Singapore

Too little, too late

Dedicated to the memory of those of many races who did not survive the war and the Prisoner of War (or Civilian Internee) period that followed it.

Singapore: too little, too late

Some aspects of the Malayan disaster in 1942

by

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All the above were involved in Malaya at the time except Colonel MacFeat, who first reached Malaya for the Japanese surrender in 1945. He put much time and work into helping me and his 'neutrality' on the 1941–42 period was much appreciated for retaining balance in the story.

My thanks are also due to the authors and publishers of several books from which short quotations are made and acknowledged in the text; to Her Majesty's Stationery Office for allowing quotations from Despatches and the Official History (The War against Japan: Vol. I, The Loss of Singapore); and to the Institution of Royal Engineers for quotations from Vol. IX of 'The History of the Corps of Royal Engineers'.

To all the above and others, and to my wife, I am indeed grateful for help and encouragement for over six years because the story of the Malayan campaign as I saw it has proved to be quite the most difficult and unpleasant writing that I have ever undertaken.

It is now over a quarter of a century since the Malayan defeat. So far as I know no national overhaul of our traditional methods in finding civil and military leaders and of teaching and organization has resulted in any of the four Services—particularly civil and army—to avoid the types of mistakes that caused such speedy collapse in Malaya. Ranks quoted are those held in 1941–42.

IVAN SIMSON

January 1970

Illustrations

Foreword

by the late Admiral Sir Geoffrey Layton
formerly C-in-C, China Station

It has always been a mystery to me that no Royal Commission was set up after the war to investigate the greatest disaster to British arms which history has ever had to record, in the tragic loss of the Malayan Peninsula and Singapore.

Had it been done, no doubt many lessons would have been brought to light and the true causes of the defeat elucidated. As it is at present, none of the histories so far published, official or otherwise, have, to the best of my knowledge, produced any lessons for future generations to study.

The reason why successive Governments have failed to appoint a commission may be because so much of the tragedy was due to the High Command in London not appreciating the danger and, in consequence, failing to supply aircraft, anti-aircraft guns, tanks etc., all of which had been asked for in the tactical appreciation carried out by local Commanders in 1940, and agreed to by the Chiefs of Staff as necessary.

Brigadier Simson has had the courage to write a first-hand and excellent record of events on the spot. He has brought to light the lack of morale and leadership and what more could have been done with the resources already available. For this future generations will be more than grateful, provided the lessons he has deduced are not forgotten or ignored.

To publish the truth of such a campaign must be painful to some, but where the tragedy is so complete (embracing as it did not only the loss of all this important territory and naval base, but also the elimination of our prestige and reputation throughout the Far East, probably for ever) no personal feelings or consideration should be allowed to interfere. If fault lies with even the highest authority in London, then it should be fairly and squarely laid on their shoulders, as much as on the shoulders of local commanders and civil servants.

The plea that an attack from the north was never envisaged cannot be allowed to pass. This probability was fully reported and discussed by General Dobbie as far back as 1938, and the tactical appreciation drawn up by local commanders in 1940 was based on this thesis.

This is a record which should be widely read and discussed in all staff colleges, the Headquarters of all three services and the Colonial

office, so that combined action may be taken to ensure the highest possible selection and training of our leaders in the future.

Our thanks are due to Brigadier Simson for his care and courage in producing this work.

GEOFFREY LAYTON, *Admiral*

January 26, 1961

NOTE. Admiral Layton's foreword was written after reading an early draft of the book. He stated that it could be used later if so required, as he realized that the book would be altered in form and possibly published considerably after 1961.

Glossary

of chief abbreviations used

A.O.C.	Air Officer Commanding
A.R.P.	Air Raid Precautions
A.A.	Anti-Aircraft
A.B.D.A.(C.)	American British Dutch Australian (Command)
B.E.F.	British Expeditionary Force
C.E.(M.C.)	Chief Engineer (Malaya Command)
C.I.G.S.	Chief of Imperial General Staff
C.R.E.	Commander, Royal Engineers
C.D.	Civil Defence
C.-in-C.	Commander-in-Chief
D.D.M.S.	Deputy Director Medical Services
D.F.W.	Director of Fortifications and Works
D.G.C.D.	Director-General Civil Defence
G.H.Q.	General Headquarters
G.O.C.	General Officer Commanding
G.S.O. 1	General Staff Officer (first class)
H.E.	His/Her Excellency
M.G.	Machine gun
p.s.c.	passed staff college
p.t.s.c.	passed technical staff college
P.W.D.	Public Works Department
R.A.S.C.	Royal Army Service Corps
R.E.	Royal Engineers
R.E.S.B.	Royal Engineers and Signals Board
W.O.	War Office

The Malayan Peninsula showing the location of the Japanese landings and the principal places of interest mentioned in the text.

1

THE REASONS FOR WRITING THIS BOOK

On my return, in December 1945, from being a Prisoner of War in the Far East after the capitulation of Singapore, several military and civil friends pressed me to put on record the engineer and civilian defence story of the Malayan campaign of 1941–42. I did not do so then because as soon as I was fit, and just before being retired in mid 1946, I was employed by the Foreign Office on the Control Commission, Germany. I returned from Germany in early 1951 and the writers of both the Official History and the Official Royal Engineers History approached me. I gave them all the Army Engineer and Civil Defence facts in which I had been involved in Malaya.

My reason for writing this account about the fall of Singapore is my failure over a number of years to have certain facts behind the swift disaster recorded fully in one or other of several official publications. These would obviously have been the best places and the two Official Histories in particular should have approached the subject from a totally neutral and unbiassed point of view. I have set out to write my own version, very reluctantly, because I feel that the full story ought to be told and the warnings and lessons from the Singapore disaster should be in the minds of our political and military leaders both today and in the future.

Singapore had been selected in the 1920s as a bastion which would oppose the spread to the West of any war which might break out in the Far East. Thus it was clearly aimed at the possible future ambitions of Japan. A vast naval base, which cost some £60,000,000 and took nearly a score of years to build, was established on Singapore Island. The Island, which is diamond-shaped and approximately 25 miles by 14, lies off the southern tip of the Malayan mainland. It is roughly the same shape and size as the Isle of Wight.

The 'fortress' had a main seaward fixed armament consisting of five 15-inch, six 9·2-inch and sixteen 6-inch guns in emplacements plus anti-torpedo boat and small arms fire. But it may never be known and nobody has satisfactorily explained why no permanent or field defences were planned or built in time against a possible landward attack. Serious attacks from the landward side had been considered by the Chiefs of Staff Committee in 1928 and turned down. However, such an attack was appreciated as possible by 1938,* and in fact formed the basis of the Joint Commander's tactical appreciation of October 1940; but after this no landward defences on the Island were planned or erected even after the war had actually started in Malaya. Over the years Air Power also became a serious added risk.

Thus Singapore could not claim by any historical parallels to be the impregnable fortress which the Press made it out to be; since all history proves that it has been by attack from the landward side that coastal fortresses have invariably fallen even if seriously defended. It should therefore have been clear to all that if war came to Malaya, Singapore, as it existed in 1940, was likely to fall.

The story of the Malayan campaign is recorded in the Official History THE WAR AGAINST JAPAN: *Vol. 1, The Loss of Singapore*. This is the work quoted from time to time later in this book.

I had many interviews and exchanged much correspondence with Major-General Stanley W. Kirby, C.B., C.M.G., C.I.E., O.B.E., M.C., who headed the Cabinet Office (Historical Section) team who were writing the book from 1951 onward. Publication in 1957 had been delayed for nearly two years after its completion in 1955 and none of the responsible leaders were allowed to see the final draft owing to their continuous and great divergence of opinion. It was only after final publication that I discovered that the information I had supplied and which I considered of major importance had not been included, although I had been led to expect that some of the items would be added to the earlier drafts which I had seen. I made two further efforts to get certain facts placed on official record, and it was only after this failure that I decided to write this book.

This decision required much heart searching, since it implies criticism of some of those I served in Malaya. When things go

* Official History, p. 15.

wrong criticism is often pointless; but I agree with Mazzini (an Italian patriot of Garibaldi's time) who stated:

> "Silence is frequently a duty when suffering is only personal; but it is an error and a fault when the suffering is that of millions."

Official Histories are seldom read by the public or by others than those who were directly involved. To my mind their main value lies in sifted accuracy for careful study later by the Civil and the three fighting Services, in order to avoid similar mistakes in future. The Official History of the Malayan campaign quoted Mahan's dictum that:

> "Defeat cries aloud for explanation; whereas success, like charity, covers a multitude of sins."

Official Histories therefore surely should record *all* the facts, pleasant and unpleasant, usual or unusual, since only then can the responsible Services study and apply the lessons for future generations. All too often every generation learns its lesson the hard way involving unnecessary loss of life and treasure instead of studying the history of earlier similar events. As a nation we fail in this respect time after time. According to Sir Winston Churchill, Malaya was the biggest disaster ever suffered by the British army; yet it has apparently been largely hushed up and never seriously studied by the Staff Colleges and many other teaching schools. I consider that the necessity to avoid defeats is, or should be, one of the overriding objects of Official History; but it is pleasanter to read of the nation's successes—particularly if the individual played a part in that success—rather than of national failures so far away from home.

The detail of the story that follows is based on the Director General Civil Defence report dated May 17th, 1942; on many notes made from my Chief Engineer's report prior to its destruction in 1943; on memory and reminders by others; and to a small extent on a record of the prisoner of war period completed on board ship in October 1945 on my way home. All this was checked at the time by fellow prisoners of war who knew some of the facts. At that time we all, seniors and juniors alike, thought a government inquiry on the speed of the Malayan collapse must be held after the war; and that any inaccuracies and exaggerations in individual reports would soon come to light at any such inquiry. In both my appointments, military and

civil, I was not allowed to function normally or fully; but could not say so to others at the time.

What follows in this chapter is an account of my efforts to secure full publicity after the war for the acts of omission and commission which, to my mind, were largely the determining factors in the speed of the Japanese conquest of Malaya and the fall of Singapore.

As Chief Engineer Malaya Command, I was responsible to the G.O.C, for military engineering requirements in Malaya and British Borneo. I took over this appointment four months before the Japanese attack; and remained in it (with additional civil duties) for the ten weeks of actual war before Singapore fell. My additional duties were those of Director-General of Civil Defence during the last six weeks of the campaign; and as a Member of the War Council for the last three weeks.

During our three and a half years in prisoner of war camps I wrote two reports. The first was on the civil defence aspects, and was prepared on the orders of the Right Honourable Duff Cooper (later Lord Norwich), then Resident Minister for Far Eastern Affairs, with Cabinet rank. He had insisted on my taking this civil appointment as Director-General of Civil Defence; and before he left Singapore he asked me to write a report on Civil Defence and to bring it to him after the war.

This D.G.C.D. report was written during my first three months in the Changi prisoner of war camp; while my mind was fresh, while facts could be easily checked with other prisoners of war, and before ill-treatment and semi-starvation had mentally and physically weakened all of us.

The second—and more important report—I wrote in my position of Chief Engineer Malaya Command. This was compiled in Formosa (Taiwan) to which the senior prisoners (American, Australian, British, Dutch) had been sent. It was compiled between September 1942 and June 1943. Like the civil defence report, the Engineer report was checked, during the writing, with fellow officer prisoners, British, Australian, and Indian Corps.

When, however, this report was about three-quarters completed I was told by General Percival, the G.O.C. Malayan Command, who was also then in the same Formosan prisoner of war camp, that a Chief Engineer's report on the disaster would not be required. Since the Japanese carried out frequent

raids on prisoners' property and several other reports had already been seized, I took copious 'scattered' notes from the report and destroyed the draft. If found by the Japanese there would have been the possibility that both might have been used by them for propaganda purposes. The D.G.C.D. report on civil defence, requested by Mr. Duff Cooper, occupied my only mobile hiding place; and there was no mobile safe depository for the bulkier engineer report. So the 'scattered notes' were written on the flyleaves of books, on odd sheets of paper etc., which, with the D.G.C.D. report, survived three and a half years of captivity, by subterfuge and luck. Both reached England with me in December 1945 and it is from them that this book is compiled.

With the defeat of Japan, I left the prisoner of war camp for senior officers at Mukden, Manchuria, and came home via Manila, San Francisco and across the U.S.A. During the Atlantic crossing (Halifax to Southampton in S.S. *Queen Elizabeth*) I met and discussed the fall of Singapore with Lord Ismay. At his very strong insistence, I gave the report on civil defence personally to the then Deputy Chief of the Imperial General Staff at the War Office in December 1945; although it was a civil report, prepared for Mr. Duff Cooper, and it really had nothing to do with the War Office. I learned that Mr. Duff Cooper was now British Ambassador in Paris. Our last meeting had been in Singapore in January 1942, and we never met again. He made two brief visits to London from Paris in early 1946, when he asked me to meet him but my medical advisers refused to allow me to make the journey from Devon.

When reasonably fit some months later in 1946 I was appointed to the Control Commission in Germany; and much later obtained permission from the Cabinet Office (Historical Section) in 1957 to send the civil defence report to Mr. Duff Cooper. But he died before I could do so. This report was apparently never sent to him by the War Office, nor by the Official Historians.

I always regret that he never saw this report. He had ordered it and I feel he would have better achieved my object in getting some civil facts known and therefore perhaps corrected for the future.

General Kirby and his Cabinet Office (Historical Section) staff began to collect material for the Official History of the

Malayan campaign in 1951, and the War Office forwarded them a copy of my civil defence report.

In many subsequent meetings with General Kirby and our exchange of letters, I repeatedly pressed for insertion of the more important engineering and other facts, which I felt had a bearing on the quick capitulation of the fortress. I also wished to include some material from my civil defence report, for the shortcomings here would soon have caused serious trouble if Singapore had undergone a prolonged siege.

For some two years, General Kirby and his research team remained frankly incredulous about some of what they termed my 'astonishing statements' on the military and civil defence acts of omission and commission. Finally, in February 1955, General Kirby wrote that he accepted the evidence of my civil defence report as accurate.

Contemporary documentary and even verbal evidence after such a quick and crushing defeat as the fall of Singapore is often conflicting and in short supply. A large box containing Headquarters Malaya Command papers had been buried by G.O.C.'s orders at night in the Changi prisoner of war camp. Full precautions (as we thought) were taken by tin lining to the box and its complete encasement (four inches thick) with tar and asphalt (to keep out the white ant), which was all we had available as prisoners. Three and a half years later the box was dug up. The white ant had managed to get through and the box and all its contents had been destroyed completely. Sufficient evidence of confirmation, either verbal or documentary, must have ultimately been discovered for some of the facts, which therefore are mentioned in the Official History. Other facts of real importance which I gave to General Kirby do not however appear in the official work, and one can only assume no corroborative evidence was obtainable.

About this time General Kirby suggested that I should write the Engineer history covering the war in Malaya; but with no war diaries, no Unit records, no staff and no office organization, this would have been impossible. He then suggested that I offer my material to Major-General R. P. Pakenham Walsh, C.B., M.C., who was writing the Royal Engineer history of the war. I did so, but while this publication gives Royal Engineer Unit experiences, there is again little attempt to draw conclusions and point out the mistakes which were made in Malaya,

for the benefit of future commanders and engineers. Quotations from The Royal Engineer History are given later.

So for the second time I had failed to get my information published. In a last effort I wrote to Sir Winston Churchill who was willing, under certain conditions, to forward the points I wished to make, in confidence, to his Minister of Defence.

My suggestion to Sir Winston was that he nominate a senior officer who would forward to the Ministry of Defence only those points worth looking into for the future, but using his own name instead of mine. I suggested this method because there were military and civil personnel from Malaya in the Ministry of Defence. The document would probably have been passed to them. The name of anybody actually involved in Malaya would have resurrected the old arguments and bitter feelings which had persisted for so long and which again had arisen seriously during the writing of the Official History; feelings which still persist today over a quarter of a century after events.

Sir Winston, however, insisted that my name should be mentioned to the Ministry of Defence. This was in July 1956. As I knew that the Official History was finished and ready for publication (though none of the principal actors had been allowed to see the final draft) I did not pursue the matter. I hoped the Official History might yet mention the major acts of omission and commission which had such a bearing on the speed of collapse in Malaya. But with publication in 1957 I found these hopes were not fulfilled. I should have accepted Sir Winston's terms.

While the Official History THE WAR AGAINST JAPAN *Vol. 1. The Loss of Singapore* indicates many errors of judgement by all the services in Malaya, it does not mention the deliberate disregard of advice offered by experts in their relevant fields. Nor does it tell how much more could have been achieved if better use had been made of Army personnel and defence material already available in Malaya long before Japan attacked. The two other services, the Royal Navy and R.A.F., lacked ships and modern aircraft so, unfortunately, could contribute little.

While my story has been written to bring to light what I know about the disaster and what I know and personally believe

to have been wrong, I later touch on other matters which are not limited to military engineering or civil defence work. I do this without apology because a war machine, to function efficiently, must work well in all its parts, not only a few.

During my own six and a half months in Singapore, I was able to see what was done and, more to the point, what was not done. During this period, my four months of peace that remained and the ten weeks of war, the cosmopolitan inhabitants and cosmopolitan fighting units should have been going through an intensive preparation for war. That this was not so is confirmed by the speed of collapse, which was achieved in seventy days, not the hundred days the Japanese themselves estimated; and using only three divisions, not the five originally scheduled for the invasion.

The Japanese attack was virile, but by no means so overpowering in men and equipment that a determined defence could not have held or at any rate delayed it. But the enemy had something we lacked—a clear plan, good preparation, the determination and tactical skill to carry it through, with very fit and highly-trained troops, well directed. We lacked all these things and made no serious effort to offset our disadvantages.

While many of our troops were inexperienced, our rapid collapse in Malaya, in my opinion, was more due to unimaginative leadership, both military and civil, than to the troops as this story will attempt to show.

The people in Malaya, especially in Singapore, both military and civil, lived in a fool's paradise. The policy of the government and the fighting services was 'Don't worry, it may never happen'. This was backed by a serious underestimation of the Japanese who, it was thought, had more than they could handle after four years of war in China and who, it was said, were near to economic collapse. In the First World War after three to four years war, we were better equipped, better trained and more efficient despite far heavier losses than the Japanese. No attempt had been made to condition the mixed population of Malays, Chinese, Indians and British, to the possibility of war and what war meant. Naturally they took their cue from the leaders, and if the leaders were not worried, why should they be?

Not even the beginning of the war nor the first shock of the

Japanese landings and their rapid progress down the peninsula jolted bureaucracy. At a time when files and typewriters, routines and procedures should metaphorically have been thrown out of the window, official procedure still dictated the pace—not quick decision and action. Time, now the vital factor, was ignored. The festive mood remained; people still dressed for dinner.

Some of the blame for the lack of permanent defences, especially on the vital North Shore of the Island facing Johore, undoubtedly lay with the Home Government. They held the purse strings and had reduced spending before the war. But how such a staggering defensive omission could be overlooked by all those on the spot, and the issue shelved for so many years—and still shelved even in 1941 after the start of war—deserves the closest examination for the teaching at our civil and military schools of instruction, such as the Imperial Defence College, the Higher Commanders Course, all three Staff Colleges and many other schools of instruction.

Over the years, it appears, none of several military commanders (except General Dobbie) in Malaya, took up the defence deficiencies and made a *cause célèbre* of them in London. It is clear, whoever was to blame, that the ship was wrecked for the lack of a coat or two of tar.

Our great Prime Minister, Mr. Winston Churchill as he then was, considered as late as October–November 1941 that Japan would not make war. For once he was proved wrong and possibly the lack of local preparation in Malaya itself, was due to the Authorities there adopting this comfortable view which saved them so much trouble and expense. The known military weaknesses and the riches of petrol, oil, tin, rubber and iron ore—of which the Japanese had been starved by American-British-Dutch sanctions imposed in July 1941—plus of course the chance of a lifetime to expand while Britain, U.S.S.R. and the Netherlands were preoccupied with Germany, literally forced the Japanese to go into the war. In August 1941, some businessmen, who knew the Japanese, warned that their need for those war materials would make them do just this.

The collapse of Malaya cost us more than the loss of territory, more than the cargoes of rubber, petrol and tin. It destroyed, possibly for all time, British prestige in the Far East. We became what the Chinese so aptly called 'A Paper Tiger'.

It is most unfortunate that no court of inquiry, as envisaged by Sir Winston Churchill, was held after the war while the leading actors in the drama were alive to give their evidence. Such an investigation, which was never implemented later by several Labour or Conservative governments, would have shown what were the real causes of such quick failure—individuals or the system. Possibly the matter was dropped because the Home Government of the day realized that they shared some responsibility for the disaster with those in Malaya. The latter could and should have done better, however, with the resources already available in the country.

But what troubles one is the thought that the faults seem still to be there, that the lessons have not been learned, and that the military *defence* doctrine in our army teaching schools may require reshaping, or pointing out more strongly and clearly; since so many civil and army leaders omitted essentials.

One wishes that the Malayan campaign was required for study by both military experts and civil defence organizations at the highest levels. The main principles of war will always apply despite technological advances in equipment; yet we have virtually disbanded civil defence training in this country, though it had proved its value in war and is still being developed by several European nations.

2

WAR OFFICE INSTRUCTIONS TO THE NEW CHIEF ENGINEER, MALAYA COMMAND

Prior to appointment as Chief Engineer, Malaya Command, I had spent three years (1937–39) at the War Office and one year (1940) at the Ministry of Supply after the Master General of the Ordnance and his Branches moved from the War Office to the Ministry of Supply. In both places I served under the Director of Mechanization as Assistant Director of Engineering with continuous and close liaison with the Staff Duties and Military Training branches at the War Office on the engineering requirements of the Army. This also involved frequent visits to establishments of the Royal Engineers and Signals Board (as it was then called). The R.E.S.B. had specialist research and development staff for the complete modernization of all R.E. equipment and the techniques and training necessary for using such new equipment in the field. This covered railway, road, and personnel bridges of all types, floating and rigid (including the Bailey bridge); water supply; petrol storage; demolitions and new demolition explosives; camouflage; obstacles against enemy tank and infantry landings from the sea and their advance on land; 'disappearing pill boxes' to protect airfields etc. against paratroops and plane landings; searchlights and sound locators (and radar which was being developed there); barbed wire of various sorts; booby traps . . . etc.; and how best to deal with similar enemy items when we were attacking. In fact the engineering equipment of the army was being brought up-to-date after intensive troop trials.

For about five months in 1941 I was Deputy Chief Engineer (Operations) at H.Q. Scottish Command, installing many such items on airfields and seaward against tank and infantry landings—and advance on land if they got established ashore.

In many books the term 'Defences' is loosely used to include all the defending forces and their fighting equipment—ships, aeroplanes, tanks, guns, machine-guns, etc. In this book, however, 'Defences' is used in its far narrower sense to cover all works which directly or indirectly protect the man, be he soldier or civilian, or delay the enemy's advance. Thus 'Defences' include trenches, pillboxes, dugouts, gun emplacements, air raid shelters, camouflage, demolition of anything but mainly roads and railways (usually bridges), barbed wire and obstacles of all sorts against tanks, infantry, bombing and landings from the sea or air, flooded and incendiary areas, land and sea mines, searchlights, etc.—in fact everything that will increase casualties to the attacker directly or by delaying him while under fire; and decrease the defender's casualties by physical protection for his body.

Then, in May 1941, I was ordered to report urgently to the War Office to Major-General W. Cave Browne, C.B.E, D.S.O., M.C., the Director of Fortifications and Works. This was the senior War Office Engineer appointment at that time, since the Engineer in Chief appointment was not established until later in the war.

