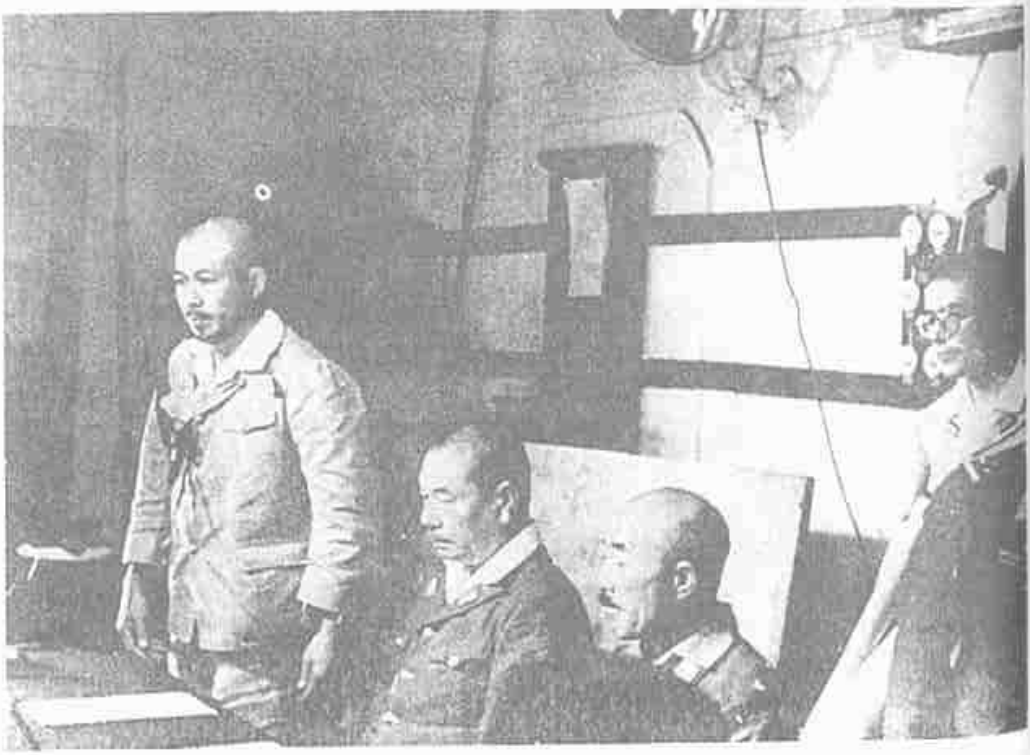
The *Queen Mary*, carrying some 5,750 Australians, arrived at Singapore on 18 February 1941. A group of British officers, including the G.O.C. Malaya, Lieut.-General L. V. Bond (carrying cane), and the Governor, Sir Shenton Thomas (on Bond's left), greeted the Australians. The troops threw down pennies to the rather startled VIPs on the wharf (*AWM negative no. 5907*)

War correspondents interviewing Lieut.-Colonel Stewart (second left), commander of the 2nd Battalion Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, in the jungle frontline. In foreground right is Al Noderer of the Chicago *Tribune*, with Ian Morrison of the London *Times* (partly obscured) and Gilbert Mant of Reuters.

Two grief stricken Chinese women lament the death of a child after an air raid during the last days of Singapore (IWM negative no. HU29 22)

Jubilant Japanese troops after the fall of Singapore (*AWM negative no. 127905*)

General Yamashita (left middle row) accepts General Percival's surrender at 7 p.m. on 15 February 1942. Percival is seen on right foreground (*AWM negative no. 127903*)



Three years later, events turn full circle as Japanese commanders surrender Singapore to the British on board HMS *Sussex* (*AWM negative no. 41570*)

resent most bitterly is the fact that young able-bodied civilians, many years my junior, were still accepted as honoured guests in the club. I, because I wore a uniform of which I saw no reason to be ashamed, was no longer acceptable. The club was not keeping me out—it was keeping my uniform out, with preference to a sac suit. It was hurtful in the extreme, and a complete negation of the principles for which we were fighting.

It was curious that a few nights later Alan Cocks, Stan McAlister, and I got into conversation with a jolly Englishman at the European canteen. His name was Fred Hilton, and he was a sort of Pooh Bah of Seremban. He was acting secretary of the Sungei Ujong Club, Adjutant to the Local Defence Corps, chairman of the Ex-Servicemen's League, secretary and leading light of an amateur dramatic society and countless other organisations. He invited us to his home for dinner and we fell in love with Mrs Hilton at first sight. She was a charming and cultured Englishwoman, and she spent all her spare time as a voluntary nurse at the Seremban Hospital and performing other good deeds. Their only son was in the RAF. I wonder if they realised that their house was the first private home we had been in in Malaya, and how their kindness warmed us through and through? Their bungalow was on the edge of the town, looking across to the hills and the mountains. It was only a simple meal, after all, but to us it was like a ten-course repast at the Ritz. Afterwards we lounged back in armchairs with whisky and soda *stengahs* ('half-in-half' in Malay) and talked, I think, intelligently. We went there again and always loved it for their natural charm and hospitality. We used to pull Freddie's leg when he set off for the club and apologised that he could not take us with him.

Lasting friendships were made, too, amongst the Ceylonese community in Seremban. We were given the full run of the Negri Sembilan Club, with its Indian and Malay membership. How strange that our friendships with them and our presence in their club should have provoked certain Europeans to say that we were thereby lowering European prestige! I say, we did much to restore it. Indeed, the Australians were unpopular amongst some tuans besar (big shots) in Malaya. In many ways they were crude and virile and their impact on the country was of something rudely realistic. Without thought, but not thoughtlessly, they became on familiar terms with the native population, and saw no wrong in it. In doing so they no doubt broke down something that had been carefully and patiently built up over the years, and they were not liked for it. It should be remembered, however, that this was in the days before Mr Churchill and President Roosevelt framed the Atlantic Charter.

The Ceylonese and Indians were shy with us at first, anticipating racial condescension on our part, but when they saw that we were completely natural with them and enjoyed their company, they accepted us on the same basis. The Ceylonese were crazy about cricket. They played it all the year round. Rain never stopped play because it rained most of the time, anyway. They plied one with questions about English and Australian Test cricketers and we had long arguments about bodyline bowling. They still talked of the time when Frank Tarrant had taken an Australian team to Malaya and they still bemoaned the fact that they had never seen Bradman in action. They were terrific drinkers and used to delight in pouring whisky and gin into us. We did what we could to repay their hospitality, but we never had enough money to treat them as they treated us.

We had two special Ceylonese friends who were employed by the government, but I will not give their names or their particular professions. We used to go to their homes frequently. One of them had a quiver of eight children, ranging in ages from twelve years to five months. The father, being a cricketer, explained to us that there was another which he described as '9 not out'. That may have explained why we seldom saw his wife. In fact, when you go visiting you never see Indian or Chinese wives. They do the cooking and stay hidden in the background, entirely unemancipated but apparently quite content with their status. The eight children put on an entertainment for us one night. They sang Tamil songs and staged an Indian play. Then the eldest girl sang proudly Gracie Fields' hit song, 'Wish Me Luck When You Wave Me Good-bye'. The children were quite unselfconscious and we could see the mother watching it all proudly behind a screen. There were fifteen items in the performance, and it finished with 'God Save the King'.

Our best Chinese friend was Koh Lian Chin, proprietor of Seremban's biggest store. What a grand gentleman Chin was, and what an intelligent one! He had the loveliest Chinese treasures of china and tapestry and silverware in the big living rooms above the store. There was a most beautiful olive-eyed daughter of about seventeen and a twelve-year-old girl named Say Nya, who was our favourite. She and Carol corresponded for months until we heard no more from them. Say Nya, who had learnt to speak Chinese, English and French fluently at the convent school, also sang 'Wish Me Luck'. She was the sweetest little creature in her coat and trousers and her eyes were always bubbling with fun.

Chin always had a lot of fun with us when the *stengahs* were poured out. At once he would shout, 'Yam seng!' Now 'Yam seng!' means

'Bottoms up!' or words to that effect. The old Chinese custom was that as soon as your host cried the magic words, you drained your glass to the dregs, turned it upside down, and had it refilled. It amused Chin hugely to shout 'Yam seng!' as soon as ever your glasses were filled until in the end we had to plead for mercy. In his house we gorged ourselves with the most astonishing and gargantuan Chinese meals served in innumerable courses. We ate delicious Malayan fruit such as rambutan, mangosteen and durian (which Say Nya called 'the smelly one'). And afterwards we talked about Chinese customs and languages—interspersed with a few 'Yam sengs!'—until it was time to go back to camp.

And I, most fortunate of all, had relatives at Kuala Lumpur who had me for one glorious weekend and, in turn, passed me on to hospitable friends in Seremban, Port Dickson and elsewhere. The Mannings, the Barron-Toops, the Leasks, the Hiltons, the Romneys, the Rhodes and others—how charming they all were to me!

9

Back to Civvies

MOLLY was battling away at her job with Reuters. She achieved some distinction when she became the first woman to attend a prime minister's press conference in Sydney. She confessed she trembled with fright, but found that 'Call Me Artie' Fadden, then prime minister, soon put her at ease.

Her greatest triumph was the day she captured Tobruk. The Minister for the Army, Mr Spender, made a statement to the effect that Tobruk had fallen, and by some means or other Molly managed to get it ahead of anyone else. She flashed it off to London at urgent cable rates, and soon afterwards the BBC was broadcasting to the world that Tobruk had fallen 'according to Reuters' Sydney Correspondent'. It was an out-and-out scoop of the first magnitude, but unfortunately it was followed by a terrifying official silence. It looked as if Mr Spender had 'jumped the gun' as no confirmation was forthcoming from British military headquarters. The hours passed and Reuters' Sydney correspondent was a very white-faced and worried correspondent indeed. All was well, however, and a long time later the news was announced officially. Instead of a cable ending her career with Reuters, one came full of congratulations. Whether Tobruk was taken that day, only Mr Spender knows the answer, and your guess is as good as mine.

There had been changes in Reuters. Sir Roderick Jones, with whom I had made almost a private arrangement in order that I might enlist, had resigned some months before. Reuters' costs of reporting the war on every conceivable front were so colossal that economies were necessary. Molly's salary, which admittedly was very liberal indeed, was reduced.

Then like a bolt from the blue I received a cable from Reuters in Sydney saying that they had made formal application to the Minister for the Army for my release from the army. It was followed by a letter from the minister asking the AIF authorities in Malaya to make an early recommendation about my case. The Reuters argument was that Reuters was an integral part of the war effort in disseminating Allied news and propaganda in all parts of the world, and that by directing their news service from Australia I would be doing a far better war job for my country than by serving as a private in the Army.

I have been through some emotional crises in my life, being cursed with an emotional introspective temperament, but never such mental torture as racked me during the next few weeks. For obvious reasons no soldier can be honourably discharged from the army in circumstances such as faced me unless he agrees to it himself in writing. The primary decision was mine and mine only. Once again I was torn between conflicting loyalties—loyalty to my family and loyalty to the army. Why the hell couldn't the army decide the thing for me? I felt like the classic case of the shipwrecked man who had to choose between saving his wife or his mother, with its soul-racking conundrum, 'What would *you* do?'

I had not asked for this to happen; I would sooner have died than make such a confession of failure. I didn't want to leave the army, and yet I knew that Molly was finding it too much for her and that her hair had become streaked with grey since I left. Hadn't we as a family done as much as any family could reasonably be expected to do under the voluntary system already? Hadn't we given up more than many other people in pursuit of something we believed in so earnestly? Didn't I know too well that I was a lousy soldier; that other members of the 'I' section were constantly trying to cover up my physical weaknesses? Didn't we all feel we were wasting our time in Malaya and might never have joined the Army for all the use we were?

And yet—

I took Reuters' cable to Colonel Maxwell, not as a private soldier but as a private individual. He was splendidly understanding.

'I'm between the devil and the deep blue sea, sir,' I said. 'I don't know what to do. Whatever I do I am always going to feel I've done the wrong thing. I'd like you to decide for me if you would, sir.'

'It's extraordinarily difficult,' admitted the colonel, after I had told him all the circumstances, some of which it is not politic to mention here. 'There's this, Mant; whatever you do, the army will still have to decide whether to release you, so it's not altogether your responsibility.'

'That's true, sir, but if I refuse in the first place, that will settle it once and for all. I can't be thrown out of the army unless I misbehave myself.'

We had a heart-to-heart talk. Everyone else in the battalion in whom I had confided reckoned I was plain nuts not to grab the chance to get out of the blarsted country as quickly as I could. If only *they* had a chance like that! I wonder? It was not as easy as all that, and the colonel, with his quick sympathy, recognised it. He argued wisely, and I agreed with him, that an application for my release by a private firm might be misinterpreted, however genuine my own reactions were. Would it not be possible to have Reuters' request backed by the Commonwealth government or by some Commonwealth department? That was a practical idea, and it was agreed that I should cable Reuters to that effect.

The affair dragged on for weeks. I was inundated with advice until I thought I would go insane. There was another letter from the military authorities wanting to know when Private NX55915, Mant, G.P., was going to make up his mind. All this fuss about an unimportant private soldier!

I spent a weekend with dear 'Dusty' Rhodes and his wife Nessie, who had a rubber estate a few miles from Seremban. Under the influence of some *stengahs* I poured out all my troubles to them; it was a relief to confide in someone right outside the army. I told them of the two salient questions that tormented me: would some people say I had wangled my way out of the Army? How was I going to feel within myself if, after I left, the 2/19th went into action and some of my dearest friends were killed? On the other hand, how much duty did I owe to my wife and children? And God knows I wanted to see my home badly enough, as everyone else in the battalion did. Oh, hell! . . . Do you mind if I have another *stengah*? . . . Dusty was the wisest of all. He recognised all the problems and said nobody could decide them except myself. But if I left the army I might regret it more in later years than if I stayed in it. How right he was and how I appreciated his frankness.

Cables to and from Sydney. Telephone calls to Reuters' office in Singapore. Letters to Molly asking her to forgive me if I took the hardest course. Hours of self-reproach for ever getting myself into such an abominable dilemma. The futility of it all. To go back now without ever having seen a shot fired in anger, after costing the country hundreds of pounds to train me. Utter, utter futility and defeat. If only I had enough money to go out and get drunk for a couple of days.

Finally, a cable from Reuters saying that the decision was between me and the Military Board. Apparently any government department that had been approached considered that the war could be conducted quite competently on the civilian front without my assistance, which was reasonable enough. So that was that. I felt a weight lifted from my shoulders. I wrote to Molly and said I could not possibly agree to my release and hoped she would understand.

Then I went to the colonel and told him. The colonel had been giving the matter a lot of thought. He spoke to me as a friend, not as Commanding Officer. He said, 'It's still extraordinarily difficult and I don't want to influence you against your will, but I'm convinced now that you should go back. Think it over again and if you decide to go back I do not think you need ever reproach yourself for it. You've never gone downstream with us; it's always been upstream. I think it is better for you to go back now than for me to have to send you back medically unfit later on.'

'But I'm not sick,' I protested.

'No, but—'

It was on again! This time the flesh was weak and I betrayed my innermost feelings by arguing successfully with myself that whatever I signed, the final decision was the army's. All right, I would leave it to them. In my heart I hoped the application would be rejected. I composed and signed the following statement: 'Although reluctant to leave my Army comrades, I agree to the Military Board considering Reuters' application for my discharge. I do this on the assumption that the board will consider the application from the viewpoint of whether I would be of greater use to the national war effort as Australian News Editor of Reuters than as a soldier in the AIF.'

Then I borrowed five dollars from one of the boys and went out and had a lot to drink.

Days passed before the army's decision came through from Division. Then things happened quickly. I was at Chin's house with Jack Rescorl and Chin was ejaculating 'Yam seng!' He was giving me autographed photographs of himself and Say Nya. And Say Nya was singing 'Wish Me Luck as You Wave Me Good-bye' with real significance. A prodigious Chinese meal and afterwards 'Yam seng! . . . Yam seng! . . . Yam seng! . . .'