General Cave Browne told me that I had been chosen for the post of Chief Engineer Malaya Command because of this up-to-date knowledge and experience in the development and installation of modern defences. Of course others possessed these qualifications but perhaps were not readily available at that time.

His instructions, given verbally, but written down by me at the time, were:

To install the most modern types of defences throughout Malaya, including Singapore Island, and to bring all existing defences up-to-date—specifically against possible beach landings and against tank and air attack. This was stressed as my most important task. He knew Malaya and its limitations well.

I asked General Cave Browne if war with Japan was considered imminent, and was told that it had long been considered possible; but since two of the Axis partners were now committed and relations between the Japanese and the United States seemed to be worsening, 'possible' was rapidly becoming 'probable'.

General Cave Browne also told me that friction existed between the Chief Engineer's office and the General Staff in Malaya. Relations had deteriorated in recent years. As a

consequence, he said, I would possibly suffer from this unfortunate state of affairs, and he urged me to move carefully and to do everything possible to repair the damage.

He also asked me to check the internal organization of the Works Service in the Chief Engineer's office and to tighten up control on works contracts because an officer in Singapore had recently been convicted of malpractice.

Although I did not realize it at the time, my subsequent troubles in Malaya were really to date from this meeting because I had no written orders. Clearly the general instruction that I was receiving which envisaged the complete overhaul and modernization of Malaya's defences should subsequently reach the General Officer Commanding Malaya Command in writing through War Office General Staff channels; and then from the G.O.C. to his Chief Engineer as orders in more detail.

I immediately asked General Cave Browne for instructions in writing to show General Percival, the General Officer Commanding Malaya Command, on my arrival in Singapore.

Although I pressed him on this issue, General Cave Browne refused to set out my duties in writing, but told me that the Chief of the Imperial General Staff himself was about to write to the G.O.C., Malaya to the effect that modern defences of every type were needed in Malaya; and that this letter would mention me by name as being qualified to carry out the modernization. I next asked if a copy of the C.I.G.S. letter to the G.O.C. Malaya Command could be forwarded to me. This was refused.

Consequently I sailed for Malaya without any instructions in writing, with nothing on paper to show the wide-sweeping and fundamental importance of my terms of reference. The refusal to give me briefing instructions in writing seems, in retrospect, to have been a grave mistake, especially because of the known difficulties between the General Staff and the Chief Engineer's office at Headquarters Malaya Command. Malaya of course was not then at war and General Cave Browne, like the rest of the War Office staff, was fully occupied with the war against Germany. With London under heavy air attack, with a German invasion of Britain still possible, with home defences to be hastily established and a new army to house and train, it is easy to see why the letter from C.I.G.S. to G.O.C., Malaya was apparently overlooked.

Although it is being wise after the event, it would have been of great help if General Cave Browne had given me instructions in writing 'for information only' and to have stated therein that a letter was to follow from C.I.G.S. to General Percival.

My personal position with General Percival on my arrival would then have been covered by my instructions in writing. Even if the promised letter from C.I.G.S. had not followed in confirmation, General Percival could hardly have brushed my written instructions aside without first raising the matter with London.

And with no C.I.G.S. letter arriving in confirmation—even assuming General Percival had not raised the matter with London—I too would have been in a position to communicate officially with General Cave Browne to seek confirmation or cancellation, if policy for defence measures had been changed. The human element had failed somewhere, with very serious consequences for Singapore later.

I sailed from England on June 1, 1941, and the journey, in convoy, was by the long route around the Cape. As senior officer on board I arranged lectures for the Army and R.A.F. personnel. Among the reinforcements for Malaya were several British officers who were going out as Japanese interpreters. They knew much about the military, naval and air potential of Japan, and confirmed that we would find the Japanese a powerful, resourceful and aggressive opponent, if war started.

Although I had never visited Japan, I had studied the Russo–Japanese War of 1904–5 for an earlier promotion examination; and, becoming really interested, had subsequently read every book I could find on that campaign.

As a result I had formed a very high opinion of Japanese fighting capabilities, of their methods of training, powers of endurance, their *élan* and readiness to exploit swiftly every tactical opportunity, and their quick ability to master new and complicated types of equipment.

Most of these interpreter officers were aware of the resourcefulness and power of Japan as an enemy, and in their own lectures stated that it would be madness to underestimate them. The oldest of them in fact had been a press correspondent in the Russo–Japanese war, 1904–5.

When I finally reached Singapore I found that few of the senior commanders had made any effort to study our potential

enemy. In fact, the majority apparently grossly underrated the Japanese soldier both in his ability to fight a modern war and his qualities of physical endurance and courage. He was underestimated too in the air as well as on the land. In the Far East, it seemed, only the Royal Navy, who had originally trained some of the Japanese naval officers, did not underrate the Japanese. As a consequence little had been done, militarily, to prepare adequate resistance if war came.

We arrived in Singapore on August 5, and I took over as Chief Engineer from Brigadier J. A. C. Pennycuick, D.S.O. and bar, p.s.c. We had been together as cadets at Woolwich and as Young Officers at Chatham; but had never met again since 1911.

I had met General Percival, the G.O.C., previously at one of the Higher Commanders' courses, or possibly at the R.A.F. Staff College or at the Imperial Defence College, when I lectured at these places between 1935 and 1940. I had also known his Brigadier General Staff (Brigadier K. S. Torrance) who had been G.S.O. 1, Burma, when I had been Commander Royal Engineers, Burma during the rebellion of 1932–33. I had not previously met any of the other senior commanders and staff officers.

Brigadier Pennycuick had long been concerned about the state of the defences in Singapore. He said that he had tried to have these built, but nothing effective had been done and nobody seemed to be interested. I studied all his minutes on the subject, and found them, to my mind, tactically and technically sound. I also found apathy on the need for defences anywhere.

My previous relations with both General Percival and Brigadier Torrance had been normal and friendly. But from the beginning, on first taking over as Chief Engineer, I at once became conscious of an indefinable restraint on their part—as if they never trusted the Chief Engineer or his staff. Though I did all I could to establish friendly and frank relationships with them I felt I did not fully succeed then—or even at first when we were prisoners of war together after Singapore fell—though this feeling certainly disappeared later.

The reasons for this feeling perhaps were partly because of strained relations prior to my arrival: and partly because they—already averse to any defences—suspected that I was bluffing about my instructions from the War Office to modernize and

extend defence works. Whatever the reason it was discouraging, dispiriting and unnecessary, because the matter could have so easily been cleared up by a signal to the War Office by General Percival, if he doubted my word about my verbal instructions. I asked him to do so several times, because as time marched on, the C.I.G.S. letter never arrived.

During my first six weeks in Malaya I travelled six thousand miles. I visited all Formation Commands, with the exception of the Kuantan Area, down to Brigade level. I toured every likely invasion landing beach, every airfield which was either in service or under construction, again with the exception of the Kuantan Area, and traversed practically all the main roads and railways.

These, and subsequent tours, were made by air, launch, rail, by car, or on foot—and once on horseback. I made copious notes on what I saw so that I should know where the Engineers could be most effective, if war came, in supporting the fighting troops.

The old adage that 'personal reconnaissance is never wasted' proved true and useful later. My journeys were interspersed with frequent returns to Singapore to see my Deputy, and to check whether the letter from C.I.G.S. had arrived, when I hoped to get some orders from the G.O.C.

By now, the end of September, over four months after I had received my verbal instructions from General Cave Browne, I became seriously concerned about the non-arrival of the confirmatory letter from C.I.G.S.

On several occasions I had asked General Percival to send a signal to the War Office asking for confirmation that General Cave Browne had given me specific instructions about Singapore defences. I told the General that the C.I.G.S. letter might well have been lost *en route* through enemy action and stressed that the subject was of far too great importance to go by default. At one of these later meetings I suggested to General Percival that he was scarcely being fair to me since it could be alleged, without his receiving War Office confirmation, that I was being a charlatan in claiming that specific and important instructions had been given to me in London. But General Percival decided to take no action locally or with the War Office. So, deeply concerned, in September I wrote privately by airmail to General Cave Browne. I asked him to expedite the letter from C.I.G.S.

to General Percival because it seemed that nothing would be done to extend or modernize defences until General Percival had received orders from above.

Meanwhile on the minor points of instruction General Cave Browne had given me, I impressed upon my staff the importance of improving personal relationships with the General Staff at all levels. I further instructed that all cases of friction arising with the General Staff or with units should be personally reported to me.

I also carried out the instruction to tighten control on contracts issued to civilian firms for building roads, etc., and here there was a curious sequel.

I was always pressing the importance of defence work and, at one meeting with the G.O.C. present, a staff officer stated that this was useless because the few concrete machine-gun posts which had been built around Singapore Town were not bullet-proof. This, it was said, was because an officer (sentenced prior to my arrival to five years for the offence) had taken bribes from a contractor.

With General Percival's permission, I got the staff officer later to point out three M.G. posts which he thought were not up to standard, and I then had them demolished by pneumatic drill. All were inspected by the accuser, and one by General Percival, and all three were found to be without fault. This demonstration helped to stop dangerous and ignorant gossip on defences.

3

SUGGESTIONS FOR DEFENCES IN MALAYA

When I first discovered in September what I thought to be indifference to expansion and modernization of defences for a Fortress was definite policy among all the senior commanders in Malaya, I was profoundly shocked. It not only contradicted recent War Office thinking on defences (including as I had been led to understand the wishes of the C.I.G.S.), but it went against what every single senior officer had himself experienced in the First World War—the tremendous stopping power of barbed wire covered by fire from trenches and pillboxes, in all theatres of war. It went against all the reading of history too. Moreover, I had recently left an England and Scotland preparing energetically with defences and obstacles of all sorts to hold beaches and airfields as firmly as possible against paratroops, tanks and infantry. In fact anti-tank and M.G. posts were being constructed many miles inland on main roads for example, near Oxford.

Early thinking for Singapore had been that the British Navy and R.A.F. (and later the American Navy) would protect Malaya from Japan, 3,000 miles away. Sea and air forces would deal with hostile shipping in the Gulf of Siam and the South China Sea; while heavy guns on Singapore Island would keep enemy warships out of range of the naval base and Singapore Town even for tip and run raids. In 1940–41, several new airfields were under construction up country but were never equipped with modern aircraft and in due course were used by the enemy air force to help subjugate Malaya.

With the outbreak of war in Europe in 1939, the position changed completely. Modern aircraft and fighting ships could not be spared for a part of the world which was not involved in war and might never be. Indeed as late as November 1941 many

responsible people in Whitehall thought there would be no war in the Far East. There was a strong belief that Japan had over-extended herself in her war on the land mass of China. Yet others, who knew the Japanese, thought she might well strike while Great Britain was fighting alone for her life on the other side of the world. It was an opportunity too good to miss; still more so when Germany attacked Japan's traditional enemy Russia, and Japan occupied Indo-China.

It was clearly useless to try and save Malaya by modern ship and air reinforcements if this would strip the U.K. to danger point while still under threat of German invasion in 1940–41. Thus, the defence of Malaya now fell practically entirely on the Army.

The full local demands for extra troops, and particularly modern aircraft, were never met—could not be met; but the Australian, Indian and the Home Governments did dispatch appreciable troop reinforcements before and after the Japanese attack. Some of these new arrivals, however, were virtually recruits under-trained, inexperienced and ill-equipped. There were no tanks, few anti-tank guns and no modern aircraft. The Japanese invasion of French Indo-China gave her airfields near to Malaya. War Office thinking in 1941 may well have been that Malaya, if attacked, could hold out temporarily even with inferior-equipped troops, if her physical defences were strong. From behind barbed wire in trenches and pillboxes, a semi-trained man with only a rifle and machine gun can take heavy toll of an attacker as we and all nations learned in the First World War; but the semi-trained man would stand little chance in open or jungle country against a fully trained and equipped enemy.

Since 1938, it had been considered that the Japanese might land in Siam and their army advance down the full length of the Malayan peninsula to Singapore. Some of our leaders saw safety too in the terrain. There were few roads leading from the Siamese border to Singapore Island, and in parts these were flanked by primary jungle, which some mistakenly thought was too dense to traverse or to fight in. The belief was that an enemy could be held on the roads, without serious outflanking through the jungle.

Unlike the attitude in Britain, far too much was taken for granted in Malaya, including the oldest and most serious

mistake of greatly underestimating the enemy in all three elements.

All this was in sharp contrast to the philosophy which prevailed in Scottish Command during my previous appointment. General Carrington, then G.O.C. Scottish Command, worked continuously to improve and extend all physical defences particularly on the beaches and airfields. He, personally had given his immediate attention to reports from any of his officers which had to do with defence matters, and a great deal of thought and time was devoted to examining, and if necessary rectifying, points reported as capable of improvement.

The lessons from the fall of France in 1940 were not being overlooked in the defence of the British Isles.

The situation in Malaya was very different. Senior officers were discouraged from reporting or making recommendations on anything outside their own specific sphere.

For example, in Scotland it was finally the agreed War Office/Air Ministry policy that airfields must have defences built and manned long before the buildings and runways became usable and the field operational. I informed General Percival of this, and also the Air Officer Commanding, but nothing was done, possibly because there were insufficient troops. Consequently there remained every risk throughout the war that airfields might be 'jumped' by enemy paratroops before their ground troops reached them. This in fact occurred later in Sumatra but fortunately never in Malaya.

All I could do to protect incompleted or unused airfields, as Chief Engineer, was to block them with obstacles against plane landings, but this of course would not have stopped paratroops.

An actual invasion exercise with troops landing on the east coast from ships had been carried out in Scottish Command, which had immediately shown up certain defensive weaknesses. These were promptly corrected by General Carrington.

I suggested to General Percival that a similar exercise be carried out near Kota Bharu in Malaya, but the proposal was deemed impossible. Such an exercise might however have proved helpful to prevent the Japanese landing so successfully actually at Kota Bharu some two months later.

By mid-October the only defence work in hand or planned, so far as I knew, was:

1 The short Jitra single anti-tank line* across the main road. To my mind (though I could not say so) this was too far forward. It was easily and quickly turnable by tanks on its eastern flank, by infanty on both flanks, and of course by sea on both flanks.

2 More beach landing obstacles proposed on the south side of Singapore Island which was already covered by big guns and small arms fire. I thought we were gilding the lily here. This was the only strong defended section and therefore it was never attacked. The tubular scaffolding to be erected later against small boat landings would have been more valuable on the North shore of the island, as was suggested.

No other defences, certainly none of the types suggested, were either in hand or authorized at that time.

So, in mid-October, since no letter to the G.O.C. had arrived from the C.I.G.S., I sought an interview with General Percival to lay before him in detail various proposals on defences. Some of these he had already received piecemeal through his B.G.S. (Brigadier Torrance), as the result of my earlier tours.

General Percival kindly gave up the entire morning to this discussion and Brigadier Torrance was present most of the time. On the map, I suggested defensive positions at defiles and other suitable places down the Malayan peninsula, in South Johore and particularly on the north shores of Singapore Island, all of which I had personally reconnoitred.

I pointed out that whatever basic framework of permanent and field defences was ordered by him now, could be carried out by civil labour directly or under contract, but that this would almost certainly prove to be more difficult once war had started. At present, I added, I was also in a position to provide adequate supervision by R.E. officers and N.C.O.s who were trained in defence work, which would again be more difficult once war had started. There were ample stores available for all the work suggested, and there would still be enough left for the wants of local commanders up country.

Here, if I might digress a moment. There were large quantities of defence stores in Singapore and up country which had been shipped out in 1938–39. They included steel loopholes for pillboxes, sandbags, pickets, old and the latest types of barbed wire, including much high tensile steel anti-tank Dannert

* See map on page 12.

wire . . . The War Office had shipped such materials to Gibraltar, Malta, Aden, Singapore, etc., knowing that after war had started, there was invariably a strain on shipping and shipping routes to such oversea garrisons.

At this mid-October meeting with the G.O.C., I gave several examples from history which showed the wisdom of constructing permanent and field defences whilst time, labour, supervision and material were available and long before the defences were needed. Among the examples I gave with explanations, were Torres Vedras (1810), Sebastopol (1854–55), Port Arthur (1904), field defences as used by all belligerents in 1914–18, and the little known but classic story of the Givenchy Redoubt (1915–18), which I will deal with later. I also mentioned, the British army efforts to extend the defences in 1939–40 from the Maginot Line to the sea, of which the G.O.C. probably had personal knowledge.

I mentioned particularly, what I could remember of the Russo-Japanese war of 1904–5. It gave a clear warning of how the Japanese might strike—and they now had air power in addition in French Indo-China, within range of Malaya. I said that at Port Arthur in 1904 Japan hit suddenly, without warning, and of course no declaration of war. Half the Russian naval strength in the Yellow Sea was put out of action by this surprise attack and at a cost to the Japanese of negligible casualties. (After the war I looked this up. They had 6 killed and 45 wounded!) Landings followed at once, and if the Japanese repeated this method in Malaya, I thought that our small obsolescent air force (and no navy) would be totally unable to prevent landings in force up country.

This earlier war also showed a Japanese army characteristic of invariably attacking in considerable strength, at once, straight ahead on the shortest direct route to their objective. In this, they were prepared to accept heavy casualties. Simultaneously without waiting to see if the initial thrust was a success, the Japanese had usually sent other formations round one or both flanks in their up country battles in Korea and Manchuria. In their siege of Port Arthur the Japanese battle casualties were over double the Russians, thanks largely to the latter's strong defences. Although outnumbered by 3 to 1, they held out for about 5 months.

I was asked to tell the story of the Givenchy Redoubt. It was

the idea of a C.R.E. of a Division holding the line here in 1915. Although not required by his own and subsequent Divisional Commanders holding this part of the front, permission was given for it to be worked on by a succession and variety of Sapper units whenever they had men available. The village of Givenchy was on a slight eminence just north of the La Bassée canal. It and its very solid church and tower, was totally destroyed by enemy shell fire in the severe fighting of 1914–15. Underneath the church was a large crypt, still intact and now provided with heavy masonry overhead cover perhaps 16 to 20 ft. thick. The crypt was to be strengthened by steel girders and internal walls; and provided with steel loopholes at ground level which gave a splendid all round field of fire as the surrounding debris of the village gradually disappeared to floor the wet front line trenches near by. The whole job took about three years to complete in men's spare time. I worked there for short spells in the latter half of 1915, but was never there later and heard the sequel from others.

After peace with Russia in 1917, large German reinforcements arrived on the Western Front and heavy attacks could be expected. The Givenchy Redoubt, from early 1918 apparently, was kept fully and permanently garrisoned and stocked up with food, water, ammunition, access being usually only possible at night. In the German attacks of 1918, the redoubt was apparently overrun several times, but it was never silenced and caused very heavy casualties to the enemy over some weeks. The British fronts North of Givenchy and South of Arras were pushed back. By this Givenchy 'hinge' holding fast, it possibly saved the Givenchy–Vimy Ridge–Arras front from being rolled up from the north. I told the G.O.C. that it seemed good value from a never-officially-wanted and virtually a spare-time job.

During this long mid-October conference, with Malaya still at peace, my specific proposals for defensive measures were:

1 Anti-tank and machine-gun positions in depth across roads and railways at as many natural defiles down the Malaya peninsula as possible; to prevent deep tank penetration as had occurred in France in 1940. I had noted many such natural defiles on my tours and I now indicated them on the map. Also I recommended detailed demolition plans to be prepared in advance and mine chambers built for all major

bridges. Since they had already used tanks in China, it was expected that the Japanese would use them in Malaya, should they attack.

2 Any of the above positions selected to have some flank protection. Some flanks could be canalized for ambushes; others blocked by anti-personnel mines. Additional protection would be barbed wire, trip wires, booby-traps and such-like, all aimed at forcing casualties, delay and longer detour on the enemy and warning by the explosions. I specified some points where our flanks could be thrown forward to ambush the main enemy advance along the road or railway from three sides.* In other positions the flanks could be refused.

3 A complete ring of permanent and field defences round Johore Bahru to keep the naval base out of shell range. A detailed reconnaissance had found several M.G. pillboxes in jungle about a mile or two apart near Kota Tinggi. This was the line now suggested for full development with flanks on the sea and Johore Straits. The history of these pillboxes was unknown to the G.O.C., B.G.S., or myself. Years later from the Official History (p. 16), I learned that they were built in 1939 by General Dobbie when G.O.C. His successor (General Bond) must have stopped this work as the Official History records that only £23,000 out of £60,000 allotted by the War Office was actually spent.

4 For the north shore of Singapore Island covering the waters and opposite shores of the Johore Straits, I proposed field and permanent defences in depth consisting of mutually supporting wired trenches, switch lines, pillboxes and various underwater obstacles, mines, petrol fire traps, anchored but floating barbed wire, and methods of illuminating the water at night. Rivers and mouths of rivers up country could be provided with similar defences also. The idea was that the water surface and shore line should always be the main killing ground.

5 To organize Chinese and Malays into guerrilla bands to operate behind enemy spearheads. To use various aboriginal tribes as guides and to give warning of enemy movement through the jungle.

* The Australians sprang a most effective ambush along these lines at Gemas three months later; but it was apparently the only one during the campaign. This could well have been repeated in many defiles both north and south of Gemas.

My basic idea, as suggested to General Percival, was to carry out now whatever heavy work he required at key points on the roads and railways up country and on the north shore of Singapore Island. These heavier works would take time to build, would not deteriorate in the hot and humid climate and would quickly be camouflaged by the growth of vegetation. All the lighter work and smaller items could be added swiftly when the main axis of an enemy's attack was known for certain. But all the minor features could also be carefully planned now and stores allocated and placed near the sites he chose.

One of the points I made was that it seemed that Malaya could always expect to be the theatre of war most short of men and equipment until Germany, the greater threat to home, was knocked out. Strong defences therefore would reduce our casualties while allowing us to inflict more and to *see* the enemy's casualties which always increased morale of the defenders. I stressed that what was now proposed did not commit General Percival to man any positions until the need actually arose.

Repeatedly I had reminded both listeners that it was a well established historical fact that coastal fortresses, if seriously defended, invariably fell by attack from the landward side—never from the sea.

It was officially thought that if Japan attacked, she would land her forces on the north-east coast and, as she had shown to the whole world in the 1904–5 war with Russia and in her attack on China in 1937, her military machine would be efficient, amphibious, and her personnel fanatically brave, well-trained, resourceful, and well-equipped.

This meeting with General Percival was a very long and friendly one. I had done my homework and reconnaissance thoroughly and so could be specific on all points.

There were very many questions by the G.O.C. and B.G.S., and it was clear to me that they were really interested in the historical examples quoted and the defensive suggestions for Malaya and Singapore. I had great hopes that some defences at least would now be ordered or that reference to the War Office would be made on their instructions to me; but finally General Percival decided to take no action at all. He would give me no reason. I was very disappointed of course and gave much thought later to what his reasons might be for no defences. This was in mid-October 1941, and I thought he might well have

refused to order defences because he thought there might never be war (as so many thought); or because his immediate predecessor (General L. V. Bond) had also decided against defences though in turn his predecessor (General Dobbie) had wanted them in 1938–39; or because G.O.C.'s local financial powers were very small for preparation for war and this was causing many references to the War Office. At that time, the G.O.C., B.G.S. and I were all unaware of the War Office allotment of £60,000 to General Dobbie in 1939 for the start of defences, only about one-third of which had so far been spent. There seems little doubt that reference to the War Office in mid-October 1941 would certainly have produced much more money for defences than it had in 1939.