It was goodbye to Chin and Say Nya. It was goodbye to Jack and Gordon and Stan and Bill and Ben and the others. It was goodbye to the grandest company of men it has ever been my good fortune to meet. It was goodbye to something in my life that will never come

again. It was goodbye to myself as I wanted myself to be. It was the last 'Yam seng' of all because there was nothing left to fill my glass with.

I was glad that I had such a devastating hangover the next day, because it made the parting easier. I was too sick to care whether I had done the right thing or not. I was in an army truck with my kitbag beside me and I could not bear to look back at KGV. I hoped they'd stay there for the duration of the war and that Japan would keep out of it.

I was at an AIF convalescent camp near Malacca for I was returning to Australia with a party of medically unfit soldiers, most of them well over thirty-five years of age. (Infantry rankers over that age, if they led sedentary civil lives, were no use in the tropics. They cracked up every time.) Malacca was one of the most historical places in Malaya and still had traces of the Portuguese who captured it under Albuquerque in 1511. Poor Malacca!—it changed its nationality like a chameleon. Portuguese in 1511; Dutch in 1641; British in 1795; Dutch again in 1818; British again in 1824; Japanese in 1942; and another change pending.

In took weeks to get home. The camp at Malacca, another camp in Singapore where I celebrated a gloomy thirty-ninth birthday, a Dutch ship to Fremantle, another camp in Perth, and an interstate steamer to Sydney. And then through Sydney Heads at night with the city blazing with lights. Home again!

An impatient night aboard the steamer and then a military doctor at the Showground saying: 'Your heart is too fast. Is that why you were sent back?'

'My heart's like that because I'm waiting to see my wife and children,' I said with a grin. 'I'm not a medical case; my firm asked for my release.'

'I didn't know they could do that,' he said.

'Neither did I,' I said. So, it had begun already. Would I have to spend the rest of my days making involved explanations? Perhaps that was what Dusty Rhodes had meant.

It was a puzzling metamorphosis getting back into civvies again. It was like going into a new world. Australia seemed completely remote from the war. I pledged myself never to forget the loneliness and discomforts Jack and the boys were undergoing in Malaya. I slept in a warm, comfortable bed in a kind of trance and ate food that was the food of the gods to me. It was unbelievable that there was no totalitarian sergeant in the house to order me about; only Molly, sweet

mistress that she was! In the streets the sight of an MP made me slightly guilty as if I was AWL.

And yet it *was* terribly easy to ignore realities after a while. Soon good food, beer, pretty women and unlimited leave—the things we dreamt recklessly about—became commonplace and unimportant. The same eligible young men I met before we left Australia now met me on a civilian footing, although the gulf had widened more and more on my part. Gone the slightly uncomfortable defensive attitude in the presence of a uniform when they said, 'I'm joining the AIF myself soon', or 'I've put in for a job in the Navy'. Apparently the right kind of job hadn't turned up, and, of course, it would be too unutterably foul to enlist as an ordinary infantry private.

I understood after a few weeks how easy it was for a civilian to become complacent. Nothing had disturbed the even tenor of the civilian's way of life. I found many who confessed frankly that they were perfectly prepared to do their part when things got bad enough for the government to direct them to the fighting services. In the meantime they didn't see why they should offer to endure all the discomforts and physical dangers of service life. The voluntary system again!

In Malaya we frequently read eulogies of the home front and heard with some bewilderment that in the end the war would be won on the home front. It was a shock to come home and find that a large part of this boosted home front seemed utterly indifferent to the effort that was required of it in a 'total war'. I was sickened, as I had been in the last war, by the recruiting meetings in Martin Place. Now, more than twenty years later wounded men were being shoved up on a platform again to appeal for help for their mates overseas. There was something nauseating in the fact that a man had to parade his wounds for that purpose, with bands to play martial music. The same apathetic response; the same half dozen youths, in sheepish exhibitionism, going on to the platform to spasmodic clapping from the crowd. But I remember one sergeant from Tobruk, after his pleading for reinforcements had left the crowd unmoved, exclaiming angrily: 'You'd better come in with us now, lads, because after this war *we're* going to run this country!

. . .

It was appalling to experience the complacency and smugness and to realise, after a while, that perhaps I was getting smug again myself. I loved the comfort and newly won personal freedom, but I hated the fact that I had to associate myself with everything I had rebelled against more than a year before. I was selfishly glad to be out of the

army—and wanted to be back in it again! Dusty Rhodes had been right. I did not think I could stand the home front atmosphere very long. I sneered at my allegedly 'essential' job. When I looked around at some of the other 'essential' young men I despaired for my country. Then I saw in a sudden flash of understanding that the really essential Australian men were not here but overseas, dying and being maimed and blinded and undergoing the most hideous sufferings. What an intolerable thing that these men, and their unborn children, should be lost to us, and that the others should survive. It was not survival of the fittest; it was death of the fittest. But not all of them. Some would survive, and I hoped the Tobruk sergeant's wish would come true—they would run the country under the principles for which they had offered their lives. Amongst the welter of selfishness and greed and absolute callousness of the 'blood marketeers' there was still much nobility and courage and probity, and after many days these good qualities would triumph over the evil.

For three months I enjoyed stolen bliss with Molly and the children. It was stolen because deep inside me I knew Dusty Rhodes had been right and that I was AWL. Well, sooner or later the celestial MPs would catch up with me. In the meantime home was incredibly, shatteringly beautiful. I was listening to Alistair talk for the first time. I took Carol to school in the morning. I planted French beans in the garden and silver beet. I had beers at the Rose Bay pub. I went surfing at Bondi. I didn't have to go to church parade on Sunday morning if I didn't want to. *I had breakfast in bed!*

My brother, John, who was a colonel in the Army, asked me about the defences of Malaya.

'Just let them try to take it!' I said boastfully. 'One of our fellows is worth six Japanese. The air over Singapore is black with aeroplanes—vicious-looking Brewster Buffalo fighters. Anyhow, they tell me Japanese pilots have got a blind spot in one eye. Believe me, John, Singapore's impregnable all right. Big guns pointing out to sea—they'll never get it *that* way.'

'What about tanks?' he asked.

'You couldn't use tanks,' I scoffed. 'If you could only see the country! You couldn't get a tank through the jungle or a rice field. All they could do would be bring them down the roads. And what do we do? The roads are all narrow and winding with perfect sites for anti-tank guns. All you do is wait around one of the corners and knock 'em out one by one! It's easy! Don't you worry, old boy, about Malaya;

we've got it sewn up as tight as anything can be sewn up.'

You see, I had fallen into the same trap as so many other people, and I believed it all implicitly at the time. But being only a private how could I know of the shams and the complacency and the fake racial superiority behind the 'impregnable' fortress?

Three months later I bought a special edition of the paper as I got into the tram at Rose Bay to go to the office. Pearl Harbour attacked! The Philippines attacked! Malaya attacked!

So it had happened at last. The most monstrous betrayal in history, but there it was. The 2/19th might be fighting even now. They'd be down near Mersing and they'd be conning those maps we drew of the jungle. They'd be straining their eyes across the China Sea for a Japanese invasion fleet. At last the waiting was over for them and the 8th Division would be on their toes eager to get to grips with the foe.

And now I would have to go back to that cursed country just when home was so stupendously beautiful. I would remember those twelve weeks for the rest of my life. Perhaps I could pretend it had never really happened; just a dream and I would wake up on my stretcher in KGV at Seremban. For go back I must; it would be impossible to stay in Australia while the boys went into action without me. They meant more to me than anyone else in the world. If I couldn't get back in the army, I just wanted to be around to share something of it with them. Otherwise I would reproach myself for ever, as Dusty had said I would.

It had to be done quickly before my own resolve weakened. I cabled London offering to go to Malaya as their war correspondent. It was only a matter of hours before Reuters' reply came to the effect 'Get there as quickly as you possibly can'. Pleading, begging, bullying the airline companies. Telephone calls to Canberra for a priority. Browbeating the taxation people for a clearance. Passport in a hurry. No chance on the planes; what about boats? Too slow, the war may be over before it gets there. Cables from London: 'When's Mant leaving?'

Impatient days – then success. There's a seat for you in the KNILM plane leaving on 19 December. I'd lost only eleven days. Gosh, won't Jack get a surprise when I barge in on them again!

10

Flight to Singapore

I said goodbye to Molly and the children for the second time. Henry Stokes, who had joined Reuters in London the same day as I did in 1931, was going on the same plane as a representative of the ABC. We had decided to spend the night at the Australia Hotel, where the KNILM car would pick us up at some ungodly hour the following morning.

It was a dismal farewell. We tried to be cheerful, but the memory of the first farewell was still with us. I kept assuring her it would be vastly different as a war correspondent. I went in and kissed Carol and Alistair, who were asleep; in the morning they would probably think I was some kind of a commercial traveller. Then the parting could not be delayed any longer. We clung to each other tightly at the door. The last thing she said was: 'Don't be too altruistic, Jimmy. *Don't miss the last boat*. Promise me you won't do that if it comes to the worst.'

They were prophetic words as it turned out.

'I promise,' I said.

Then I picked up my suitcase and walked down the path to the gate, and I did not look back.

On the way into town a flood of self-reproach engulfed me. What a fool I was to be doing this sort of thing again when I didn't have to. I felt utterly, utterly miserable. I had a melancholy feeling that I was tempting Providence too much this second time. I was convinced I would never come back. Perhaps it was still the dengue fever working in me, or perhaps it was just stupid self-torture. Then I knew there

was nothing else I could do, and that made me more miserable than ever. It seemed like mock heroics, but that was how it affected me.

Henry and I were not the only correspondents who had bullied their way into that KNILM air liner. At dawn the next morning there was Geoffrey Tebbutt, who was flying to Batavia for the Australian Associated Press—as he put it jokingly, 'To wait for you fellows when you get kicked out of Singapore'. He did not realise that he was to see us again under exactly those circumstances in less than two months.

I had never flown before. I had as great a horror of aeroplanes as I had of thunderstorms. When we got to the aerodrome I experienced an overwhelming temptation to cut and run before it was too late. Heights petrified me at any time and I wasn't convinced by the story that an aeroplane trip would cure the phobia.

At last we got into the plane and attached our safety belts. As I strapped it round my waist I knew that that action settled my resolve once and for all. There was no going back now. The motors roared; the great DC3 bumped along the runway; and then we were in the air. I was sweating like a pig. My hands were glued to the arms of my seat and I stared straight in front of me. We were circling over the aerodrome and swinging out towards the harbour.

'Have a look!' urged Henry. 'It's the loveliest sight imaginable!'

I looked out of the window and down at the blue harbour below and the tops of toy houses. It made me physically ill and I sweated more than ever. I felt that if the safety belt wasn't round my waist I would smash my way through the plane and leap over. The same compelling urge gets me on top of a high building or on a mountain, and I could see that flying was not going to cure me. I don't think I took my eyes off the inside of the cabin more than half a dozen times during the next two and a half days. Seasoned air travellers will laugh at my reaction, but there it was and I am not ashamed to admit it.

The whole journey was a horrible nightmare, and I laugh now as I remember what a perfect ass I was then. Flying at great heights gave me a fantastic feeling of unreality. I just could not believe that this machine I was in was nearly 20,000 feet above the ground. It did not seem to be moving but simply suspended in the air. I could see the bright silver wing on my side of the cabin perfectly steady and apparently immobile. Then it would give a sudden lurch as the plane was caught in a pocket of air. Great clouds suddenly pushed like pillows into us and we climbed even higher. This put me in a new panic. Hiding from thunderstorms all my life, now I was going to be hurled

straight into the very heart of one. Blimey! I clutched the seat tighter than ever, waiting for a red streak of lightning and a colossal crash of thunder.

The worst fright I got was when we made our first landing at Charleville. We suddenly dropped down, and in doing so the loss of altitude made me completely deaf. Nobody had warned me about this. Suddenly everything was deathly silent. Before there had been the steady drone of the motors; now my ears seemed clogged and the inside of the cabin was silent as the grave. I looked around the cabin; nobody seemed in the least perturbed. I had leapt to the conclusion that the motors had failed and that we were going to make a forced landing. A light flashed at the forward end of the cabin: '*Please Adjust Safety Belts*'. That confirmed it for me. Nobody knew that my own safety belt had never been taken off since we left Sydney. I thought: 'Well, it has ended pretty quickly and I was a damned fool anyway'.

And then the plane was suddenly moving terrifically fast as we neared the ground. It was skimming the brown earth, and we were down to a normal landing. I got out, shaking, and pretended to Henry that it was all in the day's work to me. How much did I fool him? I don't know. These physical fears: it is not the actual fear that bothers those afflicted by them, it is the tremendous attempt not to let other people know the extent of the fear.

It was blisteringly hot at Cloncurry. I staggered out of the plane; rushed to a galvanised iron latrine; vomited my insides out. I had eaten nothing all day and was sick in mind and body. I experienced again the terrible temptation to say, 'I can't go on; really, I can't go on. Just leave me here and even if people despise me for the rest of my life, I am going to stay here'. But of course I didn't. I climbed into the plane again and strapped the safety belt as tightly as I could round my waist. The plane lifted again and my stomach heaved. I slouched in my seat and tried to sleep.

We stayed overnight at Darwin, soon to be shattered by the Japanese. Then it began all over again. I steeled myself once more to look over the side, but there was the same panicky sickness and the same overpowering urge to fling myself overboard. We began the flight over the Timor Sea.

There was a pleasant and unexpected surprise waiting for me at Koepang. It gave one a surge of national pride to see, as we landed, AIF troops guarding the airfield. There was an anti-tank detachment there, and I asked one of the chaps did he happen to know Bombardier Ted Connor, my oldest friend. To my astonishment he said that Ted

was in his troop and dashed off to find him. Ted was more astonished than I was. He scarcely expected to see me dropping from the skies. It was a splendid reunion, and it bridged the years of separation that had drawn us apart. I could give him first-hand news of his mother and sister and he was affectingly grateful. We were at Koepang less than half an hour, but it was a heart-warming experience for us both. As the whole world knows, Ted and his companions were later to put up a magnificent and inspiring fight against the Japanese and to hold them at bay in the mountains for months on end.

The plane took off again. On our way we flew over more airfields with one or two Hudsons on them. It did not look very promising from the aerial point of view. I wished more than ever that I could conquer the heights complex because in one quick glance over the side as we neared Bali, I glimpsed a scene of indescribable beauty. Underneath us were opalescent seas splashed with light greens, dark greens and mother-of-pearl blues. Dark mountains sliced sharply to the water's edge and clouds softly beheaded the mountain tops. A fishing boat, looking from our high eminence like a toy boat in a bathtub, was sailing serenely out to sea with a thin ribbon of white lace in its wake.

There were brief halts for refuelling at Bali (where to my disappointment the lovely Balinese girls wore modest jackets) and at the Dutch naval base of Sourabaya. And then on to Batavia, where we spent the night and changed into another plane. Batavia was blacked out, but it was still a happy carefree city and crowds of Javanese jostled one another in the busy streets.

Next morning we climbed into a 10-seater Douglas for the last run to Singapore. Only, instead of ten passengers, there were twenty. Amongst them were two young girls who were going to rejoin their fiancés in Singapore. When you think that this was 21 December and the Japanese were already striking down the Malayan Peninsula, it seems incomprehensible that the authorities should have permitted two young girls to return to Singapore for such a purpose. This was the time, if evacuation had been decided upon, when the authorities in Malaya should have been doing their utmost to get women and children out of Singapore, not into it. I enjoyed this hop best of all; I lay on a pile of mailbags and went to sleep.

On the last lap of the journey the curtains were drawn so that we could not see the secret defences of Singapore. It was supposed to be the most dangerous part of the journey, and the plane seemed to get along a lot quicker for that reason. But nothing happened, and

an hour or two later—two and a half days since we had left Sydney—we came down to a landing on the big civil airfield a few miles out from Singapore city.

Waiting for us—and by us I mean Henry Stokes and myself—was Kenneth Selby-Walker, general manager for Reuters in the Far East. Since I had last seen him on the Reuter desk many years ago in London, he had grown a long black beard. He looked like General Balbo. He had got himself into the news a fortnight before during the first bombing of Singapore on 8 December. The lights of the city were blazing at the time ('it can't happen *here*'), but when Kenneth set off on a bicycle to rush through a message to London, by then somebody had told somebody else to blackout the city. And a bomb had gone off just in front of him and pitched him off his bike. Kenneth, at the best of times, does not enjoy good eyesight. But he picked himself up (the bicycle was wrecked), dashed into the bomb crater, dragged himself out of *that*, and in due course lodged his message. If Reuters weren't 'first' that time it wasn't Kenneth's fault.

I stayed with Kenneth and his charming and talented wife Emma, for a night and gathered together the scanty equipment a war correspondent needs in the tropics. Emma was a first-class artist; her oil paintings of Bali were splendid. She was doing a war job under Mr Duff Cooper at what all Singapore called the 'Duff Coopery'.

Singapore hadn't changed much since I had last seen it. Robinsons, the big store, showed visible bomb damage. The city smelt the same, especially near the river. Raffles, to which I was refused admittance as a private soldier, welcomed me with open arms now that I was a temporary gentleman. Raffles was a very shabby and overrated hotel, but it was the social hub of Singapore. It symbolised many of the things that contributed to Malaya's downfall, but it was certainly lively and expensive.

The war correspondents, and they were pouring into Singapore from all directions, were under the control of a British Army Public Relations unit. The unit's initials were SPRO, rudely altered by some of the boys to ASPRO. I always found the staff helpful and obliging and I think the real headaches came from the ostrich-like attitude of the military command in handing out news, and from some of the Singapore press censors. Once a censor changed the word 'poignant' in one of my dispatches into 'sad'.

There was an advanced headquarters of ASPRO which moved according to the situation at the front. Sometimes it had to move mighty quickly. The unit had three fast staff cars and a couple of trucks,

including a film truck with a specially constructed roof to carry a movie and equipment. Advanced headquarters at this time was at Kuala Lumpur, a long way behind the front. But this was only a temporary location and the unit was preparing to move north. I just managed to make it by catching the train to KL on the night following my arrival in Singapore.

Advanced headquarters was in charge of Captain Henry Steel, seconded from a Staffordshire regiment and with Middle East war experience. Henry was one of those cheerful young Englishmen with a certain 'je ne sais quoi'. Besides that, he had lashings of courage. If you wanted to get as near to the front as possible, Henry was the man to take you there. He revelled in it. He was never happier than astride the unit's motorbike, his blue forage cap stuck jauntily on the side of his head, charging up the road looking for a good story for us.

When, on occasions, the Japanese came on faster than we were going back, Henry would say briskly, 'Come on, chaps, it's time we beat a hasty!' Henry Steel managed the advanced unit right through the Malayan campaign, and was one of the last men to leave Java. I have never heard of a war correspondent in Malaya who had anything but admiration and affection for him.

11

War in the Jungle

IT was Christmas Eve, 1941. A sense of dreadful unreality hung over the Malayan countryside as we drove towards the main western fighting zone along the Perak River, near Kuala Kangsar. The countryside was deserted and silent in the heat as we passed through it and it seemed fantastic to think that not far north men were engaged in fierce hand-to-hand fighting. It was a bitumen road, winding narrowly between forests of trees and rubber estates, and soon we kept a sharp lookout for enemy aircraft. For mile upon mile we passed through the deathly silence and saw European bungalows and clubs, desolate and empty.

As we pushed further north, past Tanjong Malim, we began to meet convoys of army transport taking back wounded and caught up with convoys taking up supplies and ammunition. And presently we came upon the head of a thin stream of Chinese refugees impassively moving back. There were wrinkled old women with babies slung over their backs, carrying heavy burdens in wicker baskets on long bamboo poles. They trudged along the road in the hot sunshine and did not even look around as we shot past. Others streamed down the road with their household belongings piled high on rickshaws and ox drawn carts. Motor cars were lying upturned in ditches where they had gone off the narrow road. Every now and again we passed some of the unsung heroes of the Malayan campaign—the men who drove with stoical patience great lumbering steamrollers right down the Malayan Peninsula. Day after day the steamrollers trundled down the road at a couple of miles an hour until they reached Singapore. There were train crews, too, including many Australians, who worked the railways to the end

and have never received their proper due.

That day we got as far north as Ipoh, important tin-mining centre, which was just about to fall to the Japanese. As we drove into the town I saw the first dead man I had ever seen in war. He was a Chinese and he lay spreadeagled near a bridge. Death was to become a common sight afterwards but never commonplace. There were still some Chinese and Indians in Ipoh. They were there to loot and gathered outside shops protected by big wooden barricades. Small parties of British soldiers were also in the town systematically breaking into shops and smashing thousands of bottles of liquor. It was the first sign of an organised scorched earth policy. It was a study in human psychology to watch the natives preparing to break into a shop. Inherent timidity and fear of authority held them back until suddenly one man would move forward. Then chattering, shouting and gesticulating, the whole crowd would storm the shop, clawing and kicking at the wooden framework. They broke up again when a British soldier with a Tommy-gun threatened them.

We drove to the railway station to meet a scene of utter devastation. Two days before the Japanese had bombed an ammunition train standing there. The explosion shattered the countryside for miles. Billows of curdling black smoke and scarlet flames were still spilling out from two oil tanks which had also been hit. We walked into the shell of the Majestic Hotel to find that miraculously much of it had escaped damage. The main lobby was strewn with papers and debris, but the hotel register was still sitting on a counter. A Mr Jones was the last name in the book. Al Noderer, of the Chicago *Tribune*, pottering about amongst the wreckage near the station, picked up a perfectly good bottle of beer and an undamaged packet of Christmas crackers!

Somewhere along the road we came upon a British battery of 25-pounders getting into position near some trees. The men, stripped to the waist and glistening with sweat, were manhandling the fat rubber tyres of the gun carriages through the mud. There was a British major whom I shall never forget. He was tall and lanky and had buck teeth. He always seemed to be laughing, and for some reason or other he reminded me of Edgar Wallace's unforgettable character 'Bones'. We seemed to come across that major all down the peninsula, and he was always laughing and always absolutely unperturbed. How that man loved his 25-pounders! He told us they were the greatest guns in the world, and when he put his hand on one of them you could see that he loved it almost like a woman. I never learnt his name, but as Al Noderer said, he was 'a great guy'.

We went back to Kampar for the night and took over a bungalow that had belonged to a Frenchman. It was beautifully furnished with a magnificent radio set. There was a cellar, too, but there was nothing in it. Near the Frenchman's bungalow was a European Club. There wasn't a soul in Kampar, but a Chinese 'boy' in a white suit still stayed behind because nobody had told him to get out. I'll go back there some day and settle up for the bottle of Scotch whisky I signed for. The 'boy' insisted on somebody signing a chit for it. He had disappeared the next day.

On Christmas Day one of the war correspondents cooked a doubtful kind of bully-beef stew. We washed it down with liquor signed for at the club. Afterwards Al Noderer produced the packet of Christmas crackers he had picked up at Ipoh. We put on absurd paper caps and sang 'Auld Lang Syne', and Norman Fisher, of Fox-Movietone News, took our photographs. It was the most peculiar Christmas I had ever spent and it got more peculiar afterwards.

As we were piling our belongings into the cars and trucks after lunch preparatory to moving off, there was a shout of '*Aircraft!*' Two Japanese bombers came swooping over Kampar. Apparently they had seen our transport for they came straight towards us. I've never seen men scatter so quickly as we did. I raced with Al Noderer towards some shrubbery at the back of the bungalow, panting urgently as I ran, 'I've never been bombed before. What do you do?' 'Get down on your stomach and stay there!' said Al tersely, as he flung himself to the ground underneath a tree. I flung myself down near him; instinctively covered my head with my hands. I could feel my heart pounding against my chest. What will it feel like to have a few machine-gun bullets plugging into my back? I'm taking it better than I thought. I'm not in a panic but I'm horribly scared. I suppose there'll be a hell of a noise when the bombs drop. Here it comes! I can hear the whistle so it must be close.

Down came a couple of bombs. I was scarcely conscious of the noise though there must have been plenty of it, because the concussion shook the tree above us. It was all over very quickly. Somebody shouted out, 'It's all right, chaps! They've gone!' The next thing I heard was Al roaring with rage, 'We've been lying on a garddamned ants' nest! The little so-and-sos are crawling all over me!' We scrambled to our feet, and for the first time I was also aware that I had been bitten by ants. I was shaking at the knees when I stood up. It was the first time in my life that anybody had tried to kill me. I was glad I hadn't panicked; but I was frightened. Anybody who says he isn't frightened

under bombing is either a freak of Nature or a complete liar. Most people say that the more they are bombed the less frightened they are. It wasn't so in my case. The more I saw of it the less I liked it . . . Throughout this little affair only one man had not taken refuge on the ground. He was Norman Fisher, who stood up with his movie camera and got some magnificent shots of a bomb actually falling from one of the Japanese planes and the subsequent explosion. Somebody ought to write a story about war cameramen some day.

We didn't wait to see if the Japs came back; we got into the cars and got out of Kampar as quickly as we could.

From then on, as we moved back in the inexorable retreat towards Singapore Island, we spent our days dodging Japanese bombers. By now the Japanese had complete control of the air at the front, although once we saw a thrilling dogfight over Yong Peng. There are nearly always clouds in the Malayan skies and they made excellent and disconcerting cover for aircraft. As we drove along the narrow roads with a slit of sky above, every man in the cars became a 'spotter'. Half a dozen times a day there would be a cry of '*Aircraft!*'; the Malay driver would bring the car to a paralysing halt; doors would be flung open; and we would bolt into the rubber trees beside the road. The Japanese planes came sliding out of the clouds when you least expected them and were on you almost at once. Bombs thudded down and machine-gun bullets pinged through the trees. Cars passed us at times literally riddled with bullets and all glasswork shattered.

Henry Steel took us as close to the front as he dared without earning official disapproval. Once he, with Harry Standish, of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, riding pillion behind the motorbike, almost ran into a Japanese advance guard at a bridge in Perak. They beat the quickest hasty in the unit's history.

We interviewed generals, brigadiers and colonels at their headquarters. They were all extraordinarily frank and gave us a true picture of the tactical situation. Much of it could not be printed for security reasons. It was only when we got back to Singapore that we met evasion and half-truths and such ingenious but pathetically transparent phrases as 'a successful disengagement of our forces'.

Many times we came across the 2nd Battalion Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders and their lean-faced commander Lieutenant-Colonel Stewart. There was something tremendously inspiring about these Scotsmen, and they fought from one end of the peninsula to the other almost to the last man. We met some magnificent Indian troops, including

my old friends the Sikhs, who fought according to their tradition. I remember one young Indian officer who looked like a god; I have never seen before or since such an arrestingly aristocratic and beautiful face. And one day we nearly took to the rubber when a truckload of Mongol-eyed soldiers suddenly swung round a corner on to us as we sat by the roadside. They were Ghurkas with knots of black hair on their heads and they grinned at us as they passed.

We heard first-hand some unbelievable 'escape stories' until they became so frequent that we did not bother cabling them. One day on the west coast we came across four British officers with long, unkempt beards and ragged uniforms. They had just been landed by a naval patrol ship after twelve days of hair-raising adventures. The four had joined forces in an attempt to reach the coast after being separated from their units in confused jungle fighting near the border of Thailand. They had one compass and no maps and they spent days groping their way through the dense jungle, dodging enemy troops. The only food they had for five days was a few handfuls of rice, but finally they struck the coast and found an abandoned Chinese sampan. They managed to navigate the sampan towards Penang and reached it just in time for a big Japanese air-raid. They hid in Penang for a day and then took to the open sea in the sampan again. Six days out from Penang they were sighted and picked up by a British naval vessel on Christmas Day. 'They gave us a bottle of whisky and wished us a Merry Christmas,' said one of the officers. 'All we want to do now is to get some new kit and rejoin our units.'

One other escape story is worth recording. It concerned seven Ghurkas who were cut off in the severe fighting around the Slim River. Ten days later they reported back, grinning, to their battalion, after having covered 200 miles. During that time they had been captured no fewer than five times by the Japanese and each time they escaped. In the last break for liberty, they swam a wide river and then dressed in full view of the Japanese, who did not take the slightest notice of them. There were many other escape stories just as strange.

January saw 'successful disengagements of our forces' a nightly affair. The Japanese were infiltrating down the west coast, and apparently our generals could devise no counter measures except a constant straightening of the line right across Malaya. The British and Indian troops were showing signs of physical exhaustion after weeks of unrespited battle. There were no reinforcements in sight and no chance of a rest. They were always on the move day and night. After a day of persistent air bombardments there was little chance of sleep after

dark and the jungle and rubber country was nerve-racking at night. The Japanese would let off firecrackers in an attempt to draw counter-fire and so pinpoint our positions, and there was always a feeling that small parties of Japanese soldiers with Tommy-guns and mortars were padding through the shadows of the trees in sandshoes. In the morning the Japanese might be behind you instead of in front of you. They were audacious and fanatical and flushed with success.

Indian drivers were falling asleep at the wheel with fatigue as the convoys wound like a fat snake along the roads. The roads were choked with convoys and the time came when the drivers were so tired that they didn't care whether the regulation distance between trucks was observed or not. When a bomb straddled the road the whole line of trucks had to come to a halt while the bomb crater was filled in. Japanese bombers did not neglect the opportunity. Red Cross trucks, ammunition trucks, water trucks, food trucks. Malaya was crammed with motor transport. The food problem was almost insoluble. The British ate one kind of food. The Indians all ate different kinds of food and had to get it. The Japanese carried a little bag of rice that lasted him for days; he lived off the country as he marched through it; therein lay the secret of his bewildering mobility and speed. Everything our soldiers ate had to be transported to them by road. There was nothing growing in the country that they could eat and there was dysentery and other diseases in the running streams. Back and back they went towards the sea down a peninsula which has been described as hanging from the greater peninsula of Indo-China like the tail of a possum. Miles behind the line squads of Indian sappers were systematically laying charges on every bridge on the road, ready to be blown up when the troops passed through. The Indians would step aside as we drove over, and there was something dreadfully dispiriting to see them take up their task again.

We drove back to Kuala Lumpur to replenish the unit's supplies and reached there the day after it had received its first big bombing. The bathroom annexe of the famous 'Spotted Dog' Selangor Club had received a direct hit, and one of the only two articles I souvenired (which is a polite form of looting) in Malaya was a club bath towel of which I was sorely in need. Daisy-cutter bombs had fallen plumb on the club cricket-ground, and a swarm of natives were gathered curiously around the small craters from which the bombs' contents had ripped along the grass, giving them the appearance of spoked wheels. On a hill overlooking the town we saw a house utterly shattered and a mound of earth where there had once been a slit trench. It had

received a direct hit and it was now a grave of an officer. He had taken shelter there during the raid and he was still there, we were told. Nobody seemed to be bothering about digging him out.

One incident will illustrate the curious mentality of a certain type of British civilian in Malaya. One of the banks had also been hit and business, we were told, was being conducted at the private house of one the bank officials. Henry Steel had an account at the bank, and we were short of money. We drove to the official's house on a hill to see what could be done about it. Unfortunately it was after banking hours and the official was resting from his arduous labours and enjoying a *stengah* with a lady friend and another man. Henry went inside, saluted, and explained that he had just come from the front. Could the official oblige him by cashing a cheque for a small amount? I didn't hear the conversation myself, but when Henry came out white-faced and angry, I gathered that the official had testily resented the intrusion on his privacy and had refused point-blank and rudely to do anything until the following morning. It seemed that this man was accustomed to having his *stengah* at this time of the day and such a minor thing as a war was not going to interfere with it. As for offering Henry, a British officer, a drink, such a thing never entered his head. It was the only occasion on which I have seen Henry really angry. Of course, all Malayan officials and civil servants were not like this.