Despite this major setback, I continued to advocate defence measures to local commanders in my travels, whenever the opportunity offered; but, alas, with no more success than I had in discussions with the G.O.C.

When I wrote again by air mail the second time (late October) to General Cave Browne at the War Office, I informed him of this meeting with General Percival and of his 'no defences' decision. I made a point of stating that no effective defences would now ever be constructed in Malaya unless orders for their construction came from the C.I.G.S. in the promised letter which still had not reached G.O.C. I had no reply to this second letter either. This was the last time I wrote to General Cave Browne.

It took me just ten years to clear up this mystery of why General Cave Browne had not replied. In 1952, now back from service in Germany and while General Kirby was collecting material for the Official History, I told him of the verbal War Office orders I had received, which had not been confirmed either by General Cave Browne in writing to me or in the promised letter from G.I.G.S. to G.O.C.

General Kirby took the matter up with General Cave Browne and with the War Office, and in a letter to me dated May 1 1953 he wrote:

> "I saw Cave Browne today. You reached Malaya in August (1941) and you wrote him probably in September 1941*. He left the appointment of D.F.W. in the middle of September and, therefore, it is probable that he never received your letter.
>
> * This was my first letter. The second was in late October.

His successor knew nothing about Singapore and would not know of Cave Browne's discussion with you. Cave Browne cannot remember discussing the matter with Dill who was then C.I.G.S. In any case Dill was at that time a failing figure and shortly afterwards was replaced by Brooke. I am afraid, therefore, that we shall never get to the bottom of this."

My two air-mail letters in September and October to General Cave Browne were both addressed to him personally by name at the War Office and should have been forwarded to him wherever he was—unless they had been destroyed *en route* by enemy action, which was unlikely to happen to both letters.

I did not meet General Cave Browne again until 1955. On my reminding him, he recalled in general his three verbal orders to me in May 1941. He also confirmed that he had never received any letters from me from Malaya. He could not explain why no letter from C.I.G.S., as promised, had gone to General Percival.

In early 1941 Malaya was not a live issue at the War Office, since the Prime Minister and many senior officers thought that Japan would not go to war. Presumably the C.I.G.S. letter was overlooked in the pressure of the more urgent business of waging war with Germany.

What I cannot accept is the theory, suggested by others, that General Cave Browne put up the idea of the C.I.G.S. letter as a 'morale booster' for me. He was not the type of man to do this, nor did he have any incentive to do so, and I also think he knew me well enough to know that I hated this sort of nonsense.

Although he could not recall any specific discussion with C.I.G.S. or his deputies on the defence plans so many years later, I feel certain that General Cave Browne spoke the truth in May 1941 when he said a letter from C.I.G.S. was to go to General Percival.

There was a possibility of course that his definite statements and orders to me had emerged from discussions he had with some other Directorate—for example Military Operations—which had intended to get C.I.G.S. to write in confirmation, and then omitted to do so. The point will now never be cleared up but, in my opinion, it proved serious for Malaya a few months later.

A corollary arises. It is suggested that verbal briefing instructions of this sort should always be given to the officer concerned

in writing, 'for information only', with a copy kept in the officer's file at the War Office. The written word forces accuracy of thought, prevents misunderstandings, avoids forgetfulness by overbusy men and establishes responsibility. Had General Percival referred the matter to the War Office as requested, General Cave Browne's successor would then have known the main details of my briefing instructions. Had I been armed with this letter 'for information only' the G.O.C. could hardly brush the subject aside without referring it to the War Office for confirmation; and I also would have been in a position to raise the matter with the War Office Engineer branch officially.

4

CONSIDERATIONS OTHER THAN DEFENCES, JUNGLE TRAINING, RATIONS, DUTIES OF C.E., N.E. MONSOON LANDINGS, LABOUR

Another matter which caused some disquiet to those who knew the Japanese physical efficiency was the physical condition of some of our troops in Malaya. It quickly became clear that the standard of physical fitness, discipline and training varied enormously in the Commonwealth fighting units (British, Australian, Indian, Gurkha and Malay). Special training in jungle warfare and against aircraft and tanks, and continuous speed in attack was not as good in most of our units as they proved to be in enemy units.

Certainly the tropical climate had much to do with the softness of some of the troops. Some British units had been there for as long as six years, and all ranks had become accustomed to the easy and slower living conditions of the East. To any new arrival, this was a sharp contrast to the very spartan training to which all U.K. forces had been subjected since 1940; even to the point of dismissing Commanding Officers who did not carry out G.H.Q. Home Forces instructions on this subject.

The Royal Navy and R.A.F. live, work, eat, sleep and move in war time all in much the same way as they do in peace. The Army, however, is different. 'Peace-time fitness' is totally insufficient for the soldier in war. In the field, prior to battle, the soldier has long ago left barracks, beds, cookhouse, shelter from weather, sometimes transport and all other peace-time comforts and amenities, usually for the duration. In a country like Malaya he has to march continually, gets little proper rest and sleep, often cannot get dry after tropical storms and has to protect himself against malaria, etc.

One notable exception to criticism was the 2nd Battalion,

Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders; and there may have been other units which I did not know about. When this battalion was in Singapore, I made a point of going to see the Commanding Officer, Lieutenant-Colonel (later Brigadier) I. Stewart, in mid-November. I had heard that he had long been training his battalion to function for prolonged periods in the jungle away from normal supply lines, to live on what they found, learning to keep direction and above all to overcome the fear and discomfort arising from the gloomy humid isolation, and not to be overworried about insects, reptiles and wild beasts, all of which often have the effect of lowering the morale of the town-dwelling infantry man. I told him of my ideas about defence works, anti-tank obstacles, and thoughts on reducing flank infiltration in jungle. I wanted to learn from him anything I could of jungle lore to pass on to the engineers and also asked him how he thought sappers could best help the infantry in such conditions. I liked his very realistic thinking, and he thought only one or two of my ideas were feasible up country in jungle.

I mentioned this meeting to General Percival and Brigadier Torrance in late November, only to be told by Torrance, without any remark from the General, that Stewart's ideas on jungle training were those of a crank. Nevertheless, it is now a matter of well-recorded history that the 2nd Battalion Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders were trained and fought magnificently throughout the Malayan war. Certainly General Wavell did not regard Stewart as a crank, for he wrote in his foreword to this battalion's history of its activities in the Malayan campaign:

> "If all units in Malaya had been trained and led with the same foresight and imagination that Brigadier Stewart showed in the training of his battalion, the story of the campaign might have been different. It was the realization of this that led me to order Brigadier Stewart's return to India . . . to impart his knowledge and ideas to units preparing for the return match with the Japanese."

In his book, mentioned above and published in 1947, Brigadier Stewart put forward his ideas on training for the jungle and the problem of maintaining communications. He writes:

> "In a modern army control is decisive . . . break control and an army will disintegrate . . . Jungle prevented visual control; within a battalion there was no wireless; maps and compasses were

scarce. Control therefore depended on keeping open the single artery of the road. It became absolutely the dominant tactical feature. The only one to attack or to defend. Battle was always for control and therefore always for the road . . .

Under these conditions a static defence has no hopes of success. It will be walked round, infiltrated, the road in rear cut . . . the force will severely disintegrate. There were no positions in Malaya . . . where the defence could have its flanks secure and compel frontal attack . . . (so) there are only two alternatives—to attack, or to delay by gradual withdrawal to avoid the encircling move . . ."

Brigadier Stewart was dead right. There were only two places in all Malaya where static defences would have had no real flanks to go round without the enemy coming under fire from other defences:

(a) General Dobbie's concept of the line in front of Johore Bahru and Kota Tinggi, and

(b) The north shore of Singapore Island.

In both cases the flanks rested on the sea, but neither defensive position was ever developed, though both were repeatedly suggested.

Stewart also says that the Argylls gradually evolved their own jungle tactics and later found that they corresponded almost exactly with those devised by the Japanese. In fact this Battalion was one of the very few who were the equal of the enemy in jungle. At the same time, unknown to him then, these same tactics were being applied in training in the United Kingdom under the name of Battle Drill. The accent was always on 'aggressiveness and intense speed which alone saved this battalion from destruction on several occasions'—to use Stewart's own words.

The principles for units from battalion strength down to three-man combinations known as Tiger Patrols was 'fix frontally then encircle'. There was an alternative form of attack which the Argylls called 'filletting'. This was also used by the Japanese against us, with disastrous results from tanks at the Slim River and earlier battles. The idea is to cut enemy control of his battle either by an encircling attack on to the road or by ripping it by a frontal attack straight down the road 'to great depth on virtually the frontage of the road itself'.

Thus, completely independently of each other and well before the Japanese invasion, Lieutenant-Colonel (as he then was)

Stewart and I had reached much the same conclusions from our different approaches to the problem. I was concerned mainly with anti-tank blocks to prevent being 'filletted'; and with defences on the north shore of the Island.

Neither of us could get H.Q. to adopt these ideas generally. He managed to apply his ideas within his own self-contained unit but I was not permitted to help in training Commonwealth engineer units. However, anti-tank and other defences, in defiles at many places, would certainly have caused the enemy heavier casualties at first contact and then would have had to be evacuated swiftly before encirclement. These anti-tank defences on road and railways would have prevented us from being 'filletted' not only at the Slim River battle and earlier at Jitra and elsewhere as occurred later.

Brigadier Stewart also states in his book that on two or three occasions bridge demolitions failed, and there were no engineers present. He did not know the reason, nor do I. But this is just another example of not allowing the Indian sapper and miners, the Australian and British Engineer units to make preparations in time to ensure really effective demolitions.

Had the Chief Engineer's office been permitted, in peacetime, to look into Engineer Field Unit organization, to build mine chambers, etc. for the major road and railway bridges, and later to advise that small demolition squads should actually live in dugouts at those bridges (as in France 1918), errors like this would rarely have happened. All this was implemented in France in 1918 and other theatres of war as the result of earlier experience during the First World War. The lessons were incorporated in detail into Field Service Regulations about 1922 as being the nearest foolproof and safest method for ensuring effective demolitions in the face of the enemy. This was for the benefit of Commanders of Formations and smaller units and the Engineers themselves. This was never implemented in Malaya by Commanders and the Engineers were not allowed to advise on the proved best way to ensure success.

The British and Australian battalions in Malaya consisted of excellent material but they were, to my mind, over-rationed. Few units seemed fit and hardy enough to take to the jungle and survive, when life could also depend on individual physical fitness against an enemy who was himself supremely fit.

British and Australian rations could be purchased in large quantities in most town and village shops; so that the ration was clearly in excess of needs if the men could sell it. In peace time, earlier in life for short periods, I had been attached to three British and two Indian battalions. With some notable exceptions the Indian and Gurkha battalions seemed to me generally to be the fittest for Malayan conditions and, providing they did not lose too high a proportion of their officers, seemed more likely to be able to stand the rigours of jungle warfare, which meant marching with a heavy load, always marching, against great climatic and physical difficulties.

The question of what food is adequate in hot countries is of course a medical decision and few calories are necessary for body heat in Malaya. The Australian soldier's daily ration provided 4,300 calories, the British 3,700, the Indian 2,700, the Japanese 2,200. Later when prisoners of war, the Japanese provided rations estimated at 2,050 calories to British and Australian troops engaged on continuous hard physical work such as digging *in a colder climate*. All these figures were provided by the Deputy Director of Medical Services, Brigadier C. H. Stringer, C.B.E., D.S.O. Excessive rations must have involved extra cost and transport, and possibly reduced physical fitness—on which the man's life could depend.

I decided to find out how the various Commonwealth Engineer field units showed up in physical fitness and up-to-date technical training. I assumed that, as Chief Engineer Malaya Command, I had some responsibility in this matter. I was quickly disabused first by some Formation Commanders, and then by General Percival to whom I appealed. My responsibility, I was informed, both in peace and war, was to supply engineer stores as requested by the Commanders Royal Engineers of the Divisions; and, only if the C.R.E. of a Division requested it, to give advice on the technical training of individual tradesmen in engineering units. I was also told that it was not my duty to help train engineers in combined field training with other troops. These responsibilities belonged solely to Formation Commanders. As a result I met many Engineer officers and troops for the first time when we became prisoners!

I said that I particularly wanted to ensure that the field units were up to date in their knowledge of the essential dimensions and various types of anti-tank obstacles, pillboxes, modern

bridge demolition techniques, camouflage and obstacles against small boat landings; all details which Formation Commanders were unlikely to know but I was not permitted to pass on any of this information to the various engineer units, some of which very clearly had little or no experience of some of these subjects—e.g. anti-tank blocks. I soon began to wonder whether it was I, or those about me, who had lost their senses.

In view of General Cave Browne's instructions in London that I should do all I could to improve the strained relations between the Chief Engineer's office and the General Staff, I of course accepted General Percival's limitations in this matter in September and October. In retrospect, in view of what actually happened during the war in allotting Chief Engineer's duties to the Public Works Department, and especially after the swiftness of our military collapse, I feel I was wrong to have done so. Perhaps I should have stood firm against the ruling, even to the point of being posted back to the U.K.; though, again in retrospect, I do not think a change of Chief Engineer would have achieved any result. My predecessor under another G.O.C. had also failed to get action.

No C.I.G.S. letter had come from the War Office, and I was completely frustrated in what I still considered my primary duties in preparing for war. Turning the other cheek, of course, would not help me to carry out my War Office instructions, but I still hoped that General Percival must eventually change his mind, or that my letters to General Cave Browne would bring the promised letter from C.I.G.S. to the G.O.C.

What was clear, however, was the implication behind General Percival's ruling—that the duties of the Senior Engineer Officer should be confined to storekeeping and works services. This seemed to me then, to be completely wrong in preparing for war. General Percival in fact did not take a similar line, for example, with his other departmental service chiefs such as Medical or Supply and Transport, all of whom had responsibilities for the technical efficiency of their units at the front as well as in the rear. Why was this line taken only with the Engineers?

My own conception of the appointment is that the Chief Engineer not only controls the works services but is also responsible to the G.O.C. for the technical competence and 'up-to-dateness' for war of all engineer units, including those which form part of fighting formations. In addition, as an officer

attached to the staff at G.H.Q., it is his duty to advise the G.O.C. on all engineering matters, and has not only the right but the obligation to do so. At the same time, I also considered that the Chief Engineer should have the right to be kept informed at an early planning stage of all operations which would, sooner or later, involve engineering effort.

The Chief Engineer must, therefore, be fully in the confidence of the G.O.C. and the General Staff. It is worth remembering, too, that it often takes considerable time to get the correct engineering specialists and the right equipment to a specific place. But not all commanders and staff officers appear to realize this. Far too many of them still think any engineer unit can do any engineering job; and have little idea of the time factors often involved.

At the end of November General Percival sent me up to report on the Jitra anti-tank line, which was about 500 miles from Singapore Island. I now had no responsibility for its construction, as this had been handed over entirely to the civilian Public Works Department. During this visit. I again met Major-General Murray Lyon, who commanded the 11th Indian Division. His troops at this time were assembled and had their equipment loaded up in preparation for Operation Matador. This operation called for advancing into neutral Siam to seize certain positions near where it was expected that the Japanese would land. Such invasions by Hitler had happened earlier in Europe; however, in our case, Whitehall was reluctant (as was the British Ambassador in Siam) to invade a neutral country until positive proof of the enemy's intention to do so was forthcoming. This may be preferable, but it means we lose the race always and it seems unnecessary to enter. The move was eventually authorized—but it was too late—and Matador was called off.

It was because he expected to receive orders to move off on the Matador operation at any time now that General Murray Lyon demurred to my suggestion that his troops dig their own trenches and build their own anti-tank and machine-gun posts to cover the main road approach and across the Jitra anti-tank ditch. Also I suggested that they prepare demolition schemes for all possible bridges and culverts.

At this date (December 1 and 2), just a week before the war started, I saw no defences of any sort at Jitra, other than the

anti-tank ditch still under construction by the Public Works Department.

I saw no trenches, barbed wire, etc. and, so far as I could ascertain, no defences had yet been reconnoitred, sited or even contemplated in future planning. I informed General Murray Lyon that I regarded all this as a vital necessity. But he pointed out that he was on 'two hours call' to move off in a race against time to occupy the Matador positions before the Japanese did. He was reluctant, on this account, to risk delay in unpacking tools and carrying out the work. I understood work did start in very bad weather shortly after I left, and after Matador was called off.

On my return to Singapore, I informed Command H.Q. that there were no defences for the road across the Jitra anti-tank ditch. It caused no anxiety.

About a week after my leaving Jitra, Japanese tanks burst through the hastily-improvised defences, which hardly existed on the vital road, where they were most needed. Within 72 hours, the entire Jitra line, on which so much labour and money had been lavished for about three months, was evacuated. So started the agony for Malaya.

When I heard of this in Singapore a few days later I was filled with foreboding, for I knew there were no anti-tank or other defences on the long road to Singapore to help halt or delay the enemy tanks. We had no tanks and few anti-tank mines and guns. We had stubbornly and deliberately, it seems, refused to overcome these handicaps with anti-tank defence work in depth. We had sown the wind and the typhoon from the east was now upon us. How should we fare?

It was probably better that Matador was called off. If carried through it would have dispersed our weak forces over a still wider area. Writing afterwards with the advantage of hindsight, one feels that the time and effort spent on preparing for the Matador operation would have been better spent on anti-tank defences at Jitra and farther south.

Probably the most serious mistake of all those made in Singapore, however, was the presumption that the Japanese could not land on the east coast of Malaya between November and March, because of the North-East Monsoon. It was tacitly assumed in Malaya, and apparently also in Whitehall at one time, that rough seas and high winds would make troop land-

1. General Wavell with Lieut-General Sir Henry Pownall who took over from Sir Robert Brooke-Popham as C-in-C Far East. *Imperial War Museum.*

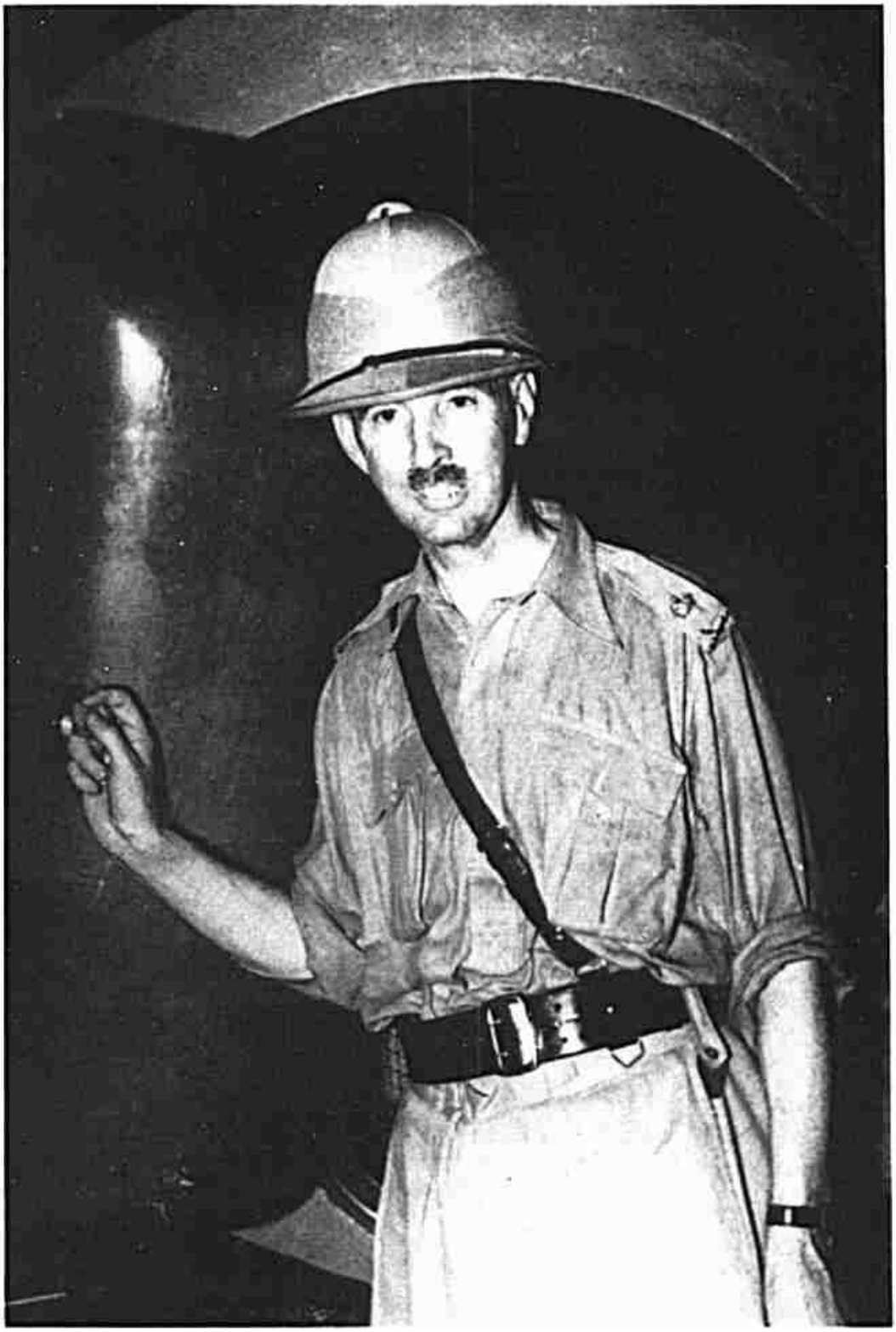
2. Left to right: Air Chief-Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, the Rt. Hon. Alfred Duff Cooper, Sir Earle Page, Sir Archibald Clark Kerr, Sir Shenton Thomas and Admiral Sir Geoffrey Layton, September, 1941. *Imperial War Museum.*

3. General Wavell (centre) with his two C-in-C's, Sir Robert Brooke-Popham (left) and Admiral Sir Geoffrey Layton (right). November 3, 1941. *Imperial War Museum.*

4. Sir Robert Brooke-Popham (left) with the Rt. Hon. Alfred Duff Cooper at the conference of September 29, 1941. *Imperial War Museum.*

5. Major-General Gordon Bennett greeting General Blamey. November 6, 1941. *Imperial War Museum.*

6. Left to right: General Wavell, Brigadier Curtis (Commander, Fixed Defences) and Major-General Keith Simmons (Commander, Singapore Fortress) in front of one of the gun emplacements. *Imperial War Museum.*



7. General Percival emerging from an aircraft on return from the mainland.
Imperial War Museum.

8. General Wavell inspecting the trench mortar section of an Indian Regiment (Dogra). November 1941. *Imperial War Museum.*

ings impossible. When I first heard this local belief in September, I informed General Percival that while at the War Office about 18 months earlier my own branch had been sent photographs taken from a British ship (in 1938) of Japanese troops landing on the Chinese coast in rough seas at the height of the N.E. Monsoon. I added that these photographs had been seen by the Military Operations Branch who now considered landings possible in Malaya during the N.E. Monsoon. I suggested that the War Office be asked to confirm this point as it was clearly of the very highest importance. No action was taken despite the fact that apparently all Army and R.A.F. reinforcements were being timed on the old and false assumption.

The belief that invasion during the N.E. Monsoon was impossible still existed in November, some two months later, when the Chief-of-Staff to the Commander-in-Chief Far East, gave a lecture to staff officers. I asked General Percival for permission to attend, but this was refused owing to lack of space, I was informed. Later I heard that the lecturer had told his audience that the Japanese could not land until the N.E. Monsoon had ended. I consequently called on the Chief-of-Staff, told him about the photographs I had seen and Military Operations' recent opinion at the War Office, and urged that a check be made with the War Office. I also informed the Air Officer Commanding about this since once the staging airfields along the Kra Isthmus were occupied by the enemy, short range planes like fighters could no longer reach us quickly. So far as I know no reference was made to the War Office or Air Ministry. After some time fighters arrived at Singapore in crates by ship—much too late for effective use.

The local refusal to accept landings as possible during the N.E. Monsoon is made all the more incomprehensible because the Official History in due course stated that a former G.O.C. in Malaya, General Dobbie, carried out actual test exercises in 1937. As a result, he reported to the War Office that not only were landings perfectly feasible during the N.E. Monsoon but also more probable then, because bad visibility would limit our air reconnaissance and so help surprise*. The War Office and H.Q., Malaya must have forgotten this in 1941. I did not know of the Dobbie report at the time, but it ought certainly to have been known at H.Q. Malaya Command. The War

* Official History, page 15.

Office had also apparently forgotten this owing to the constant changes of staff at the start of the war in Europe; which makes one wonder if the 'reminding organization' needed overhaul.

In their own official story of the war in Malaya, the Japanese say they chose the time of the N.E. Monsoon to invade because of the advantage of surprise it gave them; and posed the question:

> "Could it be that the enemy believed there would be no (Japanese) attack between November and March . . .?" (see also Chapter 16, p. 152).

A point that always struck me on my travels was what little use was made of the local population to withstand a possible invader; whereas the entire population of the United Kingdom, inspired by Winston Churchill, was helping to fight the war in Europe in some form or other. Malays and Chinese had as big a stake in their business as had the British business men; but all three nationalities were never alerted or used to full effect in any capacity.

The Malays are a pleasant and rather lazy race, but they are not craven-hearted. The Chinese (Malayan born) were virile, hard-working and fatalistic, and they instinctively hated the Japanese for their attack on China proper. Both Malays and Chinese were jungle-orientated. They could move about the forests without suspicion. There were many among them of education and character; while in Singapore and up country there were many British residents also who knew both local languages and dialects and the locale.

In October, I had suggested to General Percival that we should organize guerrilla forces for operations behind an advancing enemy,* and that caches of arms, ammunition, explosives, rations, etc. be buried at suitable sites in the jungle. A small training school for Chinese irregulars had been started several weeks earlier but the guerrilla effort was on such a small scale that it had little effect on the campaign. At the time I proposed it, I was unaware of the hostility that existed between the Chinese and the Chinese Secretariat—this came to light later.

After the war we all learned of the havoc such mosquito forces could cause—the French Maquis, Major Stirling's Long

* See page 36, para. 5.

Range Penetration Groups in North Africa, the Mau Mau in Kenya . . . Further proof lies in the time and effort it took to cope with Malayan terrorists after the war and it gave proof positive of the suitability of the Chinese in particular for guerrilla warfare. The Malayan jungles give covered approach to every type of target and there is little doubt that the enemy's advance could have been severely delayed by guerrilla activity on a much larger scale than was attempted.

It might be that the Singapore Government at the time foresaw the difficulty they might have in disarming the guerillas after the war, although they could hardly have foreseen then that China would become communist.

Of more importance to me in October was the question of raising labour units. At that time I was still optimistic about defensive works which had been my basic instruction from the War Office. It is important that fighting troops should be free from unnecessary fatigues. In peacetime their main effort should be directed at military training not on defence construction. In war, they have no time for building adequate defences. Two Indian labour units already existed and I suggested to the G.O.C. the recruitment of five locally enrolled Chinese companies each of 500 men. These would be engaged mainly for all sorts of engineer work based on experience with Chinese labour companies in France during the 1914–18 war.

Difficulties arose immediately. There were considerable objections to this locally, and there were protests from the War Office in London who wanted the rates of pay proposed for these men reduced to a level which was utterly out of keeping with current costs and conditions. Remote London financial control reached such a pitch that in one case (of which I heard after the war) a British general, posted as Churchill's representative to General Chiang Kai-Shek, was authorized to hire a servant at a rate which, in local exchange, was a few pennies per month.

It seems probable that the decline of British prestige began with the speed up of communications and the development of wireless and cable. It is not fortuitous that the development of overseas territories in medical help, roads, etc., prospered and reached its greatest heights under local leadership prior to the invention of fast communications, which leaves practically all decisions, great and small, to Ministries in Whitehall. One certainly cannot run a war successfully from the other side of the

world, nor prepare for it with a niggardly financial allowance. Local leaders should have been allowed to decide their own minor issues. G.O.C.'s financial powers in Malaya were far too low for preparing for war and far too much had to be referred to London.

During the campaign the Chinese worked as untrained labour volunteers for all the Services and Civil Defence. They faced every difficulty about pay, compensation for injury, accommodation, food and clothing, yet proved to be splendid workers. The story of the labour units and their rates of pay is not flattering. It is dealt with in the Official History (pp. 161–2) and General Wavell considered that 5,000 labourers under British vernacular-speaking officers would have saved much chaos during the war.

I have already stated (p. 39) that in 1941, Malaya was not a live issue at the War Office. G.O.C.'s limited powers in Malaya meant many references to the War Office for approval of action and finance required. In late November a War Office telegram arrived to the effect that no reminders to expedite War Office decisions were to be sent until after three months had elapsed. To us preparing urgently for war this was a staggering blow to morale and showed the lack of interest of Whitehall in Malayan affairs. The gist of this telegram (which I saw) was brought to the notice of the Official Historians but they could find no confirmation at the War Office, and I could not remember the dispatching branch, civil or military. This is not surprising. After ten years in the War Office, I know of cases where files were 'lost' if they contained awkward documentary evidence for responsibility for delay or mistakes by a particular branch or individual.

5

PROTECTION AGAINST BOMBING AND TANKS. THE ANTI-TANK PAMPHLET

Two factors which had caused me concern during my peace-time travels about Malaya were that practically no protection from bombing existed either in Army, Navy or Air Force areas; nor for important public services such as railways, power stations, radio or pumping establishments.

The second was that many fighting units seemed to be ignorant of methods of dealing with enemy tank attacks; on which I knew that the War Office had long ago issued instructions.

In October the G.O.C. gave me permission to lecture to the three fighting Services to explain what had been done recently in the United Kingdom to lessen the risks arising from air raids. The Civil authorities heard of this coming lecture, and in the end I addressed an audience of about 1,100 people in a large Singapore cinema, which included the Army, Navy, Air Force officers and many civilians from the Malayan Civil Service, the Municipality and Public Works Department and many private firms. At the request of the Governor, Sir Shenton Thomas, the lecture was repeated at Kuala Lumpur in October and at Penang, Ipoh and Johore Bahru in November. Only Mr. F. M. G. McConechy, so far as I know, took definite action. He was the Chief Engineer of the Public Works Department in Selangor State: and also a Lieutenant-Colonel in the local Engineer Volunteer Force, whom as such I got to know well during the war and when we were prisoners.

Elsewhere, excepting for the construction of a few blast walls, nothing was done to protect the more important civil installations until well after the war was under way. As Chief Engineer, I was able to insist on protection in some of the Army areas, and to advise on measures for Naval and R.A.F. areas.

In the matter of protection against tanks, late in November I received a rude shock when, by chance, I discovered that the War Office pamphlets on defence methods against tanks were still lying, in unopened bundles, in the General Staff cupboards where they must have been for several months, if not years.

I did not know whether the General Staff had ever studied them, but apparently neither the War Office pamphlets, nor Orders based on them, had been issued to the troops on how best to counter tanks. They would, of course, be the first to suffer from tank attacks and obviously they should have been always kept informed of the latest and best means of defence against them.

It is worth noting that many Army units, especially in the Australian and Indian contingents, had possibly never seen a tank, would know little of its powers as a killer, and of the difficulties involved in halting or destroying it. Why the subject had been so completely ignored for so long I could never understand—especially as nearly all senior commanders had actual experience of the havoc and disorganization that tanks could cause, physically and morally, against unprotected troops. General Percival had such knowledge from enemy tanks in France in 1940; and Lieutenant-General Sir Lewis Heath from his own tanks in the Abyssinian campaign used against the Italians in 1940–41.

I therefore brought the matter at once to the attention of the G.O.C. General Percival agreed that I should condense into one single illustrated pamphlet the information given in the War Office series with their many subsequent amendments.

All my clerical and drawing office staff were concentrated and worked overtime on the reproduction of the letterpress for anti-tank blocks, with sketches giving type layouts and the essential dimensions. The pamphlet, of some 40 pages, was ready for issue on December 6—two days before the Japanese attacked.

The B.G.S. declined to sign the covering letter to formations (Corps, Divisions and Brigades) which I proposed sending with the pamphlets. He referred me to General Percival who on return went thoroughly into the letter and the pamphlet.

The points stressed in the pamphlet were as follows:

1 Attack by light and medium—but not heavy—tanks was likely, and such attack would necessarily be limited to road,

railway tracks and occasionally adjacent rubber plantations. They could not operate in jungle, swamps or wet paddy (rice) fields.

2 Tanks on the move are always difficult to hit. Hence obstacles should be sited so as to force the tank to stop at a point where it could be destroyed; preferably at close range and with one shot. The anti-tank blocks should be for the tank what barbed wire is for infantry attacking trenches and must always be kept under close range fire.

3 The obstacle, which should be unseen by the tank until it practically reached it, must be sufficient to force the tank to stop—or be wrecked. One way suggested for encouraging advance would be gradually to deepen drainage ditches until at the 'killing' point, they would effectively prevent the tank turning off the road or railway on reaching the anti-tank block.

4 Obstacles should be of a type which could be moved into position and installed in between 15 and 30 minutes, and concealed by small trees and foliage, with similar dummy concealment forward to encourage tank advance to the desired point.

5 Some 3,500 concrete cylinders, with steel ropes or chains to link them together usually in tens, were being manufactured —enough to make 350 anti-tank blocks. In addition, there were rail and socket type obstacles for 25 anti-tank blocks in Johore. The fighting formations also had anti-tank mines available, but these were in short supply.

6 Anti-tank blocks should be in depth in close groups of two or three and kept under small arms fire to prevent prior enemy infantry reconnaissance.

7 Wherever there was a shortage of anti-tank guns, field guns (25 pounders in emplacements or not) were suggested for use by day or night and firing on fixed lines to cover the obstacle where the tank must halt or be wrecked.

* * *

The Japanese attack on Malaya coincided approximately with their air assault on the American Fleet at Pearl Harbor.

It was shortly after midnight, on December 7–8 (Malayan time), that Japanese troops landed at Kota Bharu in N.E. Malaya, near the Siamese border. At 1.15 a.m. the Governor,

Sir Shenton Thomas, was awakened by General Percival, who telephoned him the news.

Three hours later, about 4.15 a.m., the first Japanese bombers appeared over the still brightly illuminated Singapore City. There was no blackout, and no planes were brought down by our A.A. fire. Most of the bombs fell on Tengah and Seletar airfields. Some fell in the thickly populated Chinese quarter and 61 people were killed and some 133 injured. The sudden unexpected change from peace to war was an unpleasant shock to the population.

I was awakened by the bombing of course, and could do nothing about it but was left wondering the rest of that night how we should fare. I simply could not be as optimistic as I should have liked. On my travels up country two days later, news of the sinking of our two battleships staggered me.

Would Malaya even now realize what we were up against? The typhoon was well on its way.

* * *

So we were actually at war when General Percival, after full discussion that same morning, accepted the anti-tank pamphlet, but decided against signing the covering letter to go with it. I said that, in my view, the subject matter was so important that it warranted his personal signature; but I was ordered to sign it 'for G.O.C.' which did not carry the same weight. I realized the anti-tank pamphlet was now really too late and virtually useless to the troops despite frantic efforts in the office to get it finished earlier.

General Percival authorized me to deliver the letter and pamphlet personally to all Formations down to Brigades. The pamphlet deliberately went a little beyond the War Office instructions in order to help the Australian and Indian troops, who knew little of tanks.

I set off on December 8 and, with very few exceptions, saw every Formation Commander personally—except the 8th Brigade at Kota Bharu and the 22nd Brigade at Kuantan*—in the next few days and told them all, as I had already told the G.O.C., that their staffs must specify where anti-tank material should be dumped. Unless they gave specific instructions, the

* Owing to the type of country it was thought that tanks would not be used in these two places.

engineers would deposit material at suitable places along road and rail.

No directions for anti-tank cylinder dumping sites were ever received from any Formation. Throughout December and January the cylinders and chains were dumped on Engineer initiative, at suitable places as far north as Bidor, some 70 miles north of Kuala Lumpur. Even the swift Jitra defeat, which was largely due to Japanese tanks, apparently failed to drive home the lesson that anti-tank defence was really vital. It seems certain that very few officers now had time to read the pamphlet; certainly it was not implemented down the Peninsula or on Singapore Island. As far as I know, no copies of this pamphlet now survive. It was really issued far too late to be of use to the fighting troops.

One of the Commanders I visited—this was on December 19—was Major-General H. Gordon Bennett, Commanding the 8th Australian Division which had not yet been in action. He reacted as had some others but his views on the anti-tank pamphlet, as written at the time in his Diary, are repeated on pp. 77–8 in his book *Why Singapore Fell*, published in Australia in 1944. The following quotation will, I think, indicate somewhat confused thinking on his part on the object and the value of anti-tank cylinders. General Gordon Bennett wrote:

> "... Malaya Command sent Brigadier Simson, Chief Engineer, to discuss with me the creation of anti-tank obstacles for use on the roads in Johore. He is manufacturing thousands of concrete cylinders for this purpose. Personally, I have little time for these obstacles for tanks, preferring to stop and destroy tanks with anti-tank weapons. An obstacle merely makes the tanks shy clear and come against us somewhere else and an obstacle is useless unless covered by troops. *I prefer to use anti-tank gunners to cover the obstacle.* Brigadier Simson decided to dump these concrete blocks at intervals on the road for use by troops when necessary..." (The italics are mine.)

The obstacle and gun are of course complementary, and the pamphlet dealt with the importance of forcing the tank to halt at a pre-arranged point, where it could be 'shot dead' far more certainly than if it were on the move. Any obstacle will be quickly surmounted unless kept under fire. It may be that General Gordon Bennett was referring to natural obstacles being useless unless covered by fire. But even here engineering

work can often increase their stopping and delaying value. If natural obstacles do not exist, artificial ones must be created—but still kept under fire.

Later in his book (p. 181) General Gordon Bennett writes that the loss of Singapore:

> "*was made easier by the complete lack of prepared defences.* It was not due to the lack of skill in the senior leaders. It was due in the main to poor leadership on the part of the commanders of most units. This poor leadership was responsible for the poor morale displayed by most troops. *Lack of skill in jungle fighting was certainly one of the causes of failure.*"

While I believe the first and last sentence (in my italics) are correct, I consider the rest of General Gordon Bennett's views to be wrong. If the troops were inadequately led, jungle-trained and without defences of any sort, it surely was the fault of senior—not the unit—commanders. Long before the Japanese attacked, they knew the only roads and railways along which he must advance. They should have insisted on harder jungle training for their troops and made their defensive dispositions against tank attacks on roads and railways, and particularly on defences on the north shore. All this never seems to have been seriously considered, at any level, in useful time.

There is seldom evidence that fighting troops failed; even those who were grossly undertrained and outclassed by the enemy. There is ample and clear proof in the Official History, that lack of thought by many senior commanders, in the preparatory period, to help overcome the known inexperience and undertraining of many of their troops, denied them the means of putting up the greatest possible resistance and of inflicting maximum casualties on the enemy, with minimum casualties to themselves.

General Gordon Bennett's book also gives an illustration of a defensive position which was dangerously faulty; namely, the only two large pillboxes on the mainland of Malaya situated on a major road. They stood very high, and were self-advertising to the naked eye for what they were, at a range of about 1,500 yards straight down the road. They would have been immediately neutralized in modern war and formed a good example of how such works should never be built and sited. To be fair, they were apparently constructed before the Australians took

over this area. They showed lack of one most important first principle in war—to see without being seen.

I suggested that they be evacuated and used only as unoccupied decoys to draw enemy fire, while smaller and better concealed positions with low command be constructed some distance from them to the side.

There were some bad examples of similar but smaller defence posts on Penang Island.

6

A VISIT TO HEADQUARTERS, THIRD INDIAN CORPS—GENERAL HEATH'S MESSAGE—SLIM RIVER BATTLE

On the day following my interview with General Gordon Bennett, I visited the Headquarters Third Indian Corps at Kuala Lumpur, and talked to the Brigadier General Staff and the Chief Engineer of the Corps about anti-tank methods, gave them the new pamphlet and stated that anti-tank cylinders and chains were being dumped as far north as Bidor.

By now, some eleven days after the commencement of war, bad news was continuous. The Royal Navy had lost the two battleships *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*. We possessed virtually no other warships. The enemy was ashore and had captured Kota Bharu and its airfield from which after hard fighting the 8th Brigade was retreating. The enemy, often using bicycles, was also advancing at speed from Jitra and Gurun, on the main road to the south, and enemy tanks had again been in action. Penang had been bombed and evacuated.

The R.A.F. were evacuating their northern Malayan airfields and falling back too. They had lost about half their obsolescent aircraft and the enemy had already virtually achieved mastery of the air and of the sea.

I could well imagine what these gallant R.A.F. crews were experiencing. On several of my trips I had travelled in Wildebeeste torpedo bombers. Their top speed was 110 m.p.h. The Japanese Zero fighter had a top speed of 325 m.p.h., about equivalent in performance to the Spitfire and Messerschmitt 109. Our fighters and bombers were completely outclassed in speed, manœuvrability and numbers.

After the meeting at Kuala Lumpur, I went on to meet Lieutenant-General Sir Lewis Heath, who commanded the

Third Indian Corps, at his advanced H.Q. at Ipoh. Near the Slim River I chanced to meet a Royal Engineer party who were distributing anti-tank cylinders and their fittings. This was an area which I had already noted as being one of several which could, with little preparation, be developed into a good temporary defensive position against tank and infantry assault, and I had so reported to H.Q. Third Indian Corps and to H.Q. Malaya Command for their consideration. Deep fast-running streams formed good tank and infantry obstacles.

There were, however, no British or Indian troops in the Slim River area at this date (December 22). No orders had been received from Third Corps where the anti-tank equipment should be dumped, so I personally chose several sites. The material was unloaded at several places where road blocks would take an advancing enemy tank by surprise.

After a detour I reached Ipoh station at dusk on December 22. I was surprised to find General Heath's two H.Q. railway coaches were in an exposed siding close to the main station buildings. They were the only rolling stock in the yard and clearly visible to aircraft. They had apparently been there for twenty-four hours and I told General Heath over dinner that the Japanese, who were only a few miles away, probably already knew that the coaches were there as his Advance H.Q. I urged him to move them at once to a siding which branched off into jungle and which was overhung by trees, otherwise they would probably be bombed next morning. He thought I was joking but I told him of what German aircraft had done in Europe to targets they could pinpoint accurately on maps or see clearly from the air.

Before we turned in that night, General Heath gave orders that the coaches be moved after breakfast to the concealed siding.

I had discussed defences on two previous occasions with the general. After dinner we discussed the subject again, now with specific reference to the area between Ipoh and Singapore. However, General Heath thought I over estimated the tank danger.

I quoted him two examples, his own success with tanks against the Italians at Keren in Abyssinia in 1940; and the defeat in which General Percival had been involved with the German panzer break-through in France earlier in the same year.

Among the points made were that the Japanese had tanks and his Indian troops had no experience of how to stop them. We had no tanks and few anti-tank guns and mines. I did not see how he could stop a determined tank thrust down the road against tired troops unless he had anti-tank defences in depth—all to be manned before the front-line troops fell back.

There was no more discussion that night, and we left together by car early the following morning. We had only gone a mile or so, however, when General Heath's driver suddenly swerved and stopped the car beneath a tree. We then heard aircraft and witnessed a low-level bomb attack on Ipoh Station, where General Heath's coaches were to be moved after his departure. However we went on and General Heath inspected the Kampar position. Here trenches were hastily being dug by tired fighting troops since civilian labour, as invariably happens, had begun to vanish with the enemy's approach. There were no anti-tank cylinders so far forward, but I told the general that dumping was going on from Bidor southwards, and of the dumping in the Slim River area; and reminded him of the latter's possible value as a defensive area if he elected to make a stand there.

When we got back to Ipoh before dusk, the H.Q. coaches were in the concealed siding. They were being shunted by hand when the air raid which we had seen from a distance took place. Most of the windows had been broken and bomb splinters had pock-marked the sides. There had been no casualties and no serious damage fortunately.

That evening General Heath again raised the subject of defences, but came to the conclusion that there was not sufficient time to do much north of Kuala Lumpur, but certainly to the south (and north if possible) he said he was now convinced that anti-tank defences would be useful on the several routes to Singapore.

As we knew that the Japanese had captured many small craft with the fall of Penang and could use these to turn our flank from the sea, I again suggested that we should mine certain rivers and build river obstacles at likely landing places along the west coast. With the possible exception of Port Swettenham and southward, General Heath thought it was too late to carry out such action now.

He then gave me an important verbal message for General

Percival. His message was to the effect that he, General Heath, believed he could no longer hold the enemy for long at any point, and that he therefore hoped that General Percival would have constructed successive lines of defences by the time he had retreated by stages to the Johore area. These defences were essential, General Heath maintained, for it was impossible for his troops to fight, then retreat, dig in and wire, and to go on repeating this process without ceasing.

I wrote down the message at his dictation and then read it out to General Heath. He made some minor amendments to the wording, and when it was ready I passed it to him for his signature. But, for a reason not explained to me, General Heath refused to sign it.

I did my best to persuade him by telling him of the calamitous result of my orders from the War Office not being confirmed in writing to me by General Cave Browne or by C.I.G.S. letter later to General Percival. But he remained adamant. I therefore asked him to confirm the message by signal to H.Q. Malaya Command. I do not know if this was ever done.

Since I had other calls to make, I did not leave Ipoh for Kuala Lumpur—*en route* to Singapore—until next morning; but once again I was carrying an important message with no signature to confirm its authority or accuracy, other than my own word. The incident and its sequel is mentioned in the Official History (p. 242) and later herein.

While still in Kuala Lumpur—this was Christmas Day—my car was hit during an air raid just outside the office I was visiting and destroyed. The four of us were sitting round a small rickety table when the bomb arrived. We all dived under the table to meet head on and emerged with sheepish grins to admit that our defences and overhead cover were not really adequate. My Javanese driver, a splendid character, produced another car speedily from the transport depot, and we started back for Singapore on Boxing Day. We called at the Gemas Engineer Stores Depot, the largest in Malaya, which was on our route.

I made a note of the stocks of the more important items we would need for defensive work. There were still ample materials left, even if defences were ordered on a large-scale; and it was clearly essential to use up these stores at Gemas before eating into stocks farther south.

With the exception of demolition explosives, the depot at

Gemas in fact was never seriously drawn upon. The materials were heavy, bulky and of considerable tonnage so that they could not be moved back to Singapore by rail or road. Nor could they be destroyed. Before the Depot was evacuated a few days later the local population was told to help themselves; but the Japanese finally took over, intact, large quantities of Engineer field stores.

We continued by car southward to Singapore and at Segamat ran into another air raid. While we suffered no damage this time, some delay was caused because we had to make detours round the debris and buildings which were on fire. The town was deserted, the people having temporarily taken to the jungle. One always felt sorry for the local population. Their weak, jerry-built houses suffered severely from blast and fire, even from the smallest of bombs; and it was not their war they thought.