Not many days later we watched the death agonies of Kuala Lumpur, queen city of the Malayan Peninsula and the greatest prize the Japanese had yet captured. We drove into the town on the day of its evacuation, and of all the fantastic scenes I saw in Malaya the fall of Kuala Lumpur was the most fantastic of all. In many ways it was the most tragic because with the fall of Kuala Lumpur, the heart fell out of Malaya. It was a lovely town and the Europeans loved it genuinely and many women wept as they took the last train to Singapore. The end of Kuala Lumpur was the end of Malaya as we knew it and the end of an epoch. From the materialistic point of view not many tears need be shed over it, but from the sentimental and human point of view it was heart-rending in the extreme and you could not but feel a flood of sympathy for the victims of it. Without doubt Malaya fell that day, and from then on it was merely a question of time before the whole structure collapsed.

There were two groups of native refugees in Kuala Lumpur that day: one group was trying to get out of the town and the other group was trying to get into the town to share in the wholesale looting. The city was littered with wreckage and the shouts of excited natives

were punctuated with louder detonations as British and Indian troops destroyed bridges and public utilities. The city was too big to police properly at this stage and looting was rife. The big stores were wide open and natives staggered out carrying rolls of silk and cotton, sewing machines, radios, gramophones, perambulators, bedding, tinned food, toupees, women's hats and frocks. Half of the stuff they looted was absolutely useless to them, but the looting bug had them in its grip.

We found ourselves at the hospital, and there we met some of the bravest people of all. Two young Indian assistant doctors and some Malay nurses were voluntarily staying behind to look after 150 patients, including fourteen expectant mothers. The doctors were also doing all the cooking for the hospital and burying the dead. One of them said to us, 'What else can we do? We can't leave these sick people in the lurch. We are sure that the Japanese will not harm us. We are not white and we feel the Japanese will be less harsh on us for that reason.' We shook them by the hand and wished them good luck.

We drove out of town and came to the King's House, official home of the British Resident. The superb, close-cropped lawns and gardens where the British elite of Kuala Lumpur had so recently gathered on social occasions slumbered in the hot Malayan sunshine, but there was an air of complete desolation, and out here it was as silent as the grave. The front doors, facing terraced lawns, were locked, but a back door was open and we went inside. There was every evidence that the occupants had beaten a very fast 'hasty', and indeed the High Command had ordered a quick withdrawal after the Japanese landed at Port Swettenham. The King's House had a *Marie Celeste* atmosphere. In one big office, rows and rows of official publications stood in glass cupboards and masses of papers, probably valueless to the enemy, were strewn all over the room. In the dining room news of the Japanese advance had apparently interrupted a meal; plates were still on the table; table napkins were lying on the floor. In the drawing room a half-drunk whisky-and-soda with a soda water bottle three-quarters full stood on an oval rosewood table. Upstairs a woman's light blue evening frock lay on an ironing board, half-ironed. The beds were made in the bedrooms. In glass cases in the drawing room were all sorts of brass and silver articles and other treasures were hanging on the walls. There was one lovely little brass Siamese dancing girl which I could not resist putting in my pocket. I always intended returning it to its owner if I ever met him, but unfortunately I left it behind in Singapore. Looting is an insidious temptation because you can produce the unanswerable argument to yourself 'Well, if I don't take it now, the

Japs will take it tomorrow'. It always made me self-conscious and uncomfortable, but this time I fell because the Siamese dancing girl fascinated me and I thought I would appreciate her more than the Japanese would. Apart from the 'Spotted Dog' bath towel it was the only time I fell from grace. There was a pair of perfectly made tan shoes in Robinsons store in Kuala Lumpur which I eyed enviously several times, but I could never bring myself to souvenir them. I suppose some Japanese officer is wearing them now.

We left the British Residency and drove back into Kuala Lumpur. It was time for us to leave as they seemed to be about to blow the last of the bridges. On our way through town we stopped outside a well-known Chinese store. The proprietor was preparing to leave, and when he saw us he told us to wait and came out with four bottles of Heidsieck 1927 champagne. He said he would sooner we drank it than the so-and-so Japanese. We drove out of Kuala Lumpur and in the abandoned clubhouse of a local golf course smashed the necks of the champagne bottles and drank the vintage wine warm. We were very short of rations that day and hadn't eaten since breakfast, and I remember feeling very 'wuzzy' in the head afterwards. We looked back over Kuala Lumpur from the clubhouse, and saw billows of smoke arising from the railway station and the Majestic Hotel. We heard the sound of explosions as British troops fired the last demolition charges. We all knew with certainty that these were the funeral pyres of Malaya.

The PRO unit could not handle all the war correspondents at once, and so we took it in turns to go to the front. The others 'rested' in Singapore. During my periods of rest I shared a flat with Jim Henry, Singapore manager of Reuters. Jim was a burly, good-natured fellow and nobody could have asked for a more congenial companion. I wasn't very pleased with my efforts as a war correspondent, although I preened myself for some days when a cable came from Buenos Aires saying that my despatches were popular in South America. I was managing to write fairly good descriptive articles of the things I had actually seen, but I found it singularly difficult to give any birdseye picture of the campaign as a whole. Some of the other correspondents, veterans of many campaigns, had this faculty; and, after all, what the public wanted most of all at this time was a picture of the whole situation and an explanation of the puzzling retreat. I did not feel competent to attempt to answer the question and I think my army intelligence training was a distinct drawback. I was censoring my own despatches far too rigorously instead of leaving it to officials who were there for

that purpose. It is the duty of a war correspondent to draw attention to mistakes and official stupidities if he has irrefutable evidence of their existence—*if* he can bully his messages through the censor. I wasn't sure of my ground, and when I learned it was too late.

There wasn't much rest in Singapore these days. Reuters' office was in the Beam Building near the docks, and Jim had a hectic time trying to run Reuters between raids. Jim was very proud of the air-raid shelter he had built on the tennis court near his flat, and it was certainly an impressive-looking affair. There were also slit trenches around the property, but these were usually half-full of water. We spent a lot of time in Jim's air-raid shelter, especially when the moon was at its full. For a while the air-raid warning functioned splendidly and there was plenty of time to reach the shelter before the bombs fell. Later on, when our air observers had to leave Johore, the sequence of events was usually bombs, sirens, bombs, all-clear, bombs. But that was nobody's fault.

Admitting the excellence of Jim's shelter, I always felt much safer in an open trench at the front. There's a horrible trapped feeling in being five feet underground with only a few feet of wet earth over your head. Our shelter was usually full of people, including a completely nerveless middle-aged Australian woman who wore khaki slacks and a tin hat and worked with a first-aid unit. Two or three Chinese *amahs* also sheltered with us, and they were invariably followed into the shelter by one or two dogs. Then there was a young English bride from Penang who had charge of a little girl she had offered to take to Australia when a boat was available. The little girl, poor thing, was frightened when the bombs fell, and whimpered. And there was an American girl, widow of a British officer, who lived nearby. Let us call her Bobbie, which isn't her real name. She was the most charming and intelligent woman I have ever met. She had university degrees in philosophy and languages and wrote the most delightful children's stories. She loved Malaya and loved and understood the Chinese. When the last boat left Singapore with American refugees, they pleaded with Bobbie to go, but her loyalty to the Chinese was too strong. 'We *can't* leave these people!' she said. 'Don't you see, they trust us? We *can't* leave them in the lurch.' So she stayed behind, like the Dutch were to stay behind in Java.

They weren't pleasant, those nights in the shelter, with the little girl whimpering and crying. One night as we moved tardily to the shelter we saw a Japanese plane come down. Nine of them in perfect formation were caught in the searchlight beams and ack-ack shells burst

about them like splashes of orange sealing-wax in the sky. The middle plane of the first three fell out. As it did so the middle plane of the second three moved into the vacant place and the formation flew on with meticulous neatness. The Japanese were good at that sort of thing; their pattern bombing was brilliant and destructive.

When there wasn't a 'flap' on we sat in Jim's big lounge room and listened to the radio. The Japanese had the Penang station going full blast. Some of the propaganda was terrifyingly accurate; some of it was very far from the mark. I've forgotten how many times they 'annihilated' the 8th Division and 'captured' General Gordon Bennett. Our own radio did their best to offset this propaganda. Some day I would like to know who 'John' and 'Michael' were. Two or three times a day the Singapore radio sent out messages to them. 'John,' one of the messages might say, 'if you take a compass bearing of 260 degrees from the old house and walk 500 paces you will come to a big coconut tree. Twenty-paces east from the tree is food and a change of clothing.' Or it might say: 'Michael. Are you listening, Michael? Go downstream from the dam on the river for three hundred paces and you will find what you are looking for under a log.'

I wonder who 'John' and 'Michael' really were?

12

Reunion in Jemaluang

EARLY in January I caught up at last with the 2/19th again. With Ian Fitchett, official Australian war correspondent, and Ronnie Matthews, of the London *Daily Herald*, I drove up the east coast to write a story about the Jamaluang and Mersing sectors where the 22nd Infantry Brigade group was still waiting for some Japanese to fight.

The 2/19th were at Jemaluang. We got there in the late afternoon and the reunion with them was something to remember for the rest of my life. I never saw them again, but some day some of us, I pray, will paint Sydney red when they come marching home again. I paid my respects to Colonel Anderson and other officers in a tent that was the officers' mess. It was an odd sensation being in the officers' mess for the first time, and I suddenly went back to the status of a private again and felt nervous. I saw a couple of batmen gazing at me open-mouthed and I winked at them.

Then, after all courtesies had been observed and Colonel Anderson had plied us with shrewd questions about the situation at the front and Japanese tactics, I went in search of the 'I' section. I found them in foxholes amongst the trees, and Ben, as usual, had the neatest and most elaborate foxhole of them all. Then there was Jack, and we looked in each other's eyes for a moment and grasped hands.

Then he said: 'You *bloody* fool, Gil!'

'That's a nice way to welcome me back,' I said.

'Well, you are! What did you want to come back for? You ought to be kicked from here to Singapore . . . Gee, it's nice to see you again.'

Then they were all around me— Bill and Stan and Alan and Ben and Stuart Burt and the others. I was like a visitation from another world, and I swear there were tears in my eyes as I talked to them. Presently we shoved Stuart Burt away and I brought out from my suitcase a bottle of Scotch whisky and a bottle of gin. It was strictly against orders and maybe because of that they were emptied in approximately seven minutes. They let me do the talking, and I talked and talked in the dusk. I told them what I could about their families and I told them about Sydney. They were hungry for news of home. I told them about Bondi Beach and the Sydney girls in their flimsy summer frocks. They were home-hungry and woman-hungry, which is much the same thing, and they wanted to know not the big things about Australia, but the little things. Whether the pubs still shut at six and whether Maroubra still looked the same and what were the latest tunes they were singing.

One of them said: 'Gosh, it's funny to think that you have been in action before us after all.'

'I've only *seen* it,' I said. 'It's not the same, you know.'

They wanted to know what it felt like to be bombed, for they were still frustrated and champing at the bit. At night they heard formations of Japanese bombers droning overhead on their way to bomb Singapore, but they had not yet been attacked themselves. Their time was to come very soon, although they did not know it.

We talked late into the night and they dosed me with quinine because they were in malaria country, and presently it began to drizzle with rain. I slept beside Jack under a makeshift tent made with a mosquito net and a ground sheet slung on branches. The rain came through in the night and it was pretty miserable, and when we got up in the morning everything underfoot was damp and steamy with heat.

I had to move on in the morning for Mersing. I said goodbye to them all and I never saw them again.

Within a week the 8th Division, or the two Brigade groups that comprised it, were undergoing their baptism of fire in Malaya. Other small groups of Australians had already been engaged, notably the 2/3 Reserve MT, who went down the peninsula from Kedah, AIF commandoes who caused havoc at night behind the enemy lines and in their first exploit shot up a Japanese brigadier, railway personnel, and an armoured car unit— but the AIF's first big-scale action did not take place until we had fallen back to the big railway junction of Gemas, 150 miles north-west of Singapore.

Of the action at Gemas, I have written in detail in another book [*Grim Glory*]. It was a striking success and the Japanese did not relish their first encounter with Australians in war, and suffered heavy casualties. Apart from the military side of it, the Japanese setback at Gemas scotched in the most effective manner fifth-columnist propaganda to the effect that the AIF was being deliberately kept out of the fight because of lack of covering aircraft. This propaganda had been spread amongst British and Indian troops and was wickedly untrue.

Usually enemy propaganda is based on stories that the British 'will fight to the last Australian'; this time it was cunningly reversed to the Australians 'fighting to the last Britisher and Indian'. Moreover the Japanese were flooding the countryside with anti-Australian pamphlets. One of them showed a crude picture of a hand with the artery severed and blood dripping from it. Underneath it was written in Malay, 'Australian very bad man—this is what he does to Malays'. The AIF gave the Japanese their answer at the point of the bayonet at Gemas, and they gave up their position there only when withdrawals on their flank forced their own withdrawal.

And so, one day we war correspondents stood with General Gordon Bennett at his headquarters near Yong Peng and waited anxiously for news of the battle of Bakri and Parit Sulong. Even then we sensed that we were helpless observers of what would go down in military history as one of the most inspiring rearguard actions of all time. The story has already been written in prose and verse and will continue to be written because human courage is a noble imperishable quality.

If the 8th Division was frustrated, no man in it was more frustrated than General Gordon Bennett, whom the Japanese feared and hated, as their many claims to his 'capture' showed. Here was a 'civilian' soldier whose very appearance bespoke his military character. Red-haired, keen-eyed, physically fit, he was a pugnacious realist, intolerant of red tape and hesitancy. He said bluntly what he thought and some of us thought that at times he spoke too bluntly, but he had provocation enough, and he did not pull his punches. He had a fierce, almost arrogant, pride in the AIF troops under his command. He did not think there were any better troops in Malaya, but he was unsparing in his admiration for soldiers like the Argylls. A soldier of the last war himself, he recognised the affinity between Australian and Scottish fighting men. General Bennett was the tough kind of fighter and thinker who is the ideal kind of commander for jungle warfare, and his own personal courage was beyond dispute. The only other operational general in Malaya who impressed a casual observer with the same kind of 'toughness'

was Major-General Keys, of the 11th Indian Division. Naturally, General Bennett did not take me into his confidence, but observing him on many occasions, I should say that militarily and instinctively he was opposed to the retreat policy of the High Command. He was the apostle of attack; he had trained the 8th Division for attack, not defence. Had he been supreme commander in Malaya, I do not know whether he could have forced a different result. I do not think so; because when reinforcements arrived and we may have had even numerical superiority over the Japanese, nearly all these troops were untrained to jungle warfare and conditions and might not have arrived at all for all their courage and stubbornness. His great chance, had he been supreme commander, would have been to retreat more slowly, employing counter-infiltration tactics, and hold up the Japanese until help in the form of modern aeroplanes arrived. He might have succeeded. As it was, he did not seem to know from day to day what troops were under his command, and they were switched with confusing rapidity. For instance, the 2/29th and 2/19th Battalions began the battle of Bakri and Parit Sulong under the command of the 11th Division, and were returned to General Bennett the next day.

We stood there, not many miles away from the bridge at Parit Sulong, while Colonel Anderson won his Victoria Cross; the symbol of the 2/29th (Victoria) Battalion and the 2/19th Battalion and troops attached to them. There was nothing we could do and there was nothing General Bennett could do except send out a party of commandoes to try and recapture the bridge after a newly-arrived British unit had left it uncovered.

Less than 2,000 strong at the beginning, the Australians fought along the Bakri–Yong Peng road for four dreadful days and nights. Surrounded on every side by more than 15,000 of the enemy's finest shock troops, they defied every effort of the Japanese to annihilate them. 'No surrender' was the spur that drove them on. They fought to a standstill the crack 1st Japanese Guards Division, hot with conquest; Nippon's best equipped and seasoned soldiers who had captured Canton like a whirlwind in eight days in 1938.