I reached Singapore at 11.30 p.m. on December 26, and drove straight to General Percival's residence, despite the lateness of the hour, with General Heath's message.

* * *

Here one may perhaps digress for a moment on the retreat of General Heath's Third Indian Corps. One can now appreciate the magnitude of this Commander's task and how successfully he carried out his orders from General Percival not to allow his formations to be pinned down and annihilated—which was the enemy's aim.

The historians of the future, when examining this retreat, will probably concede, I feel, that it was executed in a masterly fashion in the face of every conceivable disadvantage. These included inadequate jungle training of some units, no tanks and no anti-tank defences (or experience thereof) to face the Japanese tanks, and virtually no air support. Admittedly there were some disasters against an enemy equipped with tanks and far better trained generally than our own troops (with two or three magnificent battalion exceptions).

The Slim River battle on January 7, proved to be the greatest single disaster in the retreat down the peninsula. To quote the Official History (p. 281): although it anticipates events.

> "The action at Slim River was a major disaster. It resulted in the early abandonment of Central Malaya and gravely prejudiced . . .

reinforcing Formations, then on their way to Singapore, to arm and prepare for battle. For some time to come 11th Division ceased to be an effective fighting force . . . The immediate causes of the disaster were the failure to make full use of the anti-tank weapons available . . . It is evident that . . . Japanese achieved complete surprise although it was not the first time such tactics had been used . . . No attempt was made to employ it (the field regiment of artillery) in an anti-tank role . . ." (Words in brackets are my additions.)

From the Official History, General Percival's book THE WAR IN MALAYA and others it looks as if the anti-tank cylinders (when used at all) were not chained together nor 'kept under fire'; and so were just rolled off the road by enemy tanks or infantry. Possibly also the subsidiary roads alongside the main road had not been adequately blocked. Thus the Slim River area, instead of proving a severe check to the enemy had it been fully reconnoitred and prepared in useful time, gave the enemy the chance to 'fillet' the defending troops (to use Brigadier Stewart's expressive term).

Summarizing various accounts, it seems that about 100 Japanese in thirty tanks (some of which were knocked out), followed up by motorized infantry, advanced about 16 miles, during which they virtually wiped out the 12th and 28th Brigades of about 5,000 men of all ranks. One Gurkha battalion was caught marching along the road and annihilated completely. From one British, three Indian and three Gurkha battalions in the two Brigades, the Official History records that next day only a total of 1,173 officers and men could be mustered. These were so shaken in morale that they had to be withdrawn for a time. This sort of disaster does not improve the morale of other troops not involved as yet.

The Slim River battle was the type of tragedy (one month after war started and the tank danger realized), which one feels should have been avoided, the result being what must be expected when fast-moving armour meets human bodies unprotected by various types of defences. Later it will be recorded that the Public Works Department were to build defences. In the nine days prior to this disaster their various representatives had been able to do nothing after the G.O.C. had informed the Commanders of the Third Indian Corps and the Australian Division (which was not yet involved) that the Public Works

Department would report for preparing anti-tank and other obstacles. The Public Works Department cannot be blamed. They had no knowledge of anti-tank obstacles of course and had not received a copy of the anti-tank pamphlet—as Headquarters Malaya Command and Third Indian Corps both knew. The troops themselves had never been instructed in anti-tank defences other than perhaps by mines. The real mistake was not to have distributed the War Office anti-tank instructions to all Formations and front line troops many months earlier; and then not to use the Chief Engineer's staff in time to prevent just this sort of disaster. This was thus a major mistake by the General Staff. The enemy as will be seen later used their engineers throughout with their spearhead of attack; but our Chief Engineer's staff were never allowed to instruct Engineer troops of the Formations in modern up-to-date defensive techniques (particularly against the fast-moving tank), in peace-time and before the war started. Once the war had started it was obviously too late. The Chief Engineer's anti-tank pamphlet probably never reached the front line troops. By the time it reached Formation Headquarters, as I have said earlier, probably nobody had the time to read, much less to apply, it at any level.

The total distance by the shortest road route from Jitra to Singapore Causeway is about 515 miles. From Kota Bharu it is a little less. In statistics this Malayan retreat can be usefully compared with two famous retreats in history. In 1812 Napoleon's Grande Armée covered 550 miles from Moscow to the River Niemen 'in 45 to 50 days'—an average of say 11·5 miles per day. In 1808–9 Sir John Moore's British Army in Spain covered 257 miles from Sahagun to Corunna in 20 days—an average of 12·8 miles per day. General Heath's Third Indian Corps' delaying tactics against superior forces, with tank and air attacks added, covered 515 miles in 53 days—an average of only 9·7 miles per day—against what the Official History (p. 513) considers were at that time the finest infantry in the world. Yet the survivors reached Singapore Island and were able to fight again. The facts speak for the stamina of the British, Indian and Gurkha troops and the skill of their officers, despite some serious setbacks which were probably due more to the staff than to the fighting troops. On this, however, the historians of the future will be in in the best position to decide. The two Australian Brigades were

involved in the last 100 miles and helped to slow down the enemy's advance. All these three retreats were on foot.

Had the Engineers from Command Headquarters been allowed to prepare anti-tank obstacles, mine chambers, etc., for the really effective demolition of major bridges, in peace or early war-time—as had been often suggested—it seems certain that much of the pressure on units of the Third Indian Corps, as also their resulting casualties, could have been materially reduced during the retreat. In fact it is probably not too strong a criticism to say that Malaya provides a good example of how the Army's engineer arm should not be used—nearly always too little and far too late, when they were used at all.

7

DECISIONS AND THOUGHTS ON DEFENCES

General Percival was about to go to bed when I arrived at his residence, Flagstaff House, at 11.30 p.m. on December 26. He gave me a cordial welcome. I gave him General Heath's message, but while General Percival was willing to accept its accuracy he rejected its content and urgency for defence positions in Johore into which the Third Indian Corps could retire.

From my talks with General Heath I was now certain in my own mind that it would not be long before the enemy reached the approaches to Singapore Island, and that this was probably my last chance to get permission in useful time to turn nearly 6,500 Commonwealth Engineers (plus civilian labour) on to the construction of defence works. I was determined not to give way at this vital meeting and the debate and argument went on for two and a half hours—well into the early hours of December 27.

I repeated—once again—all my arguments and the previously mentioned historical parallels, and emphasized the special urgency now of doing everything possible to help the tired, dispirited and (in anti-tank work) inexperienced troops of the Third Indian Corps who had fought and retreated for hundreds of miles before a better trained, better equipped and numerically stronger enemy.* Moreover, the enemy were inspired by an unbroken series of victories. I pointed out too that time was rapidly running out for the construction of permanent and field defences on the north shore of Singapore Island; because once any area came under enemy fire civilian labour would vanish.

General Percival still refused to order the construction of defence works. I strongly urged him to reconsider this decision

* As was thought at the time and this was against the Third Indian Corps only up to this date.

as it appeared to me to go directly against all the military thinking, teaching and experience of the history of fortresses; and said that in none of our several previous discussions on the subject had he ever given me a reason why he was against defence works. I reminded him too that I had been sent to Malaya for the express purpose of creating such works which had been considered necessary by the War Office and that a fortress without defences was a contradiction in terms.

General Percival gave me an explanation. He said, 'Defences are bad for morale—for both troops and civilians.'

The speaker was the General Officer Commanding in Malaya, and he was speaking not in jest but in all seriousness. Like other commanders, General Percival was a graduate of the Staff College and had also attended other courses for senior officers. It was fair for me to assume therefore that he and many other commanders who were opposed to defence works, had absorbed a view which did not apply to Malaya at that time. Somewhere in their military education such a dictum on morale had been impressed upon them. Or possibly they misunderstood the value of defences in the circumstances which now existed. Admittedly jungle does favour the attacker, but nevertheless defences—particularly anti-tank types—seemed to me to be essential on roads and railways up country and still more so on the north shore of Singapore Island. It is important to note that this meeting with the G.O.C. took place about ten days before the Slim River disaster described in the previous chapter.

At this critical stage and because of our apparent weaknesses in every branch of adequate resistance, the G.O.C.'s statement, quite frankly, horrified me. It was the end of all hope of the Engineers being allowed to do anything useful to help halt the Japanese advance; and I stressed that it was preferable to use the Engineers positively in assisting the infantry to halt the enemy by building defence works, instead of only negatively in carrying out demolitions and a 'scorched earth' policy.

I came back to General Heath's request for defences. His Third Indian Corps alone of all formations had been the only one so far in actual contact with the Japanese. General Heath was also a very experienced commander who now saw that his tired troops could not make a worthwhile stand anywhere let alone go over to a major counter-attack. He was asking for a defended area where his men could rest and reorganize.

It was obviously now a struggle, I said, for sheer survival. No major counter-attack anywhere seemed possible as yet. With a strong defence line on the north shore I stressed that we might be lucky to hold out until some time in the future reinforcements with modern equipment might reach us. I added that if we lost Singapore it would be hard and costly to recover; just as in Europe we now had to retake France before we could defeat Germany. Moreover, if Singapore fell, British prestige would be destroyed in Asia. Events were proving that we had beaten 'the Invincible Fortress drums' so loudly that we had fooled ourselves, not the enemy.

General Percival would not agree to General Heath's request to help the sorely tried Indian Corps. Nor would he abandon his stand, and the argument became dangerous for both of us. Whether General Percival realized this I do not know; neither of us has ever mentioned that midnight meeting again on the many occasions we met subsequently—during the war, while prisoners of war and after the war in London at the Malayan Officers Reunion dinners and at Festival Hall. The disagreement never broke our personal friendship. To General Percival's lasting credit, when as prisoners we walked around the barbed wire like caged animals, he once admitted to me that he had been wrong not to order defences. This went far to expiate his original misunderstanding on defences, however that may have arisen. He was the only senior commander to do so, though General Heath changed his mind and wanted defences after the first fortnight or so of war. They were the only two senior commanders to express their change of mind—if too late.

After what felt to me a very long silence, while he reflected on what I had said, General Percival suddenly yielded to the extent of agreeing that I put my case to Major-General Keith Simmons, the Commander, Singapore Fortress. He added that if General Keith Simmons accepted my proposals for the north shore of Singapore Island, he, General Percival, would raise no objections. Before leaving, I once again brought up General Heath's request for a defended area in Johore for his Third Indian Corps; an area perhaps to be combined with the Australian Division so as to keep the naval base and the Causeway out of enemy shell range. There was further discussion on these points with negative result and I left at 2.00 a.m. on December 27. I was now convinced that the G.O.C. would take

no action on defences on the Johore mainland. The north shore defences now depended on General Keith Simmons.

Early the same morning, December 27, I rang up and was invited to breakfast by General Keith Simmons; told him of General Heath's request for a defended area in Johore, of General Percival's refusal of this; I also told him of my suggestions to start landward defences on Singapore Island, the decision on which General Percival would leave to him (Keith Simmons). This backdoor (the landward side) was as wide open as it had ever been; whereas the front door (seaward side) was 'bolted' by many big guns down to small arms fire. In fact, as I knew, the seaward side was soon now to be 'barred' in addition, by tubular scaffolding to stop landings from small craft. I suggested that this scaffolding should be erected on the north shore at the more likely spots for enemy landings. By now (December 27) it was obvious that the main attack would come from landward. Nevertheless the scaffolding was erected on the seaward front, the only strongly defended front, which therefore was never attacked.

General Keith Simmons was against landward defence works too and, under pressure from me, gave the same reason as had General Percival, namely that defences were bad for the morale of troops and civilians. This did not explain to me why seaward defences were being increased; and so again I went through all my historical arguments in favour of strong landward defences—especially for a 'fortress' with the critical military situation we were now experiencing on the mainland—but again without result. I finally left the Fortress Commander's house convinced that Singapore was as good as lost. Knowing a little of our amphibious opponent's capabilities, I felt it was now only a question of time before he landed on Singapore Island; and with very light, instead of very heavy casualties, which proper defences should certainly cause him in crossing that magnificent obstacle to infantry and tanks—the Johore Straits.

I discovered sixteen years later from the Official History (page 242) that, only forty-eight hours after our midnight meeting, General Percival changed his mind to the extent that he wrote on December 29 to Generals Heath and Gordon Bennett and suggested that Public Works Department work groups be formed up country to build defence works—particularly anti-tank blocks in depth. It is astonishing that General Percival or

Headquarters Malaya Command never told me, nor my deputy, of this decision since the Army Engineer organization is the normal one for building defences as required by a G.O.C. or other commanders; for which the Chief Engineer has overall responsibility. It is the more extraordinary when one considers too that the Chief Engineer's staff, as G.O.C. already knew, contained some trained specialists in defence works: whereas the Public Works Department officers, although excellent engineers, naturally have no specialized knowledge whatsoever on the subject of anti-tank blocks, army demolition explosives, bridge demolitions and all other sorts of defences (essential internal dimensions, siting, layout, bullet-proof thickness of earth, brick, concrete, etc.). Nor had any Public Works Department officers received copies of the anti-tank pamphlets as all Headquarters knew.

The events I have described above were to prove my last serious attempt (December 27), personally, to get defence work started, although Mr. Duff Cooper and later General Wavell, who was soon to be appointed* Supreme Commander of the newly-formed American, British, Dutch Australian (A.B.D.A.) Command, pursued the matter vigorously, as will be shown in due course. Unfortunately, General Wavell's intervention came much too late for any effective result; and Mr. Duff Cooper could not force action under his Terms of Reference as I was to learn later.

Nevertheless, although defence work was not officially required, I continued to dump anti-tank material at suitable places up country and on both the mainland of Johore and on Singapore Island; while the Deputy Chief Engineer collected and dumped defence stores for the defence of the north shore of Singapore Island. Then and afterwards I thought much on why we had left the Island wide open to attack from the landward side. As already stated (Chapter 3, p. 38) many years later I was to learn that while G.O.C. Malaya Command, General Dobbie reported to the War Office in 1938 that landward attack was the base's great danger and he had started work in Johore but not on the north shore of Singapore Island. On taking over as G.O.C. from General Dobbie, it appears that General Bond made a change to an anti-defence policy, which General Percival later continued. My predecessor as Chief

* General Wavell was so appointed on January 3, 1942.

Engineer had tried for over three years to get defences built but to no avail.

Here I think it is worth pausing to speculate on the 'anti-defence complex' which persisted in the thinking of so many senior officers before the war. I also had met this attitude in lectures at the senior officer's schools and in many other courses I attended. It is safe to presume therefore that all the senior officers in Malaya (most of whom were about the same age as I) had been taught to mistrust defences because they could become a danger for winning a war. To win a war, a commander must attack, and his troops must be willing to attack. Once accustomed to trenches and other defensive positions, men can become reluctant to attack across open ground. This was a real problem at the end of the First World War in 1918, when troops had repeatedly seen the staggering casualties of all belligerents in attempts to advance a few hundred yards against barbed wire covered by shell and small arms fire from trenches, pillboxes, etc.

While there is obviously some point in this principle, I thought that this doctrine had been misapplied in Malaya where it always appeared prior to the war—and very soon became obvious during it—that the problem was going to be one of 'survival' with no question as yet of 'winning'. Defences are essential for survival of fortresses when fighting a better equipped and trained enemy.

Some officers who went through the Malayan campaign, however, think that the 'no defences' complex emanated possibly from Sir Shenton Thomas, the Governor. On this suggestion I can express no opinion as I never discussed my military duties with him and do not know what he thought. The argument put forward is that Sir Shenton may have discouraged defence work because he feared it would result in unrest and even panic among the civil population. Above all, it would also, if civil labour were employed, perhaps reduce rubber and tin production, which London insisted must be maintained at maximum output.

Personally I do not agree with this view, since contractor's labour on Singapore Island for defence work would hardly have affected the necessary labour force on rubber and tin production up country. Even if Sir Shenton Thomas did have this belief, need it have been accepted by a succession of military

commanders? Their primary duty surely was to prevent an enemy overrunning the whole country, and to use any and all means at their disposal in carrying out their primary task. The risk of being completely overrun was clear by December 27.

In the purely military sphere, the military decision should have been supreme. When the heavy fixed defences were built (seaward) by civil labour at Singapore and Penang between 1925 and 1939, there was no unrest among the Asian nationalities nor were rubber plantations and tin mines stripped of workers. When last-minute trenches were dug by troops and civilians, and when air-raid shelters were constructed in January 1941 under bombing, there was no civil unrest. In fact there was unstinted help from Asian labour.

In European and Middle East countries in both the First and Second World Wars there was no panic, lowering of morale or serious objection by indigenous populations when defence works were constructed with local civil labour. Why should it therefore have been considered so dangerous for morale in Malaya?

The 'no defences' complex was also prevalent among some senior commanders in France in 1939, as shown in THE PRIVATE PAPERS OF HORE-BELISHA, edited by R. J. Minney and published in 1960. Mr. Hore-Belisha, then Secretary of State for War, met this problem when he visited the British Expeditionary Force in France in 1939. He wrote in his diary—'a great deal of digging in progress . . . but I was surprised to see only two new pillboxes being constructed . . .' (The French planned 6 per kilometre or say 10 per mile.)

During his tour and later, as his diary shows, he stressed the need and importance for more defences, but later recorded that General Ironside, then C.I.G.S.

> ". . . after his visit to the British Expeditionary Force came to see me and with great emphasis told me that the officers were most upset at the criticisms made about lack of defences and that everyone was talking about it . . ."

Some of the statements in Mr. Hore-Belisha's diaries have been challenged. Although accounts differ it is clear that the British defences which did exist or were hurriedly built between the Maginot Line and the sea, proved inadequate in quantity and depth; and again were turned by the German tank breakthrough of 1940 on the Ardennes front and because the British

under Plan D (the Advance into Belgium) vacated their defence positions and went forward.

In the BUSINESS OF WAR (pp. 27–37), General Kennedy (then Director of Military Operations at the War Office), writing of the Hore-Belisha episode, states that arguing against advance to the Escaut line, Ironside wrote to the Cabinet and General Gort in September 1939, of the danger of being caught in the open by low bombing attacks; that troops not dug in in depth before attack were bound to be routed; that improvised defence unreconnoitred could only be linear, therefore ineffective. This applied exactly to events in Malaya nearly two years later and in fact might have been written of Singapore Island.

One cannot use the Maginot Line as an argument against defence positions, except that it may have prevented open warfare training of French troops. The Germans were careful never to attack it directly.

Through Belgium to France is an age-old east to west migration and invasion route, used in war as late as 1870 and 1914; and it is astonishing that this gap was not adequately closed by the French and British. Malaya was asleep, as Field-Marshal Wavell later expressed it, and fell for somewhat similar reasons as did France some twenty months earlier. Winston Churchill summed up the fallacy of having seaward defences only on Singapore Island while ignoring the landward side. He wrote later:

> "I ought to have known. My advisers ought to have asked. The reason why I had not asked . . . was that the possibility of Singapore having no landward defences no more entered into my mind than that of a battleship being launched without a bottom."

For Britain the lesson and need for large-scale defences seems crystal clear. As history has repeatedly shown, she, like other peaceful democracies, has always faced immediate disadvantage in all departments for waging war. Unlike the aggressor who has prepared his strength and carefully timed his attack, Britain, as events in both world wars have shown, needs time to train citizen armies and manufacture weapons with which to equip them. Surely the answer for her should always be to build, retain and add to her civil and military defences over the years—a policy increasingly adopted by many European nations.

Strong defences mean that an enemy can perhaps be held at

bay while the defender prepares and from a sound defensive complex can inflict heavy casualties on an enemy with only partially trained men and inadequate equipment, both of which would tell to her great disadvantage in open and mobile warfare against a fully trained and equipped aggressor. The nuclear threat may never be used and is no reason for doing nothing.

In the casualty figures given in his chapter entitled THE BLOOD TEST in his book THE WORLD CRISIS 1916–18, Winston Churchill shows that clichés such as 'attack is the best form of defence' can be suicidal; particularly when attack is by undertrained and under-equipped troops against a superior enemy. Almost invariably throughout the 1914–18 conflict the attacker—whether he was British, French, German, Italian, Austrian, Russian or Turk—had heavier casualties than the defender behind unturnable defences which necessitated frontal attack.

Fortunately not all our commanders in the Second World War had an aversion to defences. This was demonstrated in North Africa at the Alamein defences of 1941–42, a classic example of sound defence making offensive action possible later and victory certain.

Defences were begun at Alam Halfa in June 1941 on the orders of General Wavell, who was to be so shocked to find no defences on the Johore mainland and north shore of Singapore Island six months later. General Auchinleck continued this defence complex in North Africa, and so did General Alexander and General Montgomery until General Rommel's defeat in 1942 at El Alamein.

The Alam Halfa defence position, which was sixty miles west of Alexandria, consisted of three defended localities. These covered the forty-mile wide 'gateway to the East', lying between the sea and the Quattara Depression—much as General Dobbie had proposed earlier for Malaya in South Johore.

Work continued for eleven months prior to the German attack in July 1942, and the defences comprised fire trenches, hundreds of concrete pillboxes, anti-tank posts and obstacles, and barbed wire. Anti-tank minefields were well planned by General Auchinleck's Engineers and laid by them when attack became imminent; while in each locality water was stored in a number of concrete reservoirs, plus food and ammunition should a locality be cut off.

This complex was attacked by Rommel's forces without suc-

cess for six days. Two of the defended localities ultimately fell, but the German casualties in irreplaceable tanks and in experienced infantry made Montgomery's El Alamein victory all the more possible two months later by helping to raise British superiority in tanks to about 5 to 1, for the October battle. It is most significant too that German military historians consider their defeat at Alam Halfa was the turning point of the war for them and more significant than their defeat at the more famous El Alamein battle. Rommel's failure to break through the defences at Alam Halfa apparently made him realize that he had lost the war in North Africa. Defensive fighting in the right place can be very punishing to the attacker.

Sir Basil Liddell Hart's verdict on Alam Halfa was that:

> "the battle was won by sitting tight and offering no target in a well chosen position that commanded the enemy's line of thrust".

In Malaya there were many such positions. Up country the defenders could not have sat tight for long owing to the risk of being outflanked. The main thrust, however, must always come down the road or railway, as it did at Jitra, Gurun, Slim River . . . when severe enemy casualties could be inflicted at first contact as was done by the Australians at Gemas before retiring. In Johore and on the north shore of Singapore Island proper, defences in depth could not be turned and should have made the crossing of the Johore Straits literally impossible—except by air—unless the enemy brought up more troops and artillery. But like Alam Halfa, adequate defences would have taken months to prepare.

The value of defences can never be doubted. It has been said that the Duke of Wellington even built defences while he was advancing. Perhaps that is why, full of confidence about his rear, he never lost a battle. An unexpected check could not develop into a real defeat. General Sherman in the American Civil War and Rommel in North Africa, both great commanders, also built defences on occasions as an insurance, even if it seemed unlikely, at the time, that they would ever use them.

8

DIRECTOR-GENERAL, CIVIL DEFENCE

On December 31, I received an urgent message to report immediately at the War Council Room in Singapore, to the Rt. Hon. Duff Cooper, the Resident Minister for Far Eastern Affairs with Cabinet rank. His promotion to this appointment was made by the Prime Minister on December 10, although he had been in Singapore since September. After the war I learned from the Official History that it allowed him to settle emergency matters himself when there was not time to refer them to London; at the same time, Mr. Duff Cooper had been warned that he was not to impair the responsibilities of the Commanders-in-Chief or His Majesty's representatives in the Far East, who would still be responsible to, and correspond direct with, their relevant departments in Whitehall.