They were subjected to continuous artillery and mortar fire, dive-bombing and machine-gunning from the air. They smashed their way under fire with axes through miles of jungle roadblocks; blasted Japanese tanks at point-blank range; made bayonet charge after bayonet charge singing 'Waltzin' Matilda'. Colonel Anderson had said: 'It's a case of death or going through, gentlemen. *And we're going through!*'

And they went through. They were given up as lost, but the remnants

went through, and in that dogged retreat saved the British left flank in Malaya and gave vital breathing space to our main army in the centre. Of the two Australian battalions less than 400 came out of it, including 271 officers and men of 2/19th Battalion. We saw some of them as they came in, haggard, gaunt, with festering wounds and feet, but they were still indomitable. Once General Bennett turned to me and said, 'Mant, you're the luckiest man in Malaya'. Lucky? I don't know. Well, lucky, anyway, to have once belonged to such a grand company of men, even if I did not share their Calvary.

A detailed history of the AIF in Malaya is not within the scope of this book; proper recognition for the many units not mentioned here will have to await until an official history is written after the war. I have not enough authentic information regarding actions by other units, and the splendid deeds of the hospital formations, to attempt a chronicle of that nature. Many official records were lost in Malaya. If there are any public misconceptions, however, to the effect that only a part of the AIF were in action in Malaya, they should at once be dispelled. All the AIF played their tragic part, but when whole units, already grievously reduced by casualties, disappear into Japanese prison camps, it is impossible for an unofficial narrator like myself to piece together their various histories. The fact that only eleven decorations have been awarded to members of the AIF in Malaya (six of these to one battalion) illustrates forcibly the extent to which these men have been swallowed up by an unknown fate. It cannot surely be attributed to the fact that they fought in a campaign that failed because there was no failure of individual courage.

So, for the time being, Gemas and Parit Sulong must remain symbols of the AIF in Malaya—Gemas because it was the first real clash in history between Australian and Japanese; Parit Sulong because, under any comparison, it was a rearguard action that has become military history. Other units will have thrilling and proud tales to tell at the proper time.

For instance, there was an engagement on the East Coast that resulted in the Japanese licking many wounds. It is not possible at present to give a clear picture of this action, but from various sources, including a dispatch by Ian Fitchett, Official Australian War Correspondent, I am able to give an outline of it. The action, fittingly enough, began on Australia Day, 26 January 1942.

When the 2/19th Battalion was rushed across to the West Coast in an attempt to stem the Japanese onrush at Muar, the other two

battalions of 22nd Brigade (2/18th and 2/20th) were left kicking their heels in the Mersing area. Sadly enough, they were never given the opportunity to test the great defences they had prepared there, and late in January a plan for their withdrawal to Singapore Island was issued. The 2/20th had been doing great patrol work at Endau and along the river and had made contact with the enemy.

Early on the morning of 26 January it was realised that the two battalions would have to fall back as not only was the enemy heading towards Kluang, but reports had come through that the Japs had got a large convoy ashore at Endau. A rapid conference of leaders decided that the Japanese could not get large numbers of these forces south for twenty-four hours. It was estimated that the enemy had only two regiments in contact with the AIF at Mersing River.

A bold plan on the lines of Colonel Gallaghan's master-stroke at Gemas was drawn up to entice these Japanese into a trap on the road running south to Jemaluang. The 2/20th broke off contact with the enemy during the day and fell back through the 2/18th to the south of the Jemaluang Kluang crossroads. The 2/18th then dispersed with one company in advance of the rest of the battalion, the idea being to allow the Japanese to move in along the road and then to attack with this company. The other companies were placed on the flanks as far as 1,000 yards into the jungle. Artillery and mortars were placed in position and well co-ered.

By dusk all was read , with seemingly an open and unprotected road winding invitingly sout for the Japanese to come along. Late in the afternoon a forward platoon of the 2/18th came on small parties of Japanese beating through the rubber, firing Tommy-guns and shouting. Their role was obvious, an attempt to draw our fire, which would have disclosed the presence of troops. We did not fall into the trap, and the platoon silently withdrew without answering the enemy fire.

At 1.15 a.m. on 27 January the Japanese opened fire from the road on the ambush company of the 2/18th covering it, but again the men would not be drawn into a fight; their role was to let the Japanese pass through into the trap.

Although it was their first time under fire, they maintained perfect discipline, and soon the Japanese, reassured, started to file past them, platoon by platoon, down the dark, tree-lined road. A silent count indicated that a complete enemy battalion was on the road. At 2.20 a.m. the enemy made contact with the company holding the flank on the east side of the road, and our troops joined action. The fighting was severe, but the Japanese were pushed in more compact groups

to make better targets right across the front for the waiting gunners. In the meantime the Japanese had moved an additional party to a flank so that the ambush company was more or less hemmed in on both sides.

At 3.30 a.m. gunners of 2/10th Field Regiment opened fire, backed by mortars. They were trained to perfection point, and got the range from the first shot. Their opening barrage lasted seven minutes, and then they crept forward in distances of 100 yards, phases of fire lasting two minutes, to enable the infantry to advance and keep contact with the Japanese. This went on from 3.30 a.m. to 8 a.m. with the Japanese meeting slaughter at every point to which they turned.

Our infantry advanced 1,000 yards, this time through rubber and jungle, every inch of which was well known to them. The enemy had got six mortars and numerous heavy and light automatic guns through, but these were silenced by the gunners. Japanese casualties were heavy, but unfortunately during the action the 2/18th ambush company was completely cut off and was never heard of again.

Contact with the infantry was broken and the battalion fell back towards Singapore with the 2/20th. They did not meet the Japanese again until the final showdown on Singapore Island.

The PRO unit was beating 'hasty' after 'hasty' now. We were at Kluang with its key airfield and railway station. We lived in a cottage on a hill near the mosque, and each day at dusk we saw seven Wildebeest bombers arrive on the airfield and take off after dark to bomb the Japanese on the coast. They daren't go bombing in the daytime, for they were obsolete and had a speed of about eighty miles an hour and would be mincemeat for Zeros. We got used to the sound of their engines and got in the habit of setting our watches by them. One evening, as we sat having a meal, somebody said, 'Here come the Wildebeests'. Then there was the crash of a bomb and we ran for the doors. I got outside and saw a black Japanese plane; low and almost over my head. Next moment I found myself with my head in a concrete drain about five inches deep, and my behind sticking up in the air, and feeling absolutely ridiculous. I got up and raced for the bush. The nearest bomb fell only about seventy yards from our cottage. We packed and left after that for, in any case, Kluang was just about to be evacuated.

The worst plastering we got was at the Ayer Hitam crossroads, a favourite target for Japanese bombers. We were heading for the turn-off to Rengam and we were marooned there over two and a half hours.

We leapt from the cars and scattered. In my first break for cover I dived into a deep ditch beside the road and fell crash into it amongst three Indian soldiers. I have never seen three men so pop-eyed as they were; I think they thought I was a bomb. We made two or three attempts to regain our cars, but each time the bombers were overhead again. At one stage there were at least sixty of them. I found myself lying beside Ian Morrison, of the London *Times*, under some trees at the top of a rise. Of course, it's perfectly useless lying under trees but they give you an ostrich-like feeling of protection and you feel the enemy can't see you. Suddenly the most ear-splitting din broke out around us—we were lying near a battery of British ack-ack guns, apparently the main target for the Japanese. It was too late to move; we lay there with our fingers to our ears and hoped for the best. When it was all over we found that the rise we had so recently climbed was pitted with small craters from anti-personnel bombs and branches from trees had been torn off. Further up the road was a really big crater and the bomb had just missed one of our fellows who was sheltering nearby.

We were based on Singapore itself now, and the current joke was that you could take a tram or a bus up to the front, write a few stories, and come back in time for lunch. Singapore's ordeal had begun; the bombers were coming over in force now. From 20 January to 25 January formations of 90, 100, and 54 were over the city. You didn't take any notice of alerts or all-clears; the bombs were the only infallible warning. We were moving out to see some troops in Johore when a stick of bombs fell plumb down Orchard Road. One bomb fell in the grounds of a house where we kept our truck. Bomb-blast smashed it to atoms. Yates McDaniell, of the American Associated Press, took shelter in the front entrance to Cyranos, the celebrated Bohemian cafe, and was nearly blown out into the street. We were glad to leave Singapore for the comparative safety of the front that day.

And yet even at this stage, the people of Singapore had a Micawber-like faith in the impregnability of their fortress. They simply could not believe that Singapore could fall. Their absolute faith was almost childish, although militarily the game was up and everyone in the Services knew it. A British division arrived at the docks and Singapore said, 'Now everything's all right!' My heart bled for those sacrificial troops as I watched truckload after truckload of them move up towards the front. What Singapore did not understand was that these boys had been weeks at sea and were utterly unfitted for jungle warfare. Poor

devils, they went into the bush with orthodox training instilled into them, now knowing a Japanese from a Malay or a Chinese, and their doom was certain and inexorable. It might have been a gesture to put new hope in the troops falling back towards the Causeway, or it might have been a political expedient. At any rate, it was a wasted gesture, and somebody else has suggested that General Wavell did his utmost to have that division diverted to Burma. I don't know. In Burma they would have experienced the same bewildering conditions.

Singapore's spirits rose again when some Hurricanes arrived '*Now* we're all right!' Singapore expected the Hurricanes to shoot every Zero out of the sky. But there weren't many pilots in Malaya who could fly Hurricanes. There was difficulty in getting them assembled, for most of the native workmen had fled, and I was told that these Hurricanes were equipped with sand-screens for desert flying. Poor Hurricanes!—too much was expected of them. We could not get enough of them airborne in time. During raids you saw one or two Hurricanes climb vertically into the air, in contrast to the painful spirals of the Brewster Buffaloes, and fly out of the way until the raid was over. It was the only thing to do. The only tactics were to husband our Hurricane resources until we had enough of them to really tackle the Japanese with any prospect of success. But it was too late. Too much, too late, might well be the swan song of Singapore.

One night near the end of January, Jim Henry and I were having a drink at the exclusive Tanglin Club. There were big wooden barricades at the back of the bar, and behind them were a crowd of chaps in khaki uniforms. They were members of the Malayan Local Defence Corps, drawn from the European professional and planter population of Malaya.

I noticed one of them in an officer's uniform trying to attract my attention, and I went across to the barricade. It was Freddie Hilton, secretary of the Sungei Ujon Club in Seremban. We shook hands and I said: 'Come and have a drink with us. I'm not a member, but my friend, Jim Henry, will do the honours.'

'*I'm not allowed to!*' he said. 'None of us is allowed to go into the club proper. We are simply billeted here.'

'But, dammit,' I said, 'surely you as secretary of the Sungei Ujong are allowed in? I can't believe it!'

I won't embarrass Freddie by reporting any more of our conversation, except that I, for one, was angry about something that was not my concern after all. Damn their narrow-minded souls! To think that at

this very moment Singapore was being bombed and this archaic system *still* survived. Couldn't bombs destroy it? . . . At any rate, we took Freddie in almost by force and gave him his drink. Sorry, Freddie, for bringing you into this, but it is important that these things should see the light of day, without in any way underemphasising the courage and the self-sacrifice and the indomitable spirit of so many Malayans.

I went down with dengue again with a temperature of 104.5. Convalescence was not helped by the fact that during raids one crawled out of the bed in Jim's flat, staggered down a flight of stairs on to the tennis court in the rain. Until, in the end, one just lay there or got under a table. Black depression followed in the wake of the disease and I fear I was of little use as a war correspondent. However, I made another trip to the Johore front and saw General Bennett for the last time. Indian sappers were on the Johore Causeway preparing what they could of the great structure for demolition.

When I got back Jim Henry urged me to get out of Singapore while there was time. Kenneth Selby Walker was already established at General Wavell's headquarters in Java. I didn't feel I should leave him to carry on alone. Jim had been one of the ones who believed implicitly in Singapore's impregnability, but now he knew there was no hope. Stout fellow, he was resolved to stay until the end.

'Look here,' he said, 'it would be madness for both of us to be caught here, and it wouldn't suit Reuters. This is my home, and if anyone stays it will be me. There's nothing like that to keep you here, and, anyhow, the other correspondents are making plans to get out. Besides, you're a sick man. Don't be a goat!'

I resisted, but only weakly, because running through my brain was Molly's plea to me not to be too altruistic. I wished I were back in 2/19th so that I could be ordered to stay. Why was I always torturing myself with introspective problems? But this time I was too miserable to care.

Two British destroyers were pulling out for Batavia the following afternoon, and they were prepared to take six correspondents between them. Ian Morrison agreed to join me but changed his mind a few hours before we were due to leave and stayed behind. I found myself driving to the docks with Captain Hooper ('Hoops') and Ray Maley, of the Australian Associated Press, with other correspondents in another car. I felt a dog leaving Jim and told him so as we shook hands. '*Tid' apa*,' he said, or words to that effect. 'They'll be over the Causeway today or tomorrow, and I'd like to be going with you. Bon voyage.'

13

'Tugboat Annie' in 'Bomb Alley'

SINGAPORE was burning behind us as, between raids, we reached the destroyer that was to take us away. She lay there clamped against the wharf, very grey and very fragile-looking.

We saluted the quarter deck and were greeted by a naval officer.

'Hello, chaps! Welcome to Tugboat Annie!'

'How do you mean, "Tugboat Annie"?' said Ray Maley.

'Didn't you know?' said the officer. 'We're towing another destroyer to Batavia. Of course there's *Express*, too. *She's* going to tow a submarine. It ought to be a good story for you.'

It was.

HMS *Express* got away before us for its assignation with the submarine. We just lay there at the docks. To be tied up at the Singapore docks at that stage of the proceedings was like being tied up to the end of the fuse of a time bomb.

HMS *Encounter* was used to it. She lay there and you could tell that it was just another few hours in the perilous life she had led since the outbreak of war. She wasn't a very old ship, HMS *Encounter*, but she had what it takes. If you looked her up in *Jane's Fighting Ships* you'd find she had been completed at the end of 1934. She had a speed of thirty-six knots and her main armament was four 4.7 inch guns. She had steamed since the outbreak of war 175,000 miles without a refit and with scant opportunities of outside assistance for repairs or even boiler cleaning.

There was never time for a refit. You'd get to Gibraltar and ask for one and then a few hours later you'd be ordered somewhere else.

Destroyers were desperately short. HMS *Encounter* was at Narvik, at Crete, at Greece, on the west coast of Africa, and in the Far East. She had thrown green seas contemptuously from her bows on the Atlantic and swept through the blue seas of the Mediterranean under Cunningham. She was well known to Australians on the 'Tobruk Ferry Run'. The Germans had tried to sink her and failed. There were photographs of her down in the wardroom taken at Malta, where they had patched her up after Crete. She was 'bomb happy' was HMS *Encounter*, but they'll never sink us, they said.

'The luckiest ship afloat!' said one of the officers to us.

'I *nearly* got her a refit at Gib. once,' boasted the engineer-commander. 'We were just taking her in and then . . . well, you know . . .'

So there she lay at the Singapore docks, with the Japanese bombers seeking her out with the other ships that lay there. And presently we cast our moorings and slid out almost surreptitiously to a nearby island where another destroyer, crippled by near-misses in the Near East, awaited our assistance.

As the Japanese bombers soared unchallenged overhead, we tied up to her with a steel hawser and began the long haul to Batavia.

Behind us, as the hawser tightened, the fires of Singapore threw up billows of brown and black smoke. We could hear the sound of explosions and the distant falling of bombs and the sound of the sirens.

'*Eight knots!*' wailed the engineer-commander, 'and we did *thirty* at Crete!'

Down in the wardroom Hoops and Ray and I were asking for a whisky-and-soda. The steward got them for us, but he was saying almost reproachfully that the officers never drank anything stronger than lime juice and soda in 'moments like these', when suddenly the alarm bells began to ring.

'Excuse me, sir,' said the steward. The steward's other job was down in the magazine passing up shells to the 4-inch aft guns. Before he disappeared he said in a sort of afterthought: 'That thing behind you there, sir, is the escape hatch. If anything happens you bust it open and crawl out of it. That's if you can open it.'

The three of us sat there alone in the wardroom gazing at the escape hatch. Outside we heard the peculiar *plonk* of bombs hitting the water and dull explosions close enough to rock the destroyer. Louder than that was the ear-splitting din of our own guns. To a landlubber it sounded as if we had received several direct hits.

'I'm going up,' said Ray. 'Don't like it here much.'

'Me, too,' each of us said ungrammatically.

It was better on deck. You lost the tight feeling of claustrophobia. The bitter-sweet fumes of cordite assailed our nostrils. We were even in time to see the Japanese bombers streaking away towards Johore. We saw the burly gunnery officer ('Guns'), stripped to the waist, grinning at his men. We saw the man on the Oerlikon gun wipe the sweat from his face and grin at us. We heard the engineer-commander swearing again, '*Eight knots? . . . Miserable bloody eight knots!*' . . .

We met them all that night for dinner—all except the young commanding officer, who was on the bridge and stayed there throughout the trip. We did not see him until the voyage was over. But in the wardroom that night we ate with Guns and the young Canadian and the others. There wasn't one of them, with the possible exception of the engineer-commander, who was over thirty years of age.

They were the grandest people imaginable. They all had the same cleancut young faces and the same air of cheerful efficiency. They had been through a lot, these boys, but they did not show it. They laughed and pulled each other's legs and you could not imagine that for more than two years death had been around the corner and terror on every side of them. They drank nothing alcoholic at their meal, but we gathered that they made up for it on the rare occasions when they got shore leave. The only time you caught them out was when you talked about England. They dreamt about going home and something came into their eyes when you spoke about it. But mostly we talked about the campaign in Malaya and Java's chances; none of us thought Java had any chance at all. We talked about books and Communism and newspapers. The surgeon was a well-read young cynic with an ironic sense of humour. He took a grave satisfaction in telling us about some of the more gruesome operations he had performed at sea. They were all exactly what you had always expected the men of the Royal Navy to be. They told frightening stories about the perilous naval situation in the Eastern Mediterranean after Crete when there was hardly a serviceable British warship in 'Cunningham's lake'.

We were pretty safe at night. We were slipping at eight knots towards Banka Strait. 'Bomb Alley', they called it. On the Admiralty charts it is a narrow strait with few navigable channels for ocean-going ships. If you look on the map you will see that it is bounded on one side by Sumatra and on the other side by the quite substantial Banka Island.

It's a nasty sort of place to be caught in in the daytime, and the next day we were caught in it. Just before it happened we got a signal from HMS *Express* ahead of us. Guns gave us the gist of it: '*Express* is getting hell bombed out of her,' he said cheerfully, and, turning

to the engineer-commander, said cruelly, 'Can't you get a few more knots out of the old tub?'

I can't repeat what the engineer-commander said.

Dawn came up the next day rather like Kipling's dawn 'outer China'. Across the grey flat seas we could see dimly the coast of Sumatra and closer behind us the shape of the disabled destroyer we were towing. She slewed along behind us so close that we could see the movements of the skeleton crew aboard her.

'It's a funny thing,' said one of the officers as we watched her, 'to think that she never got one direct hit. All she got was near-misses, and look at her now. Absolutely crippled. It tears the guts out of them. Now look at that photograph we showed you last night of *Encounter* at Malta. A bomb right through our deck and *we're* towing *her!*'

The seas were flat calm and muddy in colour. Overhead the skies were glazed with a pale copper-coloured sun. As it rose higher the deck plates became hot to the touch. Although the sun was not blazing as it does in an Australian mid-summer, it was burning and insistent. *Encounter* urged herself through the water with the heavy pull on the steel hawser behind. The captain was still on the bridge. The lookouts scanned the skies and the seas through binoculars. Most of the crew lounged about the deck in shorts and sandals. Guns was having a late breakfast in the wardroom.

We were scarcely conscious of it happening. I can't remember *Encounter* even lurching. At the time I was in the wardroom reading *Vile Bodies* by Evelyn Waugh, which I had found in the destroyer's small library. There was some kind of commotion on deck and we could hear shouting. Guns dropped his knife and fork and fled.

'It's on again!' said Ray, reaching for his tin hat. 'I'm staying on deck this time. Too much like rats in a trap down here.'

A stream of bad language greeted us on deck.

'What's it? More aircraft?' we asked.

'Naw,' growled a rating in disgust. 'The bloody towrope's broke; that's wot it is!'

'Jesus!' said another man in broad Cockney. 'What a place for it to happen!'

'How did it happen?'

'One of those bombs yesterday must've splintered her. One of 'em fell between us.'

'I nearly got the bleeder, too,' said a lad who couldn't have been more than eighteen. 'I was on the Oerlikon. Sent a shell right through his wing. I did.'

'Aw, you're always gettin' 'em, Ted. Don't take any notice of 'im, mister. Happen he'll have plenty more chances today, too. Those swabs'll be round us like flies if they spot us.'

The crippled destroyer was wallowing far behind us because even at our low speed the gap had quickly widened between us. The engineer-commander had dashed below; when he reappeared it was safer to keep out of his way. He was a very angry man.

Then the alarm bells began ringing through the ship again. She was galvanised into activity. The lounging man was abruptly alive and incisive. They moved to their appointed places, as they had moved so many hundreds of times before, in a tearing hurry but in perfect coordination. Suddenly *Encounter* was braced, tense, on guard. Ted was peering along the Oerlikon. Guns was with his crew at the 4-inch gun. The magazine crew were ready to pass up the shells from below. Ray and Hoops and I stood, in tin hat, shorts, a life-jacket and a pair of sandals, in the shelter of a steel awning.

Overhead, far overhead, went a plane. We could just see her as she came out of the dazzle of the sun. Then she was gone again. The signal went up near the bridge—'Unidentified'.

The tension snapped. As easily and as competently as she had jumped to the crisis, *Encounter* relaxed again. The steward took his hands from a shell and began to clear the wardroom table, whistling very much out of tune 'My Old Dutch'.

'Well, boys,' said Guns cheerfully, 'if she was a Jap, we'll be seeing her again. With a few friends, I dare say. If you ask me, and you haven't, I'd say the sooner we fix up that blasted towrope the better!'

'I'm no naval authority,' I said, 'but I was thinking much the same thing myself. How long do you think it will take?'

'Well, that depends, old boy . . . You know, I don't envy you three standing around when there's a flap on. Nothing worse than to have nothing to do. It's bad for your imagination. Y'see, we've all got our jobs to do and it keeps your mind off things. I'd be pretty windy if I had nothing to do.'

It was nice to hear that. I confess I had been eyeing the coast of Sumatra and wondering how far away it was, as the man swims. And wondering whether these waters were as 'shark infested' as the Timor Sea. I guess the other two were thinking the same thing. You can't dive into a slit trench when you are in the navy, and we happened to be standing right over the magazine.

The pair of us lay there, utterly helpless, for four and a half hours.

We rocked gently in the muddy water like a pair of sitting ducks. The other destroyer had had a crazy list in the first place; the abrupt parting from us seemed to accentuate it.

Technically I don't know all the things we did in those four and a half hours to recover that hawser. But I do know there was a suspense throughout it which I have only experienced in an Alfred Hitchcock film. It is beyond my powers to put down in words the length in minutes and seconds of that four and a half hours. Suspense held *Encounter* like a man holding his breath in the darkness. The whole ship was holding its breath. You saw a man stroking his chin reflectively and glancing trowards the skies. You didn't mind fighting it out with the planes when you could swerve and dodge and reduce and increase speed; that way you gave the enemy a run for his money. You didn't mind (although you didn't like it much) facing him when you were travelling at eight knots. Just to be moving was something. But you *did* mind being caught completely immobile on a flat sea. It wasn't comfortable being a sitting duck; you felt you could never shoot a sitting duck again yourself.

We circled back and edged in towards the other destroyer. We got so close we could talk to her through a megaphone. We drew in the splintered hawser with a winch and lengthened it by the addition of a stout rope hawser. We circled again and tried to get it aboard the other ship by rocket. It fell short twice. The third time it sailed on board and we cheered.

It took time to fix everything, and we held our breath as *Encounter* slowly took the strain.

'Better stand back there in case she breaks again, sir,' warned a petty officer.

She broke almost at once. The hawser snapped like a violin string and flapped desolately into the water. The other destroyer fell back helplessly again, still with its forlorn list to starboard.

'*What's that over there?*'

Something was coming out of the sun a long distance away. We could see the man on the bridge focusing on it with his binoculars. Then we saw him put them down and laugh. We saw him laugh and say something to the rating beside. Then we were all laughing and joking with one another. It was a bird; it swept down gracefully on us and swept away again. The boy on the Oerlikon pretended to take aim at it and we laughed again.

Then we sensed there was something wrong with *Encounter* herself. The engineer-commander was peering over the stern, looking more

worried and angry than ever.

Presently they told us what had happened. In breaking for the second time the slack end of the steel hawser had wrapped itself two or three times around our starboard propellor. Just like that . . .

Suspense gripped the ship again. This time there was almost a sensation of doom with it. It seemed impossible that the Japanese could fail to find us. We were nearly as helpless as the other destroyer now. 'The luckiest ship afloat'—you could see in their faces the apprehension as to whether the luck would hold this time. Ships were being bombed ahead of us and behind us; it seemed incredible that we could be overlooked.

They worked with desperate haste. You saw again someone gaze anxiously into the skies and you glanced up swiftly yourself and saw imaginary bombers. Over the side went a naked naval rating in Davis apparatus. He could not stay down very long; another followed him. They came up exhausted and lay down on a shady part of the deck.

We stood watching them. I started to talk to a tall, freckled rating beside me. He wouldn't say much but he certainly had a story. He had been sunk no fewer than three times in this war. The first occasion was when the battleship *Royal Oak* was torpedoed at the beginning of the war. He was posted to the destroyer *Curlew*. She sank under him at Narvik. Next he found himself in HMS *Prince of Wales*.

'That was queer,' he said, expanding a little. 'I was on the pom-poms. When she went down I seemed to go right under her and came out the other side. That wasn't the queer part, though. The pom-pom kept firing under the water. Happen I kept firing it or it fired itself, but there were bullets flying through the water, and I had a job dodging them. Aye, it was queer, all right.'

'How do your mates feel about you being in this ship?' I asked.

He grinned. 'They reckon it's lucky,' he said. 'Blimey, a feller couldn't get sunk *four* times, could he, now?'

'Well, I hope not, anyway. We're certainly lucky the way those Japs are staying away from us.'

We had to give it up in the end. It needed a real diver to release our propeller. We drifted around aimlessly for a while. There was never any suggestion of abandoning HMS ———; our job was to get her to Batavia; we hovered about her ready to offer the protection of our guns if the Japanese did come.

'Good news, chaps,' said an officer coming along from the bridge and breaking the tension. 'The skipper sent a signal to Singapore. *Electra*'s just left; should be here in a few hours.'

'What did I tell you, mister?' grinned the rating beside me. 'Didn't I tell you she was a lucky ship?'

To this day I do not know why the Japanese missed their greatest prize in Bomb Alley that day. Perhaps they saw us from so great a height that our plight was not apparent to them. Perhaps there was indeed a fairy godmother who watched over HMS *Encounter*. At any rate we saw only one other plane that day. She was a big Dornier flying boat, and one of ours. She came from the direction of Sumatra, circled over us, and swung back whence she had come. It was comforting to know that we still had planes over Banka Strait, even if they weren't fighters.

HMS *Electra*, sister ship to *Encounter* and *Express*, came up with astonishing speed. We saw her first, a thin slit on the horizon. She came up fast, and an hour after our sighting of her we saw the muddy cream of her spray at her bows as she sliced through the water. She fussed around us like an anxious mother duck shepherding her ducklings. And, by gosh, we were glad to see her!

In the course of time she tied herself to HMS ——— with a brand-new hawser, and we made preparations to resume the haul to Batavia. First of all we cut through the hawser on our own deck with an axe.

'It may get tangled around the port propeller,' said the engineer-commander, 'but on the other hand it may work itself free. What is it they say in Malay?'

'*Tid' apa*' said Ray Maley, with a shrug. You always give a shrug when you say '*Tid' apa*'; it's part of the tradition.

'I think,' said Hoops, 'a whisky-and-soda would be a good idea.'

I remember that sometime during that day—or was it the next day?—a convoy of ships overhauled and passed us away to the north-east. There was nothing unusual in that; there was a constant running of the gauntlet in Bomb Alley in those days. But this one was unusual because it had a British cruiser as escort and one of the ships was a great new American liner, one of the first signs of American participation in the war in those waters. It was an errand of mercy; her decks were crammed with women and children, but providentially she was spared any intensive bombing. A worse fate befell those who dared that passage a week later when Singapore's twilight was at hand. The name *Empire Star* will always symbolise horror, and at the same time fortitude and courage, to evacuees from Malaya.

I remember also that two circumstances worried us that night. The first was that it was the night of the full moon, or thereabouts. It

was a night of deadly loveliness with the sea splashed with quicksilver. The other circumstance that worried us was that soon we were out of the shallow Banka Strait and in waters deep enough to accommodate submarines. We were on guard against 'tin fishes' as well as aeroplanes. *Encounter*, one propellor out of action, was now the escort of *Electra* and the crippled destroyer she was towing. Despite our lameness we got up a creditable speed, and throughout the night circled the two other destroyers in a monotonous roundabout. Under the moon we laid a telltale cream behind us. We zigzagged and swung on our beam until, lying in bed, you felt the ship reeling and circling and bending.

I slept in one of the officer's cabins while he was on watch. There was a photograph of an English girl, fresh-faced and tranquil in expression, propped up on his table. You looked around the cabin, severe in all other essentials, and you realised that in that girl's face was an expression of England to the young man whose cabin it was. The girl, with the man, had shared all the dangers and 'naval occasions' of HMS *Encounter*. That girl, whoever she was, is still, I am sure, part of HMS *Encounter*. You felt almost an intruder on the privacy of their thoughts.

The next day we made our landfall at Batavia; edged past the big American liner, now at anchor; and moved towards the docks. The harbour at Tandjong Priok already was cluttered up with shipping, and we tied up near another destroyer and a cruiser.

We met the captain for the first time; a young man grey about the eyes from his sleepless responsibility on the bridge; and we thanked him. We shook hands all round with the other officers—burly, jovial Guns, the cynical surgeon-commander, the bright-faced young Canadian, and ironically cheerful engineer-commander.

'Hope you get your boilers cleaned,' we said.

'Not here!' he replied. 'But some day I will! Give my love to Sydney!'

Stout fellers, every man jack of them!

I'm glad we didn't make any final wisecrack about 'the luckiest ship afloat'. A few weeks later, in the hopelessly unequal Battle of the Java Sea, *Encounter* went down with her sister, *Electra*. She went down, I know, with all guns firing to the last; with the young commander on the bridge; with Guns, stripped to the waist, with his men; with young Ted blazing away at his Oerlikon; with the engineer-commander saying ironically, 'Well, chaps, here comes the refit at last!'

14

Last Days of Java

THERE were some people in Java who honestly believed that, even if Singapore fell, the Japanese would finally be brought to a sudden halt when they attempted to assault the lovely island. They spoke mysteriously of the great defences being planned at General Wavell's headquarters outside Bandoeng. They spoke of the presence of thousands of British airmen, but, alas, did not reveal where the aeroplanes were for them to fly. They spoke in whispers of the arrival of American troops in Australia and big American naval forces.

But there were not many people like that. The Dutch are realists and realists could not but see that over Java hung an inevitable doom. It could not escape it, if Singapore fell, and only a miracle could save Singapore. Java stayed alive while Singapore held; died if it fell.

Batavia, the capital, with a population of close on half a million, awaited its fate. The native population were the least perturbed; they swarmed through the streets in a trusting belief that all would be well; or perhaps it was that they were oblivious to the horrible realities of war. The women placidly washed their clothes in the canals by day and bathed their children. At night Batavia was utterly and impenetrably blacked-out. When there was no moon the night blanketed down with the jet blackness of the tropics until it was a hazardous undertaking to venture into the streets. Batavia waited for Singapore to fall and daily the harbour at Tandjong Priok became more congested as the refugee ships poured in.