I reported immediately to the War Council Room, and found myself facing Mr. Duff Cooper, the chairman; Major-General Keith Simmons, Commander of Singapore Fortress; Mr. V. G. Bowden, Australian Government representative; Mr. Denham and some others. With the exception of General Keith Simmons, all were strangers to me. The Governor, Sir Shenton Thomas, and the G.O.C., General Percival, were not present.

Mr. Duff Cooper said that he had heard I was an expert on civil defence and that I had lectured to both military and civil audiences on this subject. He asked me to give the War Council a short résumé of the lecture.

I stated that I was not an expert and had never served in civil defence in any capacity, but I had observed what had been done in the London blitz. As a regular officer in the Royal Engineers, I perhaps had the necessary background and training in dealing with civil defence problems, to reduce fire, blast and other risks from bombing. However, I added that I only had the slightest

knowledge and experience of the many problems that arose in the civil sphere.

During the London blitz of 1940, I had made a habit of turning out to help wardens at night, and I briefly described to the War Council what I had learned about Civil Defence organization and equipment in the U.K.; adding that civil defence in Malaya lagged far behind the United Kingdom.

I was asked to wait outside, and when called back, Mr. Duff Cooper told me that the War Council had unanimously decided that I should be offered the post of Director-General Civil Defence, subject to the approval later of General Percival. If this indeed were an offer, I said I must refuse the appointment. The War Council members were astonished, and asked my reasons for refusal.

I stated that in my opinion Singapore Island must shortly be invested; and that during a siege the Chief Engineer often became second in importance only to the G.O.C. He was a key man and I quoted several instances from history, including the siege of Port Arthur in 1904.

I further stressed that I had been sent to Singapore by the War Office because I had up-to-date experience of modern defence work and that my instructions had been to modernize all existing Malayan defences and to build others where thought necessary by the G.O.C., to whom the C.I.G.S. was to have written to this effect. This letter had not yet arrived apparently.

It was for these reasons that I thought my military appointment as Chief Engineer was of far more importance than the new civil defence appointment. There was little time left to do much in the way of more civil defence because it might demand the reorganizing, equipping and training of further civil forces from the cosmopolitan population. On the other hand, a major effort, even now, to strengthen military defences and construct new ones could materially affect the outcome.

If Singapore Island were invested, it must be the military effort which would save it, and I said that military rather than civil defence works—even though General Percival had not yet agreed the need for them—must be ordered now, as time was running out.

Again I was asked to wait outside. On being recalled Mr. Duff Cooper told me that the War Council had decided that I

must, subject to General Percival's agreement, take over Civil Defence.

I could not see General Percival until next day, when I urged him not only to retain me as Chief Engineer but to allow me to start building military defences at once. General Percival sought a compromise. He said that he wanted me to hold both appointments. I answered that it was beyond the capacity of one person now, to carry out adequately the joint responsibilities for both organizations because of the shortage of time available and because military defences and civil defences had both been neglected for so long.

My plea was not accepted and General Percival instructed me to take over civil defence in addition to my duties as Chief Engineer.

After the war General Percival explained his decision in his book THE WAR IN MALAYA (pp. 181–2).

He wrote:

> "I was naturally loath to lose the services of so important an officer at this juncture, but I agreed to make him available providing he retained concurrently his appointment of Chief Engineer, Malaya Command . . . Had he not done this he would have suffered considerable financial loss as there was no provision in the Civil Establishment for a Director-General of Civil Defence . . ."

General Percival in his book added that Mr. Duff Cooper had given me plenary powers under the War Council and that he considered the new organization unsound. He thought that the existing organization should have been retained and expanded.

Mr. Duff Cooper, however, wanted one man, not a committee, to run things. He was determined to speed up decisions and action; as confirmed in his own post-war book OLD MEN FORGET (pp. 302–3).

Admittedly civil estimates did not cover an item for the salary of a Director-General of Civil Defence, but when this problem came up a few days later for engaging other civil staff, means were always found to pay them. Two Royal Engineer captains, Arnold and Willoughby, came over to Civil Defence with me. We all three continued on Army pay.

The plenary powers from Mr. Duff Cooper covered not only Singapore Island but extended to the state of Johore on the

mainland near by, which was ruled by the Sultan of Johore. Next day, the Governor, Sir Shenton Thomas, sent for me and I met him for the first time. He was popular with his staff and the British and Asian civilians. Now mindful of his political duties to the rulers of the Federated and Unfederated states, he believed that my terms of reference from Mr. Duff Cooper were not only illegal but might well annoy the Sultan, whom he did not approach, however. He limited D.G.C.D. powers to Singapore Island only; and restricted them still further by saying that if anybody challenged one of my orders I must refer the matter to the Malayan Legal Department and await their decision, because my powers only existed within the law.

I explained to the Governor the importance of Johore, namely that the up country refugees were halting in Johore to avoid work on Singapore Island. I further stressed that reference of each dispute to the Legal Department would stultify the whole object of my appointment, which was speed. He would not relent. I can only assume that in early January, Sir Shenton had not realized the grave military situation we faced, nor of the shortage of time before the enemy would be knocking at the Singapore gate.

The Official History devotes pages 233–5 to this matter, and says:

> "On December 31 he (Duff Cooper) expressed his apprehension to the War Council. He said that although the security of Singapore depended upon the arrival of reinforcements, a breakdown in the civil defence . . . might well nullify the efforts of the armed forces defending the town. He pointed out that a certain lack of confidence existed among the civil population in the measures being taken for its defence, and that the best way of restoring public confidence was to take a new line or some drastic step which would make civilians feel that at least something was being done. The almost dictatorial powers exercised by the Singapore Harbour Board within the confines of the area under its jurisdiction were a lesson on how important problems could be tackled to ensure the greatest rapidity in the execution of the important work. He therefore considered that the time had come when one man should be appointed who would have control, unhampered by petty restrictions and applications to committees. He proposed that Brigadier I. Simson, Chief Engineer Malaya Command, who had recent

> experience of air raids and similar difficulties in the United Kingdom, should be appointed Director-General of Civil Defence. The Council unanimously decided that Brigadier Simson should be appointed with plenary powers under the War Council through the Governor . . ."

Referring to the restrictions on my plenary powers by the Governor later, the Official History continues:

> "Simson therefore had no special powers to enable him to compel Government departments and civilian organizations to take such action as he considered necessary and, further, his activities were confined to Singapore Island only. Mr. Duff Cooper's plan to appoint one man who would have unhampered control did not materialize . . .
> The selection of the senior Royal Engineer officer in Malaya for the appointment of D.G.C.D. at a time when it was possible that Singapore might be invested and when all the available engineer effort should have been concentrated on the construction of defences, seems in retrospect to have been a mistake. Indeed, Brigadier Simson who from the moment of his arrival in Malaya had advocated the construction of considerably more field and anti-tank defence works than had been authorized, accepted the appointment only under pressure . . ."

In order to achieve speed in carrying out the necessary work, I carried Duff Cooper's plenary order in one pocket and Sir Shenton Thomas's more restrictive order in another. As seemed necessary, I exhibited whichever best suited my purpose at the moment. I had one advantage in that notification of my appointment with Mr. Duff Cooper's plenary powers had been published in the British and vernacular newspapers but the Governor's limited powers had not been so well publicized. Mr. Duff Cooper approved of my duplicity for the sake of speed in action.

Most of my civil defence work was concerned with the protection of important Government buildings, large engineering firms, the railways, the Harbour Board, the Municipal establishments, etc. There was only one occasion when a private owner really challenged my authority; but Mr. Duff Cooper's version of the order came conveniently to hand, and the objector promptly withdrew his objection. With this one exception no force or 'authority' ever proved necessary. Owners soon saw the real need for whatever was required of them.

Immediately there was one unfortunate result of the Governor's order against my powers extending to Johore. I wanted to make use of the refugee up country labour and transport, which, moving back before the advancing Japanese, were halting in Johore to avoid being impressed for work on Singapore Island. Sir Shenton Thomas refused permission to impress them in Johore. As a result we lost their services for almost a month until the approach of the enemy drove them on to Singapore Island. By then it was too late to make much use of them. By flooding the island, these (by now) 'useless mouths' prejudiced the possibility of holding out owing to food and water shortages; and of course their casualties from bombing and shelling became very severe, as the available area shrank later.

Had the Sultan of Johore been approached by British officers with whom he was known to be on good terms instead of by others with whom he was not, we would probably have obtained all the labour we wanted and possibly permission for Mr. Bisseker to operate effectively in Johore. Moreover, it was in the Sultan's interest that we should contain the Japanese. He had presented a warship earlier on and was an Anglophile. The local population, particularly the Chinese among them, had everything to fear from the invader, and nothing to fear from us.

Mr. Duff Cooper had appointed as my deputy, Mr. F. D. Bisseker, who was general manager of the Penang Tin Smelting Works and the senior unofficial member of the Legislative Council. Besides being my deputy, Mr. Duff Cooper also made him Director of Labour and Transport in the Civil Defence organization.

Mr. Bisseker and I met as total strangers for the first time on January 1, 1942. Our first steps were to obtain a suitable building for our headquarters and to collect an efficient staff. We went together to see the then Colonial Secretary, with our staff and office problems and were met with a point blank refusal of help in any way. The refusal was couched in very rude terms.

The reason for this unnecessarily rude non-co-operation was apparently the presence of Mr. Bisseker: an attitude of mind of which I was totally ignorant at that time. I learned later that Mr. Bisseker had often severely criticized the Singapore Government for its lack of preparation for war during his previous two years on the Legislative Council. That his criticisms were now proving justified was ignored, and I took up the

lack of co-operation by the Colonial Secretary with the Governor, but without result. I soon discovered that from the Governor himself downwards, no civil servant would help Mr. Bisseker, or anybody who was associated with him. This seemed to me an extraordinary state of affairs and shows the strange antagonisms that existed among many civil officials and even among some military personnel during those grave days. A house so divided against itself will never stand the strain of war for long.

Mr. Bisseker rented and furnished at his own expense an office for our Civil Defence headquarters. His financial expenditure was never refunded by the Government and he was the only member of the directorate who never received a salary. This was an oversight under pressure of work, for which I fear I was mainly responsible; and I regret it.

When Mr. Duff Cooper was ordered home to England, we took over his office building; and when we were bombed out of that, at the Governor's kind invitation, I operated from Government House for the fortnight or so which remained before Singapore capitulated. Mr. Bisseker operated from elsewhere at this time but; with Singapore now rapidly disintegrating, our separation at that late stage did not matter.

Here I should like to state how grateful I was to Sir Shenton and Lady Thomas for putting me up at Government House as my own quarters had been looted and were no longer habitable. Lady Thomas was ill at this time. For greater safety she now slept on the ground floor as our field batteries were firing from the Government House grounds and this brought enemy retaliation from time to time. One evening I returned at dusk and was talking to Sir Shenton Thomas when there was a muffled explosion close outside. We investigated together to find that about a dozen of the Government House Asian staff—men, women and their children—had crept for safety into a brick tunnel which ran along a terrace on one side of the house. An enemy shell had penetrated and exploded inside the tunnel killing the whole party by blast in that confined space. The deaths of these faithful people greatly upset Sir Shenton and Lady Thomas, as did the heavy casualties in the town.

I soon came under severe pressure from the Governor and several senior civil servants to get rid of Mr. Bisseker. I said I would do so immediately if he failed in his work. Until then I

was not prepared to challenge Mr. Duff Cooper's choice. Not only did Mr. Bisseker not fail in his many duties, but he gave Trojan service and worked harder and with more loyalty in the public interest than most others in the Civil Defence organization.

Because the fate of Sir John Bagnall was unknown (he was one of the few tin experts who had apparently left Singapore a little earlier) and because a knowledge of the Malayan tin industry had to be preserved if possible, the Governor agreed to Mr. Bisseker leaving Singapore. He left on February 13, two days before capitulation, on an order signed by me despite strong protests from him.

I particularly wish to stress that it was by my order (agreed by the Governor) that Mr. Bisseker left—and with reluctance—so as to refute the rumours that spread in the prisoner of war camps and in civilian internee camps in Singapore after the war, that he had 'bolted'. This story probably arose as a result of his criticisms of Government officials. Mr. Bisseker left because he was ordered to go; which is not true about some civil servants and civilians on Civil Defence who left Singapore without my knowledge, although I believe in some cases they may have received Government permission to go without my being informed.

Closely following my appointment as Director-General of Civil Defence, Mr. Duff Cooper wanted me to become a member of the War Council. At first I demurred, as it probably meant spending several hours a day at conferences, on matters with which I had no concern. Later, once Civil Defence was fully organized and running reasonably smoothly, and when other members, including the Governor, urged me to become a member, I did so. This was after Mr. Duff Cooper had left Singapore.

From the first day of my appointment as D.G.C.D. I was ordered to report twice daily directly to Mr. Duff Cooper. This was after lunchtime and usually for dinner. After a quick meal with him and Lady Diana, he and I would get down to business, often late into the night.

He soon questioned me closely about my original reason for declining the Civil Defence appointment, and insisted on hearing the full story of my abortive attempts to get my orders from the War Office confirmed; my failure to break down the anti

defence complex of so many senior officers; and my midnight meeting with the G.O.C. in an attempt to get General Heath's request approved for a defensive area in Johore, into which the Third Indian Corps could retreat; and for north shore defences.

As a soldier and historian himself Mr. Duff Cooper not only appreciated the argument and examples for defences, but quoted other historical precedents in support. He too was convinced that Singapore would be invested shortly and asked me if I thought it could sustain a siege. My reply was in the negative. Apart from the lack of defences, everything that made for real military efficiency, with very few individual unit exceptions, seemed to me to react against us and in favour of the enemy.

I told him that I felt it was now too late to avoid total defeat. Singapore had ignored the warnings given by the fall of France, and the occupation of French Indo-China, and had done very little in military or civil spheres in planning and action to withstand invasion and now the coming siege. Since the start of war in Europe, the risk to Malaya had steadily increased; but even after war started in Malaya, complacency still seemed to rule the day.

Mr. Duff Cooper himself had also long been dissatisfied with the way the authorities in Malaya were conducting the war and in particular the lack of urgency still shown by government officials. In a letter to the Prime Minister on December 18, and again to the Colonial Office on January 3, we learn from the Official History that Mr. Duff Cooper had criticized them for 'failing lamentably in making adequate preparations for war' and on the 'inadequacy of the arrangements for civil defence.'

During a meeting with Mr. Duff Cooper on about January 7, I gave him, at his request, a list of items on which I thought action should have been taken during the past few years or months, and what was still possible now. These covered military and civil needs.

Mr. Duff Cooper studied and discussed this list of items. He undertook to apply what pressure he could to get things put right, but he considered that time was too short to bring about much improvement.

He almost certainly brought the list to General Wavell's attention a few days later; and possibly to the Prime Minister

on reaching London, since six out of ten points—and in the same order—are mentioned on page 45 of Sir Winston Churchill's THE HINGE OF FATE; Vol. IV of his *History of the Second World War.*

Mr. Duff Cooper said he had been aware of some of these weaknesses, but his terms of reference precluded him from interfering in military matters and in the ordinary processes of government. The Home Government had given him powers, then apparently restricted him in carrying them out.

In his higher sphere he was in much the same unfortunate position as I was in my lower one. We had both been sent at a late date to do important work in Singapore, but Mr. Duff Cooper had not been given the power and I had not been supported from the War Office by the promised C.I.G.S. letter to the G.O.C.; nor by the Governor on some civil points. Had there been more imaginative civil and military leadership in Singapore, these limitations would not have mattered. Commonsense would have dictated getting on with the job in useful time. In point of fact not much could ever have materialized in the short time actually available. It takes at least three years, not six weeks under bombing, to train and equip civilians adequately for war—either as soldiers, guerrillas, or as civilians in effective civil defence, and to give a fortress adequate fortifications or defences of many kinds. Our enemy had a fine homogeneous high quality army of experienced troops which probably took more than three years to produce.

I had not long been in charge of Civil Defence when it became apparent to both Mr. Duff Cooper and myself that it was impossible to alter the methods of the local bureaucracy. Officialdom was generally chairbound and lacked the drive and urgency needed to get things done really quickly. Quick decision and action proved impossible for those whose working lives had been spent on committees and deliberations when it seldom mattered if action was taken next week, next month or next year. They were incapable of acclimatizing themselves to the speed essential in war.

The Japanese were advancing rapidly—but still nobody seemed to be concerned. Disaster could not happen here. Somehow, they thought, we must win. This is a good trait but the effort not to lose must really come first! There is 'a point of no return' for those involved which is reached quite quickly as it

was in Singapore. However, to lose all at the start makes winning far more difficult later.

Orders were still transmitted by letter, minute or committee meeting. The higher up the ladder, the slower procedure became. Everybody's opinion, it seemed, was required before a decision could be given. Even when General Wavell or Mr. Duff Cooper asked the Governor for quick action on something, the Governor's method was to pass it through the machine from which it might emerge in the due process of routine. And this was despite the Governor's own order to the Malayan Civil Service, 'No more passing of files . . . the essential thing is speed in action . . .'

I could cite, for example, several urgent matters, mentioned in the Director-General Civil Defence report, in which urgency and importance made me go directly to the Governor for a decision. In some of these matters I sought the help and backing of Mr. Duff Cooper, General Percival and even General Wavell. It is a fact that some of these requests had neither been agreed, nor refused, by February 15, more than a month later, when Singapore fell. They had got lost in the machine.

The only way to get things done really quickly was sometimes to ignore Government channels completely; or to do the job and report it after completion. This I was soon forced to do on some urgent matters. Mr. Duff Cooper condoned such action until the day he left Singapore. As it worked satisfactorily I continued it later. Nobody really seemed to know or to care about what was or was not being done.

Mr. Duff Cooper asked me on about January 6 or 7 whether I could suggest somebody with the necessary military experience and drive to take over as Governor and Commander-in-Chief. He added that it would be very distasteful to him to supersede the present Governor, who was the King's Representative, but he would not hesitate to do so, if the right man could be found.

I could make no useful suggestion on this matter as I also was a comparative newcomer to Malaya. I had been so busy with my duties, largely up country since arrival five months ago, that I had refused all social functions, and had had few opportunities of meeting any of the leading civilians. Mr. Duff Cooper brought the matter up again on the following evening. He wanted not only a strong and efficient Military Governor but he now proposed at the same time, to put the country under

martial law. While the emergency lasted there was to be a military dictatorship.

I told him that Lieutenant-General Sir Lewis Heath was the only soldier available in Malaya, in my opinion, with the qualities and necessary experience to take over. But I added that, in my opinion also, he was possibly the only commander in Malaya who was capable of delaying the enemy and at the same time of getting the Third Indian Corps back to Singapore Island without annihilation.

Mr. Duff Cooper must have discussed all these matters with General Wavell and on his visit to Singapore on January 9,* General Wavell sent for me. He wanted to know the one most important and pressing item in each of my military and civil spheres of duty.

I gave respectively defence works particularly on Singapore Island (north shore) and full Chinese co-operation as labour and guerrillas. I stated that there were no defences at all on the north shore of the Island; and we seemed to be unable to get full Chinese co-operation, while two civil servants remained in the Chinese Secretariat. I was asked to name these men, and I stated that I understood both of them had been unpopular with the Chinese for many years. I added that this state of affairs had continued despite overtures to the Governor from General Percival, Mr. Duff Cooper and myself, to replace the officials in the public interest. I was closely cross-questioned at length on my military and civil statements.

General Wavell was worried. He promptly took up the matter of defences with General Percival, as he states in his A.B.D.A. Despatches (paragraph 9):

> "I was concerned to find that no defences had been made or even planned in detail on the north side of Singapore Island, although it was obvious by now that we might be driven back into the Island and have to defend it. I ordered these defences to be put in hand at once. I also received from the Cabinet Representative in the Far East, the Rt. Hon. Mr. A. Duff Cooper, who was returning to the United Kingdom, a gloomy account of the efficiency of Civil Administration and of the lack of co-operation between the Civil and Military. I discussed this latter question with General Percival and with the Governor, Sir Shenton Thomas, who promised the fullest co-operation and fulfilment of all military requirements."

* This date may possibly have been wrongly noted by me at the time.

Regarding General Wavell's last demand on Sir Shenton Thomas and the latter's promise for better and full co-operation with the local Chinese, I can only record as fact that the head of the Chinese Secretariat, whose unpopularity with the Chinese caused so much trouble, still held office over a month later when Singapore fell. This was despite pressure on the Governor to change him, first from myself as D.G.C.D., then from Mr. Duff Cooper, from General Wavell and General Percival; later still from an influential Chinese Mr. George Yeh; and finally from a deputation from the Chinese Chamber of Commerce.

There is no doubt that this man's unpopularity was largely the cause of the shortage of Chinese labour in the last few weeks; and, possibly much earlier, in the lack of Chinese guerrilla volunteers. There were younger British officers in the Malayan Chinese Secretariat who were *persona grata* to the Chinese, and only too willing to get things moving, but they were not allowed to act.

Following the visit of a Chinese Government delegation to Singapore early in January, we began to hope the situation would improve, even though it was so late in the day. Mr. Bisseker and I had a long talk with its leaders, General Cheng and Colonel Doo, and this resulted in General Chiang Kai Shek issuing a manifesto calling on the Chinese in Malaya to increase their efforts in guerrilla work, civil defence and labour organizations. The appeal, however, did not reach Singapore until late in January, far too late to have any effect. Of the Asians, the Chinese were far the toughest mentally and physically. Moreover they formed the largest nationality and already hated the Japanese with whom their mother country had been at war since 1937. Of the eight million population in Malaya, forty-four per cent were Chinese; forty per cent were Malays; Indians comprised fourteen per cent; all others, including Europeans, were two per cent.

These percentages clearly show how important it was to have enlisted much earlier the full co-operation of the local population, for all work for the Army, Navy, R.A.F. and Civil Defence; for training and use as guerrillas; and for defences had these been ordered; and of course for rubber and tin production and the normal municipal and other services of big cities and ports. Their help was undoubtedly needed if Malaya was to survive.

By failing to enlist in good time the full sympathy and colla-

boration of the Malays and particularly the Straits-born Chinese in their adopted country, we really threw away a magnificent opportunity to use their natural patriotism against the common enemy. With proper leadership both would have entered the conflict more wholeheartedly. There never seemed to me to be any real encouragement for civilians—European and Asian. Rightly or wrongly I got the impression that officialdom never trusted them.

The Chinese did place themselves at 'our disposal' in a memorandum issued on Christmas Day, yet the Singapore Government still mistrusted this offer and by then, of course, it was really too late. Some of the local Chinese were communists, but while they may have hated us, they certainly hated the Japanese more, and would have proved good allies in defence of their homeland whatever difficulties might have arisen after the war. The long drawn out trouble with terrorists in Malaya after the war was probably largely due to our attitude in 1941–42.

On the Prime Minister's orders Mr. Duff Cooper returned to London and left Singapore on January 11. Of events after General Wavell became involved, the Official History (p. 295) records:

> "He (Duff Cooper) had suggested that the simplest solution would be to declare a state of siege and appoint a military governor for the duration of the emergency. The Secretary of State for the Colonies had asked Wavell for his views. Having consulted General Pownall and Admiral Layton and learnt from Brigadier Simson of the difficulties which he was experiencing in carrying out his task, General Wavell replied that he considered it advisable that there should be certain changes in the senior personnel in the administration rather than the appointment of a military governor. His recommendation was acted on and the Governor was asked to ensure that members of the civil administration were those who enjoyed the confidence of the Services."