Daily queues formed inside the office of the Dutch KPM shipping line as refugees, chiefly British, begged for passages to Australia and

Ceylon. Rather shamefacedly I joined them. It seemed like deserting a sinking ship, and it was. The Dutch had a different viewpoint, but in mitigation of our own desertion, it was their country after all, and what good could we do by staying? Still, it gave one an uncomfortable feeling and it did not reassure the Javanese.

At night there was an 'Eat, drink and be merry; for tomorrow we die' atmosphere. The night clubs functioned until dawn and liquor flowed lavishly. A negro ran one, and for a while made a fortune. The Hotel des Indes, luxury hotel of the East, was packed with the refugees who could afford it. In the great dining room the orchestra played, 'When the Nightingales Sang in Berkeley Square'. Eleven 'boys', headed by the 'No. 1 Boy', solemnly lined up like a cricket team and served Java's celebrated *rijsttafel*. On the terrace outside in the semi-darkness Javanese waiters served *Bols* and beer and whisky, and some of the evacuees snapped impatiently if they were kept waiting. Very few Dutch were to be seen there; they were mainly British and Australian servicemen, war correspondents, cameramen, and many British women and children.

Just opposite the Hotel des Indes was what must have been the world's most terrifying air-raid siren. It went through its hair-raising banshee wailing three or four times a day. I have heard children cry with terror as it went off; it was almost worse than an actual air-raid. Like Singapore, there were no proper air-raid shelters in Batavia, the swampy nature of the ground made their construction impracticable. Civilians would just have to take pot-luck in a raid.

The refugees sat on the terrace of the Hotel des Indes and waited for a call from the KPM. The natives swarmed past and the women washed their clothes in the canal. The siren went off, but nothing happened, and soon many Javanese did not even leave the streets. One day, we thought, the tragedy of Penang will be enacted here. During the day detachments of squat Javanese soldiers in dark green uniforms trudged past the Hotel des Indes under their big Dutch officers. They carried small calibre rifles like the Japanese. It was the first time I had seen green jungle uniforms and thought what a good idea it was.

As radio reports of Singapore's death agonies came through, Batavia's edginess increased. It was obvious now that it wasn't a case of *would* Singapore fall but *when* would it fall. RAF and RAAF personnel came pouring into Batavia, but they brought little encouragement with them because they had no planes. At RAF headquarters hundreds of airmen reported daily and then wandered aimlessly around the city. There was nothing else for them to do. There were stories of unassembled aircraft arriving by ship, and stories that some of the parts were on different

ships that had been sunk. This was not as dreadful as some people thought because no doubt the authorities were working on the 'don't put all your eggs in one basket' theory. I remember a classic case in the last war when a quantity of a commodity vital to Britain was sent from South America in one ship and the ship was torpedoed. So it works both ways, and what was condemned as official stupidity might easily have been official astuteness. At any rate, Java never got its aeroplanes, so it was simply a case of waiting for history to repeat itself.

At 8.30 p.m. on 15 February Singapore fell. Java was by now so well prepared for the disaster that the people merely shrugged and said, 'Well, it's happened!' Far more dangerous than the military catastrophe was the loss of British prestige. The Dutch took the loss of Singapore very resentfully, as well they might. They had willingly contributed air and naval assistance for the defence of Malaya and they felt they had been let down. Consequently a wave of national bitterness swept through Java, particularly in Batavia, and fifth-columnists were not lacking to encourage the disillusion and rancour. Batavia was like a man in a delirium; later he would recover from his fever and see things with more tolerance and understanding. For the time being anybody who spoke English was violently unpopular. Unfortunately there were a few Blimpish British officers and autocratic refugees to be found in Java at the time, and it was a pity that they had to sit drinking on the terrace of the Hotel des Indes while the green uniformed Javanese soldiers trudged down the street. It was not their fault; they were waiting for orders to move somewhere else, in the same way as the RAF men, with nothing to fly, reported daily to their headquarters. It was a desperately crucial period in Allied relations, now happily restored.

Nor was it reassuring for the Dutch to see so many international war correspondents preparing to move to Australia and Burma. The war correspondents follow the stories and it was apparent they had 'written off' Java. Their duty is to stay to the last possible moment and then get out, for a captured correspondent is of no further use to his paper. In Java, sadly enough, one or two of them cut it too fine.

I was caught momentarily in the wave of disillusion myself. I remember agreeing with a kind of shocked surprise when an American newspaperman said bitterly: 'You British will have to get rid of Churchill.' The American was not the only person who was expressing similar opinions. Then I thought fiercely to myself, No! There must be some

answer to all this! They can't wipe us off as a race like this. That English officer sitting over there whom the Dutch don't like is only in Java because he's not wanted anywhere else. He's got an unfortunate and overbearing manner, but he's got all the guts in the world. He'll die like a gentleman if he's ordered to, but his trouble is that he'll never forget for a moment he is a gentleman. You Dutch are wrong when you exempt Australians from your bitterness about Singapore just because we are free and easy and impatient with hidebound tradition. *We* are to blame about Singapore too, you know. Why are the English so embarrassingly faithful to themselves? They'll go and applaud a favourite actress years after her voice and looks are gone. They'll stick to muddle and indecision because they might hurt somebody's feelings if they changed it. Why don't they get rid of that officer over there, who is innocently losing us a different kind of battle every time he opens his mouth, instead of pushing him about from country to country to save him from committing military blunders? That man no more represents England than a Sydney larrikin represents Australia.

No, it was too early to hold post-mortems. It was *sub judice* to say glibly, 'Get rid of Churchill'. I apologised to Churchill almost as soon as I had agreed with the American. Catastrophe or no catastrophe, Churchill represented something virile and imaginative. Far better to have Churchill and his challenging cigar than Baldwin and his complacent John Bull pipe. Deep down there was nothing to be ashamed of in being British; this was the very moment when we must set our teeth in face of the humiliation and try again. Maybe someone would have the insight to chop off a few heads, for underneath were the Argylls and the chaps on HMS *Encounter* and the cockneys of London and the 2/19th singing 'Waltzin' Matilda' as they charged with their bayonets . . .

By now the last of the war correspondents were checking in from Singapore, most of them with harrowing stories of Bomb Alley and the last days of Singapore. Jim Henry arrived with Henry Stokes and Harry Keys and others. Yates McDaniell, of the American AP, turned up later with one of the most graphically written stories of all. Yates was used to slipping out of the clutches of the Japanese at the last moment; he had nearly been caught in China as well. They poured into the Hotel des Indes and joined the crowd on the terrace. Day by day the KPM promised us a ship to Australia, and it did not seem that our departure could wisely be delayed much longer. The siren opposite the hotel wailed more frequently now, but so far Batavia bore a charmed life. Instead, the Japanese were systematically and effectively

plastering Sourabaya, the big Dutch naval and flying-boat base. The Japs did not believe in wasting bombs, and Batavia had little military importance. Its time could come.

One day after the siren had sounded we heard the *thump* of bombs way down in the direction of Tandjong Priok. That night some Australian correspondents toasted a big uproarious Dutch fighter pilot called 'Butch'. Flying a Brewster Buffalo, Butch had brought down a Zero, no mean feat as aircraft go. Butch, a huge young man with a laugh like an active volcano, went to dinner with the correspondents at the Hotel des Indes. He spoke very halting English, and one of the Australians played a cruel trick on him. In the middle of dinner, amongst that crowd of tragic refugees, Butch suddenly shouted at the top of his voice: 'Are there any —— —— pommies here?' Some of us tried to shut him up, but it was no use, because he did not know what he was saying. I remember we laughed at the time; afterwards I felt ashamed. It was like flicking somebody on the raw flesh with a whip. Some of those 'Pommies' had lost everything they possessed in the world; no wonder they hated Australians. Butch, of course, was entirely innocent.

In the Hotel des Indes also dined some of the most courageous men of all—the Qantas pilots. I cannot remember all their names now. I remember Captain Crowther, dark and thickly built, and other crews who flew their flying boats back and forth from Singapore to Batavia and to Australia almost to the end. The planes were unarmed and slow, but the pilots carried on dauntlessly and rescued hundreds of women and children from under the very wings of the Japanese. Some of them paid the price of this gallantry. I never meet a Qantas pilot of that vintage now that I do not take my hat off to him.

On the terrace another night we met a young American in civilian clothes. He was a gyroscopic expert and he dealt in Flying Fortresses. He cheered us up by telling us how the Americans had tricked the Japanese a couple of days before. It appeared that the first Fortresses the Japanese met over Java had no tail gun-turrets. The Zero pilots soon found this out and swooped down in packs on the rear of the Fortresses with disastrous results to the Americans. Then one day new Fortresses arrived with tail turrets. The first encounter with Zeros was a wow. The Japanese came swooping down carelessly for the kill as usual to meet withering machine gun fire from the quarter they least expected it. I've forgotten how many Zeros were shot down, but it was a classic example of surprise in war. (Think, you chatterboxes, what would have happened if the Japanese had known in advance of

the arrival of those new Fortresses.)

The Dutch, in the twilight of their great East Indian Empire, were setting us an example in the prosecution of a scorched earth policy. At every outpost they left civilian volunteers whose task it was to stay behind until the last and leave nothing to the Japanese (shades of Penang!). I knew one of these Dutchmen, a great jovial man with a grown-up family. He called himself the 'Chief Destroyer'. Nothing has been heard of him since. The destruction of the immense oil installations at Palembang must surely be the apex in scorched earth, even greater than the Russian destruction of the Dneiper Dam. There were rivers of fire for days, it was said.

The Dutch destroyed with savage anger as the Japanese advanced. The Dutch despised rather than hated the Japanese. They reserved their deepest hatred for the Germans. They 'remembered' Rotterdam with an intensity of feeling far deeper than the Americans, for instance, are likely to 'remember' Pearl Harbor. Their love for their country was symbolised in their intense affection for the Netherlands Royal Family. Whenever you went into a Dutch house you found a picture of Queen Wilhelmina and Princess Juliana and her children. They prayed for the day when the Netherlands Royal House would have a male heir. This great love mirrored in reverse the great hatred they bore towards the Germans who had raped their country. Their feeling towards the Japanese is best illustrated by the reception they gave to an official Japanese economic delegation just before the war. The leader of the delegation was a very little man in stature. He was received at Batavia with all the pomp and circumstance necessary to the occasion. A Dutch guard of honour was selected. Was it merely an unhappy coincidence that every man in that guard of honour was over six feet high? It was told by people who were present that it was ludicrous and humiliating to see the little Japanese walking between the two rows of great Dutchmen. Not a very promising atmosphere for an economic conference, but a blunt and uncompromising illustration of the Dutch attitude.

The Hotel des Indes was crammed to the doors now; in one big annexe hundreds of refugees slept in rows of stretchers like a military camp. There were queues at the KPM office and queues at the banks. There were drunken fights at night in the night clubs. The slightest allusion to Singapore was liable to set ablaze a bonfire of ill-feeling and bitterness. An unpleasant period which good sense has since levelled up. Perhaps we needed a Singapore to jolt us into reality; to purge the constipation of our outlook.

And still the bombs did not fall on defenceless Batavia.

Towards the end of February we were told to join a ship at Tandjong Priok. It was a spanking Dutch liner with speed written all over her. Well, that would be reassuring when we ran the gauntlet of Sunda Strait, between Java and Sumatra. If Banka Strait was known as Bomb Alley, Sunda Strait deserved its name of 'Suicide Lane'. It was a deep passage, deep enough for submarines, and there a few days later HMAS *Perth* was to meet her end.

We carried more valuable cargo than mere civilian refugees. Somewhere in the ship was the gold reserve of the Netherlands East Indies, amounting to millions of guilders. Had we known this at the time we might have been more edgy because it would have been a miracle if the Japanese had not known what we carried. We had on board also several hundreds of Dutch and Javanese air force trainees. They were to go to Australia to finish their training. Henceforth, their lives would be dedicated to the recovery of Java, because even now they realised Java was irrevocably doomed. They were leaving their homes behind and some of them their wives and children. These air force men and a few key service leaders were the only Dutch citizens who were permitted to leave the country. The women and children, the Dutch and Indonesian civil servants and civilians stayed behind. 'It is our country; we do not desert it because it is in peril,' was their credo. There was something magnificent yet some will say futile, in that great unselfish loyalty. May it pay the Dutch handsome rewards in native respect when Java is reconquered!

Late in the afternoon our liner drew away from the wharf. It was our intention to make a dash through Sunda Strait in darkness that should at least protect us from aircraft. As the ship edged across the harbour someone said, 'God, what a target!' The harbour, even at this late stage, was choked with shipping, but none as big as us. We were the last big ship to leave Batavia. There was a hospital ship anchored dangerously amongst other craft. We passed HMAS *Hobart*, which within a matter of hours was to survive a vicious and concentrated attack by Japanese bombers.

We had lifeboat drill in the harbour and were ordered to sleep in our clothes that night with our life jackets beside us. Then with a patrol boat as escort (for the gold apparently) we fled for Suicide Lane.

None of us slept very comfortably that night, but luck was with us. By dawn, we were on the edge of the Indian Ocean. There the patrol boat left us to what perilous chance I do not know. Our ship showed a clean pair of heels and fairly raced south. We were still well within range of Japanese bombers, but they did not find us. We

heard that a ship a few hours behind us had been sunk in Sunda Strait, perhaps the Japanese had really been searching for us.

So we left Java to its fate and were shamefaced, but helpless, about it. Ted Genoch, a Paramount newsreel man who was one of our party, has already put down his feelings on paper in an American magazine, and they coincide with mine. But in my case my thoughts were not only in Java but further back in Malaya. My thoughts tortured me. For the second time I was walking out on the 2/19th. I think I wasn't very well in my mind or my body. What had happened to Jack and Bill and Gordon and Stan? I had read in a Dutch paper in Batavia that Colonel Anderson had been awarded the Victoria Cross. Well, if ever a man deserved it he did. But what had happened to them all in Singapore? Maybe as we raced down the Indian Ocean they were at the same moment making a break for it in all sorts of craft towards Sumatra. I hoped they made it. On our ship we carried a poignant reminder of their plight: bags and bags of Australian mail to the 8th Division that could not now be delivered.

Little else happened until the day we cheered the appearance of an RAAF Hudson from a West Australian base. It was the most comforting thing we had seen for days, although at first we took it to be Japanese. I remember that some of our passengers complained bitterly that they had paid the KPM first-class fares and were given merely mattresses on the deck. I remember one of the Dutch officers saying he wished the ship could turn back to Batavia so that they could land one or two of the women there again.

We berthed at Fremantle in front of the *Empire Star* with gaping bomb holes in her. It was good to see Australia again.

There was no mystery about the fall of Java. It was simple. There were no planes, and after the Battle of the Java Sea, no ships. Without these, what could the Dutch Army do except make a last stand in the mountains around Bandoeng? The last that the outside world heard of Java was from the Bandoeng radio on 7 March 1942: 'Signing off. Long live our Queen. Good bye till better times.'

Reuters granted me generous sick leave and I rejoined Molly and the children at Mentone, near Melbourne. I had a marvellous few weeks doing nothing except dig an air raid trench in the back garden, which got full of water the first time it rained.

When I went about again I found that the evil results of Singapore were apparent in Australia, too. Wherever I went I heard misinformed criticism of Britain. A wave of ill-feeling was sweeping across the country,

fostered and encouraged by traditional enemies of Britain in the Commonwealth. Much of it, I believe now, was due to Australia's own peril. Darwin was being bombed and Rabaul had been evacuated. Australia was on the verge of invasion and the very people who had opposed sending the AIF abroad to hold our outer defences and who had boastfully proclaimed, 'Let them come here first and then we will fight them on the sands of Bondi', were now passing the buck to Britain for having lost the bastion of Singapore.

God knows Australia, in its prewar neglect of Singapore, was not herself guiltless. These people, in the narrowness of their vision, could not see that Britain and the AIF and the New Zealanders had held for more than two years a far greater bastion than Singapore—the Suez Canal. No credit, however, was to be given to Britain for being so long the bulwark of the democratic nations of the world.

It was sad enough, but understandable, to hear the Dutch bitterness about Singapore; it was neither sad nor understandable to hear the same bitterness voiced by people in your own country about something they had opposed in the first place. It was true that in Malaya there had been complacency and muddle and short-sightedness and military incompetence—but the people who cried the loudest about it were those who had contributed nothing to its defence, and instead should have said to themselves accusingly, 'He that is without sin . . . let him first cast a stone . . .'

15

Post-mortem

AS the war rolls on and the Japanese crawl back into their final foxholes, I think back to the tragedy of Malaya, and especially to the forlorn and frustrated tragedy of the 8th Division.

I go about amongst the people of Australia and I know that apart from sorrowing and distressed relatives and friends of the men they loved, the 8th Division have been half-forgotten in the rush of greater events. The war has rolled on and the fighting lessons of Malaya have been absorbed, although it took us an unconscionably long time to absorb them. We have mastered the jungle technique of the Japanese and turned their own technique against them with dazzling success. We have learnt to bypass and infiltrate and isolate large masses of the enemy—but now we have the weight of modern material to do it with.

Let us not forget that it was the British, Indian and Australian troops in Malaya who first faced the onslaught of Japan's finest and best equipped troops and taught us the lesson with their blood. Let us not forget that they faced it without aeroplanes or tanks or naval protection. Theirs not to reason why these things were not available, nor mine. Theirs not to reason why they had to fall back so heartbreakingly to the sea, nor mine. Theirs not to reason why there was no Dunkirk for them.

You can trace the tragedy of Singapore to many things. You can trace it strategically to the betrayal of Indo-China to the Japanese; to the fact that planes and tanks could not be spared in time from the Middle East; to the apathy of the native population; to the failure to enlist thousands of volunteer Chinese soldiers in our ranks; to the civil complacency and fake racial superiority; to orthodox generalship

which fought a 'gentleman's war' against an ungentlemanly enemy who was not afraid to try military experiments, and succeeded brilliantly.

But you cannot trace it to Lieutenant-Colonel Stewart's stout-hearted Argylls, because there were fewer than 100 of them left when the lone piper piped them across the Causeway. You cannot trace it to the Manchesters or the East Surreys because there were so few of them left that they had to be combined into one regiment.

You cannot trace it to the 8th Division, despite exaggerated stories about the behaviour of some AIF reinforcements during the last days of Singapore. Gemas and the epic retreat along the road to Parit Sulong were their true stories.

There was one consolation for them: they were together for the first time when they fought their last battle on Singapore Island. The 2/18th and 2/20th had sadly abandoned their positions on the east coast, and Brigadier Maxwell's brigade had as sadly fallen back from the centre. All the seven infantry battalions, with but few 'originals' left in some of them, the artillery, and every other man who could carry arms, were gathered together in a perimeter a few miles from the city of Singapore.

And there, at 8.30 p.m. on 15 February 1942, came the end of the journey that had begun, with flags flying and bands playing, from Sydney Harbour a little more than a year before. Lieutenant-Colonel C.J. Moses has told how tears of frustration streamed down the cheeks of some of the men when the final surrender came. But their bodies had taken more than they could stand and most of them were glad it was over.

My grief for these men is as strong as the grief of their relatives, for so many of them were my friends. This book was not my story; it was their story. Poor Bloody Infantry it began, and Poor Bloody Infantry it ends. The manpower officer earlier in the story was right: the PBI will win it in the end, and get the least credit for it.

There are those who publicly oppose preference to ex-servicemen after the war because, as one senator said, who is to judge whether a soldier or a munition worker is the better man? I should say that most munition workers would ungrudgingly say the frontline soldier, 'I did my part and I'm proud of it, but by God you had the worst job by far.' There are others who oppose preference because they declare it presupposes another Depression after the war. What arrant nonsense! Preference can't *cause* a Depression so what does presupposition matter anyway?

All the returned man wants is his old job back or a guarantee that, other things being equal, he will receive preference over a man who for years sponged on the community and then outrageously expects to benefit from the new order so many of us see on the horizon. Preference, even as a gesture, is the least acknowledgement we can make to the men who offered their life's blood to the nation. Who will dare deny this right to the men of the 8th Division when they are set free from their prison camps? Are we to say to them: 'Welcome home! Now you can scramble for a job and don't think you're going to get any preferential treatment over anybody who stayed in this country just because you've been a prisoner of war.' Are we going to say *that* to them? If we do, it will be the grossest betrayal imaginable. We must acknowledge our gratitude for the greater hazards they accepted so willingly.

Coalminers are not the only people who struck during wartime, nor are all employers the altruistic war-winners we are led to believe. In some industries, in countless firms, there have been no strikes at all—there must be a reason for it. No, there are worse strikers than coalminers, there are hypocritical strikers. I know some people, of good circumstances, who for five years have not lifted a finger to help the war effort. They have not voluntarily contributed an ounce of physical effort towards winning the war; on the contrary they have complained bitterly about their income taxes and wartime restrictions. I say these people are just as bad as any striker in industry, and usually their voices are the loudest in condemnation of strikes.

There are many people in Australia, and other countries, who will be sorry when the war is over. It has been profitable for them, not necessarily in pounds, shillings and pence, but in prestige and comfort. There are mediocre men in wartime departments (many of them of military age) who for the first time in their lives have tasted an intoxicating draught of power and they will fight tooth and nail after the war to retain it.

These are the people the soldier will have to beware of. These are the people who will fight preference to the bitter end because it might mean the abdication of their own jobs. As I see it, preference does not mean that just because a man went to the war an employer is to be forced to employ him. The man may be a very incompetent tradesman with a bad personal record. The employer should be entitled to employ a more competent man. But if it is a question between a returned soldier and a civilian with equal qualifications, who will deny the soldier's claim to preference?

There will be injustices, of course. As Bernard Shaw so wisely says, mankind has not yet learnt to tolerate each other, let alone love each other. It would be wrong that an eligible man called up in 1944 and then deciding to join the AIF after dodging his voluntary obligations for four years, should receive preference over a B-class man who toiled throughout the war in a munition factory. It would be wrong to penalise members of AIF units who through military circumstances were forced to remain against their will in Australia. The question bristles with anomalies and possible injustices. I think that the South Australian Preference Bill is the most sensible of all. It acknowledges the right of ex-servicemen and women and members of the merchant navy to preference, but, under it, a board will be set up to judge each case on its humanitarian merits. Provided the personnel of the board were beyond reproach, there seems no reason why such a scheme should not succeed.

No one will question that our goal should be 'a job for everyone after the war', but bluntly to state at this stage that a man who fought in the frontline deserves no better treatment than a man, whether by choice or force of circumstances, who stayed behind the lines is a declaration of monstrous ingratitude.

Much of this outlook can be traced to the unhappy gulf between the serviceman and the civilian in Australia. The gulf is appallingly wide. Psychologically this is not entirely the fault of the civilian. I have experienced myself the insidious Rip Van Winkle mentality that can creep over one after a few months in our big cities. It is not so easy for the serviceman straight from New Guinea to understand. Inside him he resents the civilian's matter-of-fact acceptance of freedom from physical discomforts and dangers. He feels unconsciously that he is an 'outsider' of some sort; he talks a language civilians cannot understand. He is at ease with soldiers of the last war, but, although when coming home on leave he is heartily glad to get away from his mates for a while, he goes back to them in the end with thankfulness.

It is not altogether the civilian's fault. We have not gone through the horrors of war as the people of Britain have done. In all our history we have been spared these things. There have been no bombs to unite the classes into an heroic and selfless comradeship. The war has not touched enough of us; in fact, many have profited by it. Many of us should be thoroughly ashamed of ourselves. It should be positively uncomfortable for us to sink into warm beds at night if we thought of the soldier in New Guinea trying to sleep in a stinking swamp with death on all sides of him. We should feel uncomfortable within ourselves

every time we think of the sufferings of the 8th Division. Food should choke in our mouths when we think of them.

But it is too easy to accept things as they are on the Home Front. No bombs. No civilian hardships other than minor inconveniences. Laughably generous rations of sugar, tea, butter and meat, compared with European countries. There is no way other than first-hand experience to bring home to the civilian the beastliness and realities of war. Pictures and films provoke only a transitory understanding, and then it is forgotten.

After I wrote a book about the Malayan campaign called *Grim Glory* I was assailed by British Malayans for my remarks on prewar life in that country. No book on Malaya could possibly ignore the civil background to the tragedy. After all there was nothing particularly new in the subject: Owen Rutter, Somerset Maugham and others had all satirised it. Only Bruce Lockhart had sentimentalised it. Some of the correspondents who attacked me have since admitted in retrospect that perhaps the White Man's Burden in the Far East was not so onerous after all. The realities of war and the loss of everything that was held most dear, purged Malayan life of its complacency and hypocrisy. The lesson was learnt the hard way, the hurtful way.

It would be ungenerous of me if I did not draw attention to the growth of a similar complacency and hypocrisy in Australia. We ignore the lesson of Malaya at our peril. I do not desire to underestimate Australia's tremendous and inspiring war effort; we have every reason to be proud of what we have done and our reputation as a nation stands high overseas, despite political capital to the contrary. But too much is being done by the same people and too little by others. We see self-sacrifice and devotion on the one hand; selfishness and callous disregard on the other. These things will not be forgotten when the soldier comes home from the wars.

The Poor Bloody Infantry, which is the symbol of all fighting men, will go on fighting despite it all. He will get drunk on leave and be scorned by some self-righteous people on their way to the picture shows and the golf courses. But he will go back, remembering not so much the love and understanding of his own home and the kindness of so many strangers, but the disregard and lack of understanding of the artful dodgers of the community. He will go back to that particular hell of his own, puzzled and a little bitter, but it will never occur to him to dodge the responsibilities he had accepted. If after the war he goes back to civilian life determined with the same unconquerable spirit to build a better world, the chances of a better world are rosy indeed.

What shape is this better world to take and how are we to outlaw future wars? I grope for the truth and am confused in my thinking. It will be said that it doesn't matter two hoots what I think about it, anyway. But it does matter. What I think about it is more important, for instance, than what the chairman of the BHP or the president of the ALP thinks about it. I, and thousands of others, are the people between those two gentlemen, and it is our voice that should bridge the gap.

One thing is already crystal-clear: the more people who shake their heads pessimistically and say, 'There'll be another war in twenty-five years', the more certain that war will be. The more people who can sink their overweening self-seeking and intolerance and say, 'Let us get together towards a real new order, irrespective of race or creed, the more likelihood there is of everlasting peace'.

I was a sucker in the first chapter: I am a sucker in the last chapter. I feel sometimes I would like to run away from it all and bury myself in the country. I ask myself: What on earth am I to teach my children? If I teach them to be honourable and tolerant what possible chance have they of making a place for themselves in the world as it is today? Must I teach Alistair, if he shows leanings for a business career, that the little dishonesties and little grafts of business are unimportant and that the only criterion is not to be caught out in a big graft? You can bribe a man with two shillings but if you bribe him with £2,000 you will finish up in the criminal court. There is no fundamental difference in the two actions.

If I were a religious man, I'd say that the best hope for the world after the war would lie in a religious revival. What better Charter, Atlantic or Pacific, can mankind find than the Ten Commandments? But I am not a religious man because I think the church, with the exception of the Salvation Army, needs a new order of its own before it can assume any authentic leadership. The Church, Catholic and Protestant, is out of touch with modern life. Archbishops continue to live in palaces while curates, as desperately underpaid as school teachers, struggle along on a pittance. Austerity begins at home. Should not the church put its own house in order before it attempts to give the world a lead in Christian ethics?

Young people today would far rather listen to Artie Shaw 'swinging it' on Sunday than listen to a boring sermon by a clergyman with a mediocre mind, given in an absurd and irritating chant—and who can blame them? I am not suggesting that the clergyman should 'swing it' in opposition to Artie Shaw, but I am suggesting he should get

himself down (or up) to the level of his parishioners, otherwise the present congregations of old people will dwindle until there are none left at all. It would be worth offending the older church diehards by modernising religion if it meant calling back the new generation to the fold. We badly need a few 'Dick' Shepherds in 1944; perhaps there will come back from the war some padres to supply the need.

If the church misses its great opportunity of world leadership, how then are we to attain what I, as a sucker, believe to be the only workable world charter, based on the Ten Commandments? I confess that I don't know, unless there are an overwhelming number of fellow-suckers who have similar beliefs. All the bitterness in the world—national bitterness, racial bitterness, human bitterness—springs from the eternal war between the 'haves' and the 'have nots'. Because this struggle has gone on for so long, are we to be so defeatist as to say it is insoluble?

We want not only a basic wage but a basic human morality before we can attempt to create any new order. I don't know how you set about creating a basic morality. A movement founded in Adelaide called Common Cause may have the answer, but it lacks dynamic leadership. In the face of much mockery it succeeded in gathering together people of all denominations and political beliefs on a common platform of social reform. That in itself was no mean feat. Common Cause is non-political; its argument is that if you educate enough people towards a common humanity and probity, they themselves will elect to parliament the men most fitted to pursue those ideals.

Whether Common Cause has too many intellectuals in its ranks, and not enough practical minds is a matter of debate. At any rate, its sincerity is undeniable and, properly handled, there is no reason why its influence should not spread to other states. I should like to see it linked in some way with such an eminently practical organisation as the Returned Soldiers' League. For Common Cause, if it is to succeed, must not be amongst those who neglect the Poor Bloody Infantry, whose contribution towards something better has been the greatest of all.

As I re-read this chapter, indeed this book, I know that I have failed to say what I wanted to say. I have embarrassed myself and probably embarrassed the reader, with introspections and abstract gropings for the truth. I remain a sucker and I remain a militant pacifist. I was re reading the other day a passage written by Sir Philip Gibbs in 1917. After nearly thirty years it is as applicable today as it was then, and I would like to end this book on the note it strikes:

'Germany thrust this thing upon Europe deliberately and after careful

preparation. Upon the heads of her diplomats and princes are the blood and the guilt of it, and they stand before the world as murderers with red hands and bloodshot eyes, and souls as black as hell. In this war of self-defence we are justified and need no special pleading to proclaim our cause. We did not want this war, and we went to the extreme limit of patience to avoid it. But if there is to be any hope for humanity we must go deeper into the truth than the mere analysis of White Papers and Yellow Papers with diplomatic correspondence. We must ask ourselves whether in England, France of Russia, "the defenders of modern civilisation", there was any sincerity of belief in the ideals and faith for which civilisation stands. Did the leaders of modern thought do anything with their genius or their knowledge to break down old frontiers of hatred, to enlighten the ignorance between one nation and another, or to put such power into the hands of the peoples that they might have strength to resist the tyranny of military castes and of military ideals? Have not our politicians and our teachers, with few exceptions, used all their influence to foster dark old superstitions which lurk in such good words as those of patriotism and honour, to keep the people blind so that they might not see the shining light of liberty, and to adulterate the doctrine of Christ which most of them profess, by a gospel of international jealousy based upon trade interests and commercial greed? The military castes have been supported in Europe by putting the spell of old traditions upon simple peoples. The Christian Churches have bolstered them up and failed utterly to preach the words of peace because in the heart of the priest there is the patriot, so that every Christian nation claims God as a national asset leading its battalions. There will be no hope of peace until the peoples of the world recognise their brotherhood and refuse to be led to the shambles for mutual massacre. If there is no hope of that, if, as some students of life hold, war will always happen because life itself is a continual warfare, and one man lives only at the expense of another, then there is no hope, and all the ideals of men striving for the progress of mankind, all the dreams of poets and the sacrifice of scientists, are utterly vain and foolish, and pious men should pray God to touch this planet with a star and end the folly of it all.'

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