After General Wavell's intervention no changes of personnel were made. By now it was really too late for them to have had any effect on the situation.

9

SOME PROBLEMS OF CIVIL DEFENCE

The Civil Defence personnel were of many races often led by their own nationals. It proved impossible, and in fact unnecessary, to have a European in charge of each team. On first appointment to D.G.C.D., I wanted to find out for myself how the men worked at recently bombed sites, and when they did not know that they were under surveillance. So I went out to four bombing incidents about the town looking like any civilian passer-by, wearing an old waterproof and no hat. I was soon completely satisfied that teams for Rescue, Fire and Demolition, etc. were efficient and stuck to their work. At one of these incidents, the Governor also arrived; and that evening at first would not believe that I had also been there as he had not seen me. I was not in uniform and deliberately kept out of sight.

As the bombing steadily increased during January, it soon became apparent that the number of squads was insufficient. Authority was obtained to double the strength of the Rescue and Fire-fighting squads, with about fifty per cent increase in other sections. Under the constant bombing any material increase in personnel, training or equipment, proved impossible to achieve in useful time.

The bombing by many aircraft working apparently independently in December until about early January, was not accurate or very effective. They often flew high to avoid A.A. fire and our few fighters. After about January 10 to 15, when our resistance had lessened, the enemy adopted 'carpet' bombing tactics from about 5,000 ft., and later down to about 2,000 ft. The 'carpet' was a square or rectangle of machines flying slowly, wings tip to tip, each line followed very closely by the subsequent lines. These 'flying carpets'* were always composed

* So called by the civil defence personnel, although 'carpet' usually refers to the pattern of bomb craters on the ground.

of multiples of 27 planes—i.e. 27, 54, 81 and a few 'carpets' were counted consisting of 108 planes. Several such 'carpets' usually bombed Singapore daily. On a signal from the leader all planes forming the 'carpet', dropped their bombs simultaneously. Such tactics of course would have proved quite impossible against fighters or adequate A.A. fire. The docks and airfields suffered most but in the town, the enemy's air effort had more effect on the population's morale than in actual damage. It is doubtful if the enemy's air effort was in fact justified, since Singapore really fell owing to the effort of the enemy's land forces.

There were few, if any, air-raid shelters affording adequate protection, since it had been erroneously assumed earlier that underground shelters could not be built in Singapore's sandy ground. Today, however, Singapore has underground car parks. Fire protection soon became another problem of great concern as the crowded native quarters with their flimsy timber structures and the sawmill areas were very inflammable. Although the Singapore Harbour Board had its own excellent civil defence and labour force, they came to us for help when the docks became a major target. From mid-January onwards Mr. Bisseker supplied the docks with some 2,000 labourers daily and civil defence assistance where necessary.

For fighting fires, fire breaks could not be made wide enough in the densely-packed native and sawmill areas. All one could do was to keep access open for fire engines to reach water in the creeks and streams. Fortunately the Japanese used few incendiaries. Had they done so, Singapore Town would probably have been destroyed by fire long before capitulation. Presumably, the Japanese wanted to capture the town without too much damage to its buildings and installations.

Shelters for the population were often improvised by using large-diameter concrete pipes (about 4 to 6 ft. long) on end, with the sides protected by earth and rubble against blast and splinters. They had no roof or overhead cover, so that people could get in and out quickly. These were sited mostly wherever large numbers collected, e.g. at markets. Slit trenches were also dug wherever feasible and tunnels into some hillsides. Dispersal camps and evacuation camps had earlier been built away from the city (to keep casualties down) prior to the D.G.C.D. organization being formed. These were effective until the enemy closed in on the city.

In the docks area there were sixty-four large warehouses packed to the roof with reserve food stocks and other stores for the civil population. For example, one warehouse alone contained twelve thousand tons of flour, others had enormous tonnages of rice* and other foodstuffs. Immediate efforts were made with labour and transport to disperse these stores but there was only time to make slight inroads into such vast tonnages. Forty-six of these warehouses and contents were completely destroyed, and the structures and stores in all the other eighteen warehouses were damaged. The large stocks of frozen meat were stored at Bukit Timah near the centre of the Island. First the buildings were wrecked by bombs and shells; towards the end they were overrun by the enemy.

Apparently, with the permission of the Governor, the entire British and Asian personnel of the Harbour Board vanished on or about February 10. But neither Sir Shenton nor the Board's chairman warned D.G.C.D. that this was about to happen. This type of sudden evacuation without notice had occurred earlier with other smaller organizations and it sometimes involved key individuals.

It set a poor example to the Chinese labour whom we sent to help them as had been demanded; only to find that there was nobody there to whom they could report for work.

It should have been realized in peace-time that dock transit sheds should never have been used for storage over a long period, since in time of war the docks always become a legitimate and probable target for bombing. Had the siege of Singapore been prolonged the food shortage would have probably proved another limiting factor in holding out. These reserve food stocks should have been distributed about the town and island rather than concentrated in a dangerous area, thus inviting destruction and making distribution difficult.

As soon as the D.G.C.D. organization was formed, moves were made to organize labour and transport better, both now being under Mr. Bisseker. This resulted in an immediate improvement compared with the old competitive system for the four Services. Despite the increasing intensity of the bombing and despite the unpopularity of some officials at the Chinese Secretariat, seventy-five to ninety per cent of army, navy, air

* For many months, if not years, the P.O.W. and civil internees were fed on weevily rice from these damaged stocks.

and civil demands for labour and transport, were met each day. For this improvement Mr. Bisseker praises the Lim brothers and other Chinese staff for their great efforts. The Chinese praised Mr. Bisseker!

Mr. Bisseker's office handled some twelve thousand men daily and also found the transport to carry them about Singapore Island to the various sites of work and to bring them back when their day's work was completed. He found, and delivered labour, and collected it later. Supervision of the workers at site, however, was the responsibility of the Service which had demanded them. If labour worked badly or did not return to work after an air raid, that was the fault of the Service in charge at the place of operation. Needless to say Mr. Bisseker's organization was wrongly blamed.

From early January we felt the effects of the ruling that D.G.C.D.'s plenary powers applied only to the Island and did not extend to the Johore mainland, where there were thousands of idle up-country Asian refugees. During the latter half of January the demand for labour reduced though labour demands still could not be met quite in full.

In an effort to rectify the situation, an emergency Bill for compulsion of labour was rushed through the Legislature at the end of January. The Governor, Mr. Bisseker and I opposed the measure. The Governor did not like the idea of compulsion even if legalized. Mr. Bisseker and I were against the Bill because we thought it now too late as demand was steadily reducing and this could be expected to continue once the mainland was evacuated. Singapore was starting to disintegrate and enforcement of any such law would have proved quite impossible.

Some post-war books have said that a law, even at this late stage, would have been useful; but it is a fact that the demand for both labour and transport fell very sharply after about February 1 and compulsion would certainly have had little or no useful effect at this late stage. Large areas in the north of the Island were now occupied by troops and in fact civilians had been evacuated by order and could no longer work in such areas. The burial of the dead was undertaken by organized groups of Tamils as the Chinese refused to do this work. This task was made more difficult because two out of the three Tamil camps early received direct hits by bombing—causing a shortage of such labour. Later the Japanese overran the burial

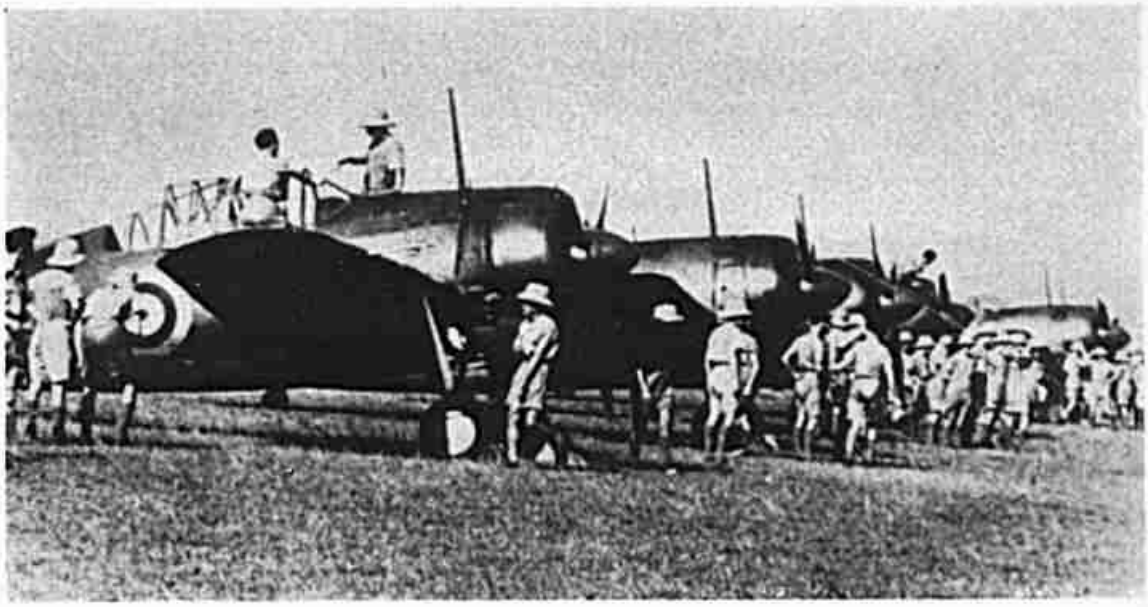
grounds which were on the outskirts of the town. Quick burial was necessary to avert pestilence because of the tropical heat.

The total Asian casualties on Singapore Island will never be known. In late December and until mid-January an average of about 150 dead were actually recorded as being buried daily. Many more certainly died unknown to the Municipality in the Kampongs, in fire destruction and beneath collapsed buildings, since the rubble from these could very rarely be moved.

In the last few days, when the cemeteries were overrun by the Japanese, it was impossible to keep any record of civilian casualties. Despite D.G.C.D. remonstrance towards the end of January, large numbers of up-country refugees were allowed to cross into the Island from Johore. The population was about doubled as a result, thus prejudicing food and water supplies, and increasing their casualties as the available area shrank.

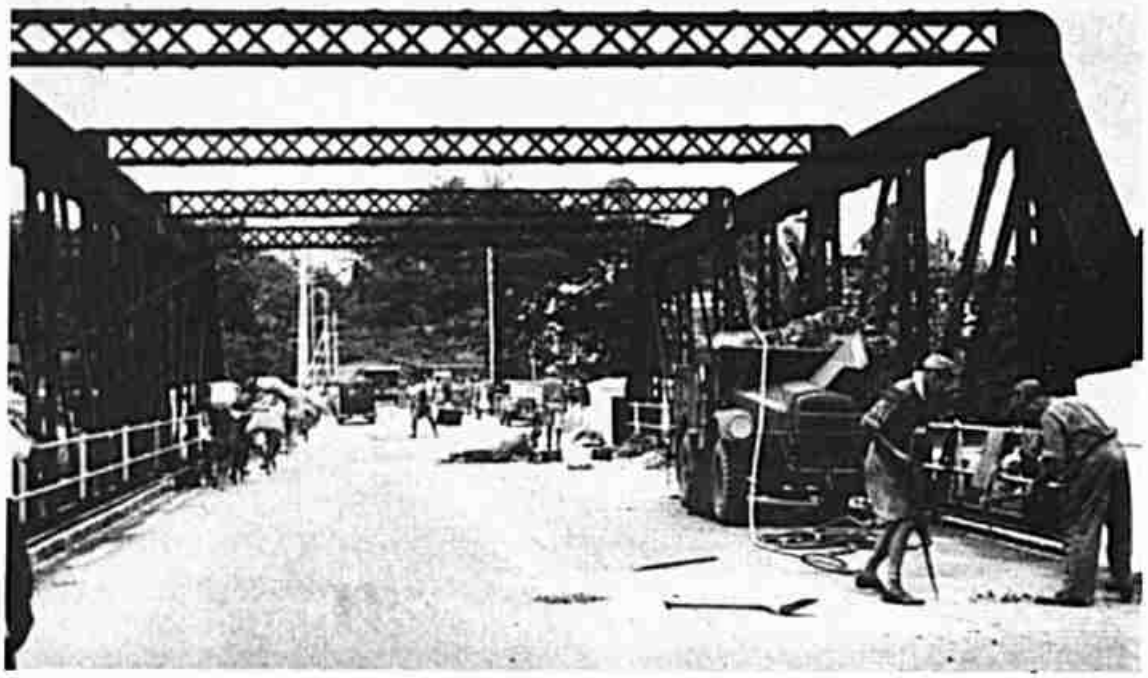
The death roll certainly increased greatly throughout the latter half of January and in February when shelling was added to the bombing. An estimate given in D.G.C.D. report (dated May 1942), puts the numbers of estimated dead at between 400 and 500 per day during the two weeks of February. The 2,000 civilians dead per day, which is the figure given in one post-war book, certainly is excessive. Possibly the author meant the figure to include the wounded and missing. If so the total casualties of 2,000 per day might well be about right.

All the established hospitals were overcrowded with European and Asian wounded. To help them many hotels and large buildings were turned into temporary hospitals. Amid all the confusion, gloom, bravery and cowardice during the last few days the work of Singapore's civil and military medical services stands out like a beacon. Their success was largely due to the Deputy Director of Medical Services, Brigadier C. H. Stringer, C.B.E., D.S.O. Since his arrival in Malaya in 1938, he had taken the Japanese threat seriously, and had prepared accordingly. He brought the civil and the military medical services together into an efficient whole. During the last hundred years the Army Medical Service in various campaigns has often been criticized. In Malaya, however, the British, Australians and Asians of many nations gave the civil and military medical services unstinted praise under very difficult conditions. It is to be regretted that no reference at all is made to them in



9. Brewster Buffalo fighter aircraft at the R.A.F. Base after arrival with their crews from England. *Imperial War Museum.*

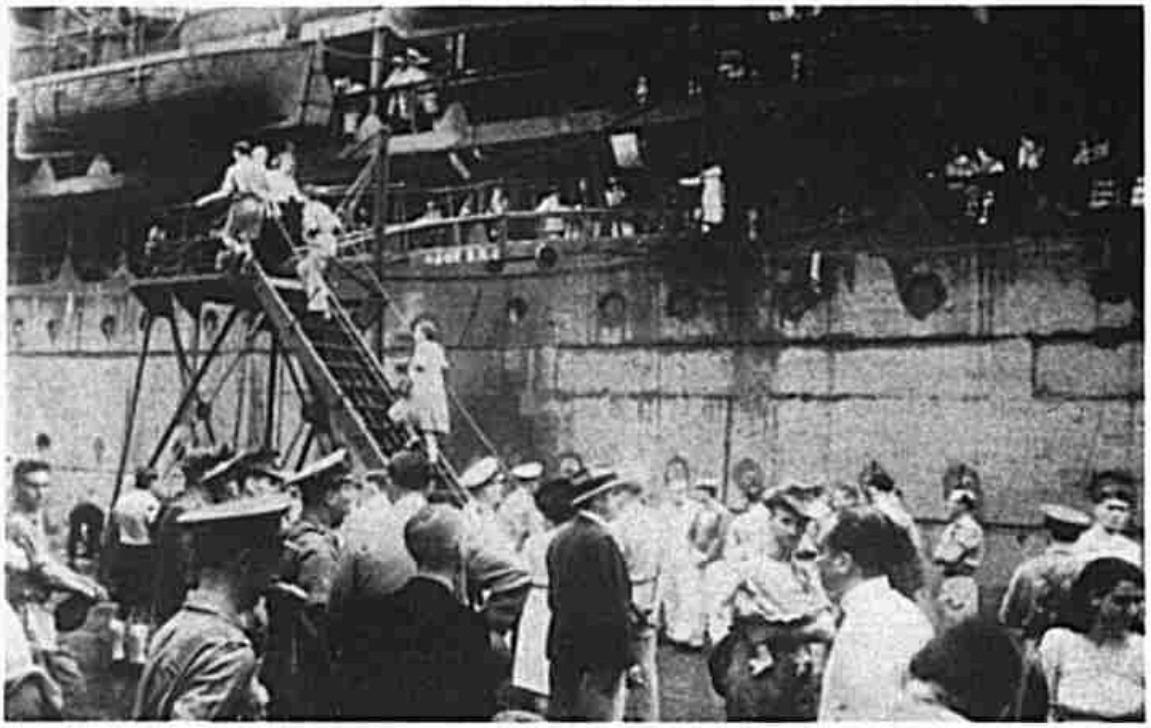
10. Recruiting local men at Singapore Recruiting Office. October, 1941. *Imperial War Museum.*



11. Sappers preparing to blow up a bridge. *Imperial War Museum.*

12. British troops often encountered great difficulties on the mainland due to roads being flooded after a monsoon storm. *Imperial War Museum.*

13. Rubber stocks on Singapore island set on fire by the British prior to the arrival of the Japanese. *Imperial War Museum.*



14. British families being evacuated. December, 1941. *Imperial War Museum.*

15. Children, clutching their treasured possessions, wait to be evacuated from the harbour. January, 1942. *Imperial War Museum.*

16. One of the big guns of the fixed defences firing out to sea. *Imperial War Museum.*

17. Japanese bombs hit oil tanks in the Naval Base. January, 1942. *Australian War Memorial.*

18. Two Civil Defence volunteers fire fighting in Singapore docks. January, 1942. *Australian War Memorial.*

19. Australian troops taking up a defensive position. *Imperial War Museum.*

20. Australian gunners in action against Japanese tanks attempting to bypass a primitive road-block. *Imperial War Museum.*

21. Three Japanese tanks knocked out by the Australians. *Imperial War Museum.*

the Official History; while the D.D.M.S. Malaya Command (Brigadier Stringer) and the D.D.M.S. Third Indian Corps (Brigadier Seaver) stated that they had never been approached by the writers of the main Official History, nor of the Medical History. This seems a really surprising official oversight since both were in possession of some facts and casualty figures which apparently disagreed with those quoted in these publications.

A further complication was unexploded bombs. We started with two Bomb Disposal units in Singapore; later three others arrived from Penang, Kuala Lumpur and Johore, as the peninsula was evacuated. There was plenty of work for all five units in Singapore. A total of some 270 'delay action' bombs was reported. All these on investigation proved to be ordinary impact fuse duds, but of course they had to be dug out, removed and exploded. No real delay action bombs were ever found, and only one phosphorus incendiary bomb was reported. The largest unexploded bomb recovered was about 250 kilogrammes, but apparently a few 500-kilogramme (half-ton) bombs were dropped on airfields. There was virtually no enemy air attack at night—with the exception of the raid on the first night of war—but in the last fortnight, when the Japanese artillery was within range, there was much night shelling. Field artillery high-velocity high-explosive shells were used but never exceeded about 6-inch calibre. (Probably German 5·9-inch).

Tin and rubber production was, naturally, of the highest importance as strategic materials in time of war and the order from London had been to give priority to their production. They were of equal importance to the Japanese war machine too, yet despite this—and along the entire length of the peninsula—Government sanction for the destruction of tin dredgers, rubber stocks and processing plant, was usually not given in time. When orders to carry out a 'scorched earth' policy did arrive in time, destruction was often resisted by owners. Often, too, Royal Engineer and Public Works Department units were switched to carry out this work at the last minute.

Although it had been suggested, more than once, there had been no plans made in advance to list important items which should be destroyed before the enemy overran them. Hurried and last-minute attempts at demolition, understandably, were not as effective as they would have been with pre-planning.

Among the stocks that fell into Japanese hands were enormous quantities of tin in Penang.*

We could expect similar difficulties in Singapore if and when it came to a 'scorched earth' policy, since stocks of everything were enormous, because Singapore was an entrepôt not only for Malaya, but for the entire Far East.

Early in January I had recommended to the Governor and General Percival that a phased priority programme for destruction of stores and installations be prepared and approved in advance for demolition if ever required. No decision was given. Two weeks later when I became a member of the War Council (from January 23), I brought the matter up again. The approval, when given, was very late. It was ruled that public services such as water, electricity, gas and sewage were to remain intact, and that the Governor should arrange for the destruction of rubber, tin and radio stations. The Governor refused to sanction the destruction of some forty Chinese-owned engineering works—again for reasons of morale—and these were left intact for the Japanese. But most, if not all, of the forty-seven British-owned plants were wrecked, often in the face of owner opposition. Such opposition, however, was presumably due to the owner wanting to preserve his legal rights for compensation after the war.

Enormous stocks of petrol and oil were destroyed by the naval authorities and by the oil companies themselves. Fires made by this burning oil sometimes continued for two or three weeks. Smoke sometimes hid the sun and soot blackened the town.

One of the strangest and most awkward jobs was the destruction of huge quantities of whisky, gin and other intoxicants, which were held in Singapore for distribution to the entire Far East.

The Chinese delegation from Generalissimo Chiang Kai Shek had reported appalling atrocities committed in China by troops inflamed by alcohol. With this at the back of my mind I raised this issue in the War Council towards the end of January, but it was another ten days before the Governor in the War Council agreed to the destruction of all intoxicants.

Spirits and wines likely to be useful in hospitals were sent to them, and then a large party got down to the job. It took them

* See page 124.

ten days to destroy the vast amounts of spirits and wines. By working around the clock in relays they finished the destruction just in time—on Sunday, February 15.

To appreciate the magnitude of this one task, the D.G.C.D. report records two items only, out of some fifty, involved in this destruction of intoxicants. These wines and spirits were all dispersed widely about the town and in considerable quantities in hotels, clubs and shops, in addition to large stocks held in several bonded warehouses serving the whole Far East.

The two items mentioned were nearly 1½ million bottles of whisky in crates and sixty thousand gallons of Sam Sui, a Chinese spirit. There was much obstruction of the working parties who carried out this work. The thanks of all races in Singapore are due to Lieutenant-Colonel F. M. G. McConechy of the local Volunteer Engineers (formerly Chief Engineer of Public Works Department, Selangor) and his P.W.D. and Asian workers. Despite the delay in starting, they undoubtedly saved Singapore from the terrible atrocities which had occurred elsewhere. Colonel McConechy also directed much other 'scorched earth' work (e.g. radio stations and railway locomotives) as the Army Engineers were manning the trenches at the end.

Singapore, like Hong Kong and other areas, did not escape some other excesses. It was in the Singapore hospitals crowded with the sick and the wounded that the Japanese, perhaps in the heat of battle, showed how far human beings could descend on occasion despite their own military code of honour. One example will suffice. The Alexandra Military Hospital clearly marked with red crosses was overrun on February 13. On the pretext that shots were fired from the hospital, many of the staff —doctors and nurses—and patients were bayoneted in the wards and passages. In the operating theatre, the Japanese bayoneted the unconscious patient on the operating table, and then the masked surgeons and nurses carrying out the operation. By feigning death, one wounded witness survived to tell the story. The Japanese took another 150 staff and patients from the hospital on the following day and executed them. So far as I know, it was never proved that shots in fact had been fired from the hospital. The written record held by the Imperial War Museum in London, is by an unknown writer.

10

EVACUATION

From December into January my advice was often sought by civilians and soldiers on whether they should send away their wives and children. By early January, with the Japanese spearheads still advancing quickly and continuously down the mainland, the matter gained in urgency. If Singapore Island was to withstand a siege successfully, it would obviously be better for themselves if all those who could contribute nothing in its defence be evacuated to reduce their own casualties, the run on food and water and the anxiety of their menfolk who remained.

To all these people I gave the same advice: that those who could not be of any assistance in the defence of Singapore should get out while it was easy to do so. After the war I received some grateful letters of thanks from the few who took this advice in time; but far too many people took the complacent official view and left their own evacuation until too late.

One of my first actions (about January 2) on being appointed D.G.C.D. was to ask Sir Shenton Thomas, General Percival and then Mr. Duff Cooper, to *order* all 'useless mouths' out of Singapore at once. We knew at this time that the authorities in Hong Kong had done just this as early as July 1941—i.e. over four months before the war had started. As the Official History told us years later, nearly 4,000 British women and children, despite Foreign Office remonstrance, were safely evacuated from Hong Kong, without a single casualty.

The numbers of European women and children in Malaya must have been many times greater than those in Hong Kong.

The Governor, who had already decreed that anybody could leave voluntarily, with no discrimination of race or creed, refused to issue a compulsory evacuation order for European or Asian women and children. Large ships had sailed practically

empty from October onwards. In December and January, the Royal Navy tried to get people to use these nearly empty liners, because still relatively few chose to go voluntarily.

The Chinese, especially those who had worked for the British and would suffer most, often complained to the D.G.C.D. office that they had been refused exit permits by the Chinese Secretariat. This was despite the fact that it had been repeatedly confirmed at meetings between the Government and representatives of the Chinese community that all help in obtaining passages would be given. There had been many complaints in December during the hurried evacuation of Penang, of racial discrimination and other troubles. This could clearly recur in Singapore on a far larger scale if there was again a rush to evacuate towards the end.

The point about evacuating the Chinese and Indians was that they did not want to go far. Unlike the British they did not wish to reach the United Kingdom, Australia, South Africa or India, which required larger ocean-going ships. The Chinese in particular, wanted to reach land nearer at hand (e.g. the Netherland East Indian Islands) whereas few Malays and Indians wanted to leave Malaya. There were many small and suitable craft for such short coastal trips, lying in Singapore Harbour. These could have been made available, but were not. Just before capitulation some of these small craft were seized by armed deserters and the bulk of the others were deliberately scuttled to prevent them falling into enemy hands.

Concerned about the fate which awaited some of these prominent Chinese if the Japanese captured them, I took up several cases with Sir Shenton Thomas personally. The Governor, however, as earlier, would not force the issue with the Chinese Secretariat chief executives. It is probable that some of these Chinese —and their families—later paid for this decision with their lives.

I will cite just one example. In the Civil Defence office we had two Chinese liaison officers. They were a Mr. Lim Bo Seng and his brother, and it is to these two men that much of the credit goes for maintaining labour during the last six weeks. Lim Bo Seng himself had been helpful to the Governor and British business interests several years earlier during trouble at the Japanese-owned iron mines in north-east Malaya. Like other prominent Chinese, he and his family would almost certainly

be on a Japanese black list for reprisals or liquidation. Sir Shenton Thomas knew this and acknowledged the fact. But on several occasions he refused to take positive steps to ensure that the Lim brothers and their families and some others, were evacuated. Like all others they could go voluntarily if they so wanted.

It was not until February 1, when Singapore was starting to disintegrate and the need for civilian labour was reducing with the Japanese already facing us on the mainland opposite, that I was able to give Lim Bo Seng and his family permission and help to leave. They finally left under their own arrangements on February 7 and reached Sumatra safely. I learned after the war that Lim Bo Seng personally returned to Malaya in 1943 as a guerrilla, was in due course betrayed and executed. There is now a monument to him in Singapore, and there is every reason to be proud of him. He was a British subject and had shown himself to be more loyal and faithful to his country than some other British-born subjects.

It is worth stressing again that the failure to encourage and organize at an early date the great potential for guerrillas and labour that existed among the Straits-born Chinese, and later to help the best of these men to escape certain execution by the Japanese was tragic and a great blunder which will take us a long time to live down.

On 'Black Friday', February 13, there was the last official civilian evacuation of Singapore. As D.G.C.D., I was allotted 300 (out of 1,200) places in 13 small vessels (out of about 40) due to sail that day. The intention was to allot the 300 places to young technical civilians who would be needed to continue the war elsewhere. Under five hours were available to warn them. Many addresses had changed of course, because of bomb damage; and many telephone lines were down. Since there would probably not be time to alert all 300 I obtained permission to fill up the D.G.C.D. quota, if necessary with older men and women and children. Also, since there was little further he could usefully do, I ordered Mr. Bisseker to leave this day with the Governor's agreement, for reasons stated earlier.* Some 320 passes in all, signed by me were distributed by others to the D.G.C.D. nominees. The extra twenty passes were to allow for some individuals not receiving their passes in time. I went down to see this party off at the docks. A very large crowd of people was

* See page 85.

already gathered at the dock gates hoping to get away. Then six Japanese bombers came over, flying very low, using bombs and machine-guns. Despite the large number of people in the area there were fortunately relatively few casualties. For the second time, my own car was wrecked and burnt out when parked on the dock side, and my new driver had the narrowest of escapes. This fine R.A.S.C. lad died two years later from beri-beri while a prisoner of war. I had released my previous excellent Javanese driver earlier to look after his family.

The final tragedy was that almost all of these thirteen little D.G.C.D. ships were sunk by the Japanese who were waiting for them. The heavy death roll included Rear Admiral Spooner and Air Vice Marshal Pulford, who left this day under their own arrangements. Some survivors were captured. Only a few eventually arrived in India via Sumatra.

The belated evacuation of non-essential personnel and young technical men from Singapore was on a par with everything else witnessed since my arrival. Everything in Malaya was always 'too little and too late'. The Government, for example, had issued an order that the passages of all European women and children would be paid by the Government. But the order was not publicized adequately perhaps owing to the fear of upsetting the Asian population. This led to several women and children —their husbands and fathers working or fighting elsewhere— looking for banks or friends to get passage money. Yet organization and evacuation many weeks before would have got all these hundreds of people away safely, plus the hundreds who now had to be left in Singapore.

The success at Hong Kong and the failure at Penang were well known—and recent. Will we never learn our lesson?

In my opinion it should never be left to the civilian population to decide whether they should go or stay. They cannot be expected to assess the military prospects or to visualize the rigours and dangers of a siege or of internment under Asian conditions. Food, water and the treatment of casualties usually soon become major problems in any siege. The leaders should not aggravate matters by a sort of perverted kindness—which in fact is really being far more cruel both to those who have to stop behind and to those who should have left under orders. For those who have to remain it is a great relief to know that their families are out of danger.

If a siege looks probable—and in Singapore this was obvious by late December—all unneeded civilians should have been ordered out in good time as being far the lesser of two evils.

By early January it was quite certain that the Japanese were closing in for the siege, if not the kill; so it required little imagination to foresee that enemy naval and air forces would soon be in position, if out of sight, to deal with any shipping which attempted to escape. Even then there was no pressure to get people away.

In the last three days, when the public realized what was about to happen, the numbers who wanted to get away were tremendous. Yet it was probably far more dangerous to go at that time than to remain. For two months of war (and earlier) evacuation remained a trickle because, of course, nobody likes the separation of their own families or to be thought a coward for going. During the last few days it became an unmanageable torrent, quite impossible to deal with adequately and with very serious risk to those who went.

The Official History records that only four out of forty-four little ships that left in the last three days reached safety. Forty were captured or sunk by bomb or shell and hundreds of civilians, including women and children were killed outright, captured, or died on islands they managed to reach. The remainder, left behind in Singapore, had to undergo three and a half years of unpleasant internment, as recorded in several books by survivors.

Evacuation remains another black mark on the Malayan campaign. Nobody nowadays is ever blamed for not taking the necessary action in time. Everything unpleasant is hushed up. Perhaps this is why we as a nation keep on making similar mistakes in so many fields of endeavour, time after time. Few people read history, yet it is the finest guide to events that may occur again if in slightly different form, in every walk of life. A good knowledge of history was one of our war-time Prime Minister's strongest points. The Official History states that on December 19 Mr. Churchill raised the question of reducing the number of 'useless mouths' on Singapore Island; and again on February 2—yet voluntary evacuation remained in force to the end.

Not only was there totally inadequate evacuation of 'useless mouths' but the reverse took place in late January. Despite strong remonstrance, many thousands of the up-country Asian refugees in Johore were allowed to flood on to Singapore Island,

as the enemy approached. This invasion doubled the normal population of Singapore. Had the Army been able to hold out, the pressure on the G.O.C. to capitulate would soon have been impossible to resist owing to the resulting food and water shortages and heavy civilian casualties. It would have been kinder to leave the Asian refugees in Johore from their own point of view.

11

THE BATTLE ON SINGAPORE ISLAND

On December 23 (G.O.C.'s Despatches, paragraph 436) and probably again about January 9 following General Wavell's visit, General Percival ordered, as urgent priority, sites for defences to be reconnoitred on the north shore of Singapore Island by General Keith Simmons, the Fortress Commander. Chief Engineer and D.G. Civil Defence offices were kept in complete ignorance of General Wavell's and of both General Percival's orders; which also conflicted with what I, as Chief Engineer, had been told early on December 27, by both General Percival and General Keith Simmons personally that 'Defences were bad for the morale of civilians and troops.' If any defences were planned then (December/January), it is certain that no construction was started. In January civilian labour could have been provided on demand by Mr. Bisseker, Director of Labour and Transport in the D.G.C.D. office. Neither Mr. Bisseker nor I were ever asked to do this.

On January 9 or 10 General Wavell ordered defences on the north shore (A.B.D.A. Despatches, paragraph 9) but nothing resulted. On January 23, General Percival in a secret letter to the Fortress Commander (G.O.C.'s Despatches, paragraph 437) appointed Brigadier Paris and others to prepare defences on the north shore. This order was possibly the result of a further order from General Wavell or perhaps as the result of a telegram from the Chiefs of Staff in London dated January 20. Again Chief Engineer and D.G.C.D. offices were kept in complete ignorance. What actual defences resulted I do not know.

The withdrawal of all Commonwealth troops from Johore to the Island took place on January 31. From February 1 the north shore came under observed enemy artillery and machine-gun fire at close to medium ranges. Civilian labour could now not be used on defences so that probably little in the way of con-

struction of trenches, etc. can have been achieved by the troops; who moreover were not capable technically of installing many of the items mentioned below.

In his Despatches (paragraph 436), G.O.C. states:

> ". . . all obstacles and depth charges were placed in creeks which appeared to be likely landing places. All available spare searchlights and Lyon lights were collected and made available. Anti-tank obstacles were constructed and made available . . ."

Neither the Official History nor G.O.C.'s Despatches, however, state that, despite no orders from December onwards, all such defensive stores had been prepared and dumped (not installed) on the initiative of the Deputy Chief Engineer, along the north shore, all west of the Causeway inclusive. They included all types of barbed wire (as well as anti-tank high tensile Dannert coils), pickets, booby traps, drums of petrol and other incendiaries to fire the water surface, etc., at the more probable landing places; with anti-tank cylinders and chains on roads as had been done up country. To supplement the searchlights and Lyon lights, headlights had also been stripped from now unwanted cars and lorries but this was later stopped on orders from H.Q. Malaya Command after the owners had complained to the Governor.

The Johore shores had been reconnoitred much earlier by myself, both east and west of the Causeway. Owing to the far better embarkation facilities for the enemy west of Johore Bahru, the defence stores were dumped on the Island west of the Causeway inclusive. General Wavell later came to the same conclusion independently, that this would be the more likely point of attack. However, late in January, H.Q. Malaya Command ordered all this material to be moved east of the Causeway—which was done. On February 6, H.Q. changed their mind and the stores had to be moved back west of the Causeway. General Percival had correctly estimated a pause of one week after February 1, before the enemy could attack. The attack came on February 8, before the move back of stores was completed and very little (if any) can have been installed in time—again the Engineers were not asked to help in installation, though the Australian Engineers may possibly have done a little on their frontage.

Defence of the north shore, west of the Causeway, was placed

under General Gordon Bennett; but he had only two (22nd and 27th) Australian Brigades and one inexperienced 44th Indian Brigade to cover about 20 miles of shore-line—practically without any real defences. This was an impossible task against a determined attack. The recently landed 18th (British) Division and 11th Indian Division (into which the remnants of the 9th Indian Division had been incorporated) apparently remained in far greater strength to cover a very much shorter shore-line east of the Causeway—which in fact was never attacked from the water front.

On the night of January 7–8, Australian patrols crossed the Straits and penetrated 1½ miles into Johore, to confirm large enemy troop concentrations west of the Causeway.

That night too an enemy boat with about 30 occupants crossed the water just west of the Causeway, to be annihilated by Australian machine-gun fire. Apparently such craft had not been removed from the Johore shore. Penang's error repeated.

On February 8, by daylight, the Australian positions were heavily attacked by artillery, machine-gun fire and bombing from the air. Before dark practically all telephone wires were cut. When the enemy infantry crossed the Straits later that night (February 8–9), little or no communication existed between the Australian infantry and their guns and lights. The guns only opened when the infantry sent up their S.O.S. light signals. The lights never came on to illuminate the water surface.

On the 22nd Australian Brigade front the enemy soon attained a strong foothold on a five-mile front. Nearer the Causeway the 27th Australian Brigade at first inflicted such heavy casualties on the Japanese Imperial Guards Regiment, that General Nishimura (we learned years later) asked his Army Headquarters to call off the attack and to direct it elsewhere. The Australian Engineer officer detailed to destroy the Kranji oil tanks, had his first truck load of explosives destroyed. He succeeded at his second attempt. He also opened the valves and blazing petrol must have added to the enemy's losses on the water surface. Before acceding to General Nishimura's request, the Japanese G.O.C., General Yamashita, sent over a Staff Officer to check the position. At 4.30 a.m. (February 9) he reported that resistance had lessened, as the forward Australian Battalion had fallen back through some misunderstanding. So the enemy now also landed in strength near Kranji, soon turning the flank of troops

east of the Causeway who were thus forced to fall back as well.

The Causeway itself, linking Singapore Island to the mainland of Johore, carrying the road and railway, was built on a massive embankment about 1,500 yards long across the relatively shallow Johore Strait. The embankment consisted of large blocks of stone and concrete—an extremely difficult object to demolish effectively. A gap had been blown in it after Johore was evacuated (January 31); but across the small gap itself the water was only about four feet deep. Once out of our observed artillery and machine-gun fire, this gap was soon made passable for tanks and infantry by the enemy engineers.

As soon as the north shore, west of the Causeway, was lost to the enemy—who could now invade in strength as he wanted—the game was up. The Johore Straits—that magnificent anti-tank and infantry obstacle—was where the enemy could and should have been stopped, at any rate temporarily and with severe casualties, had full defensive measures in depth and a re-disposition of troops been taken in useful time; but this of course would not have stopped the bombing and shelling of Singapore Town.

Once ashore in strength, supported by at least 50 tanks, the fighting reverted to what it had been earlier all down the Malayan peninsula, where we had failed to hold a very fit, well trained and better equipped enemy in open or jungle fighting. Matters soon went from bad to worse with breakdown of communications, unit disasters, confusion, and retreats . . . despite several spirited and successful local counter-attacks by individual units. One gets the impression from the Official History that the enemy were a first-class homogeneous team, which the various Commonwealth Staffs and units never became, not having worked together before. The Official History (p. 394) considers that after a night of disaster, Singapore was saved from occupation on the morning of February 11 by the failure of the enemy tanks to advance from near Bukit Timah. The Japanese account later stated that they were short of ammunition and artillery, had reached their allotted objectives and were not expected to advance again until early on February 13.

On February 11 also General Yamashita dropped from the air many copies of a letter calling on the G.O.C. to surrender. The text, already published in other books, is given on page 157.

General Percival had no means of reply but informed General Wavell that his reply would have been in the negative.

I was not personally involved in the battle for Singapore being fully occupied with 'scorched earth' demolitions in the town and harbour. I shall, however, always remain convinced that better use, in time, of the Commonwealth Engineers up country and particularly on the north shore of Singapore Island would have prolonged resistance appreciably by causing far heavier casualties to the enemy, which might even perhaps have forced them to send more troops and artillery to Malaya. General Wavell apparently wanted Singapore to hold out for an extra month. This might well have been achieved; but in view of our tremendous commitments in Europe, North Africa, Burma, it seems unlikely that the ultimate fall of Singapore could have been averted. The enemy could always bring quickly much more force to bear for attack, than we were ever likely to be able to supply for defence, owing to our commitments against Germany and to having lost command of the seas and air round Malaya and Singapore. Reinforcements and ammunition would have had great difficulty in reaching Singapore even if the island had been held.

The risk of the big guns in fixed emplacements (see page 14) being captured by enemy paratroops—as had occurred in forts in Europe—had been brought to the notice of the Commander Fixed Defences in early December. Fortunately the enemy never had the need to use paratroops in Malaya, as he did later in Sumatra.

12

THE WEAK WATER SUPPLY AND CAPITULATION

The failure of the water supply to Singapore was officially given as the first reason for capitulation, so it seems necessary to elaborate on the brief account which is given in the Official History, which was based upon the D.G.C.D. report. The water supply of Singapore Fortress had always been a weakness and had long caused concern to H.Q. Malaya Command.

Its weaknesses, should the area be involved in war—especially if undergoing a prolonged siege—had been pointed out by earlier Chief Engineers long before I brought the matter up from September 1941 onwards. Over the years the risk of water distribution failure increased with the growth of air power. Shortage of water in a lengthy siege would certainly have proved to be one Achilles' heel for the defence, even had landward defences enabled Singapore to hold out appreciably longer.

The main source of water was from the pumping station at Gunong Pulai, in Johore, some ten miles north of the Causeway. Consequently in a siege, had Singapore fought on, this main water source would have been in enemy hands. The water came by large-diameter pipe and was carried across the Causeway which was itself nearly a mile long.

On the Island itself, the pipe continued for another sixteen miles until it reached Singapore town. Throughout most of its twenty-seven miles this large diameter main lay on, or just below the surface; while sections of it were even raised on pillars, fully exposed above ground.

In November, before war started, and again in December, I arranged for the more exposed sections to be protected against bomb and shell splinters, but of course nothing could be done to protect it from direct hits by bombs. Before the war started this large main water pipe remained vulnerable throughout its length

to sabotage, which never occurred; to bomb, shell and bullet which did occur; and to capture of the source after the mainland was evacuated. This large pipe was broken and repaired nine times between December 8 and about January 27, when the Japanese overran the Johore source of supply. The pipe line itself, in any case, was destroyed on January 31 by the gap blown in the Causeway after the last Commonwealth troops retreated on to the island.

This main pipe supplied water to two reservoirs in the town, each of which was necessarily perched on top of small hills and could have been breached by bombs. The larger reservoir at Fort Canning—which held 29 million gallons or 130,000 tons of water, was situated near the bomb-proof, but not flood-proof—War Operations Room of H.Q. Malaya Command. Had this reservoir been breached at one point by bombs, water would would have 'drowned out' this Operations Room.

This danger was pointed out to General Percival who sanctioned protective work, which was completed just before war started. Nothing feasible could be done to protect parts of the city which lay around the bases of both hills.

Independent of this mainland source, although the two were inter-connected in places, was the original rainwater catchment area on the Island which drained into three reservoirs. Pierce and McRitchie, two of these reservoirs, supplied the Woodleigh Pumping Station by gravity, where it joined the main supply that came from the mainland. The third reservoir, Seletar, supplied the naval base and R.A.F. establishment to supplement the main Gunong Pulai supply.

The catchment areas on the Island, were intended to supply about half a million people; but they were sufficient for a continuous, if strictly limited supply for about a million people, which would be double the normal garrison and population. With refugees and retreating troops, the population in fact did reach over an estimated million for the last three or four weeks. The loss of the Gunong Pulai supply was thus not vital, providing distribution could be maintained.

To supplement these supplies a scheme to dig some ninety to a hundred shallow wells was started. In December some twenty to thirty wells were completed. They all proved to be contaminated worse than had been expected and the plan for wells had to be abandoned on medical advice to the Governor.

When the D.G.C.D. appointment became effective on January 1, it took over all responsibility for water supplies from the Chief Engineer Malaya Command, though the Municipal Authorities still continued to do the pumping and maintenance. What had been the responsibility of the Chief Engineer now became the responsibility of the Director-General Civil Defence. As a precautionary measure, twenty Sappers had been attached to the municipal maintenance staff in October to learn the layout of the water supply system and to help later with repairs if necessary. On the outbreak of war, the number was immediately increased to sixty. Before capitulation with G.O.C.'s permission a further 100 Sappers were withdrawn from the trenches where they were now serving.

Despite these increases of personnel, which were considerably augmented by Asian maintenance workers, it was impossible in February to keep pace as bomb- and now shell-damage increased far faster than repairs.

These difficulties were magnified enormously because no plans existed of the distribution system in the town and because valves and stopcocks were so few and spaced far apart. This resulted in enormous quantities of water running to waste beneath wrecked buildings. Since there was no valve by which water could be turned off from a damaged house or group of houses, the only way to stop the wastage was to close the nearest valve which could be a half-mile or more away. This often denied water to intermediate undamaged hospitals and households, which badly needed it.

It is difficult to believe that, whenever the various water supply systems and extensions had been planned, the civil authorities had approached the military for their opinions. One can hardly imagine any G.O.C. agreeing to exposed piping, unmapped systems, and so few valves and stopcocks, for a 'fortress' that might be involved in war one day.

The very serious risk from such a civil and military distribution system, built apparently 'on the cheap' and with no forethought years earlier as to how it might affect the resistance of the 'fortress' if it were ever closely invested, remains a mystery and another major mistake. Having spent so much on the naval base and heavy guns for seaward defence it is difficult to understand why the water supply was not also made safer years earlier —particularly with the growth of air power. Like landward

defence it seems just to have been overlooked. This is the sort of mistake an extraneous inspection team would certainly have picked up in useful time; but the prohibitive cost to rectify it in 1941, not only in money but in time and labour, precluded remedial action. It would have been a major and costly task and taken many months to put right even if the necessary large quantities of valves and stopcocks could have been readily obtained.

On February 13, the Japanese captured our last remaining source of water on the Island—McRitchie reservoir. Either by accident or more probably by design, they did not cut the pipe or close the valve. Water continued to flow to our last pumping station at Woodleigh which was itself now only 800 yards from the enemy. The British Municipal Engineer in charge there—I regret I have no record of his name—telephoned me for permission to evacuate. Bullets, he said, were repeatedly hitting the building but apparently, and more probably deliberately, because the enemy did not want to wreck it, it was never shelled or bombed. I personally ordered him to keep at his station and continue pumping. The telephone line went dead shortly afterwards but he remained at his post. When the Japanese overran Woodleigh they presumably ordered him to continue pumping. From this it can be inferred that they expected early capitulation and did not want more water problems on their hands when they took over.

On the same day, February 13, the Municipal Water Engineer warned me that complete water failure was imminent. The Asian maintenance staff 'disappeared' on the 14th after 48 hours of continuous bombing and shelling.

Water had already failed on higher ground in the town. Now it began to fail at lower levels. Some hospitals were receiving water by volunteers passing buckets long distances by hand. There was no water to fight fires away from the creeks; and there was little drinking water in most areas of the town.

After checking the municipal report, I informed General Percival that water failure was imminent. He visited the Municipal Offices twice on February 14 and went through the figures personally. His departing instruction was that I keep a check and report to him again in the morning. Checks over twenty-four hour periods had shown that two-thirds of the water being pumped from Woodleigh on February 12–13 was wasted. This

wastage increased to five-sixths of the amount pumped in twenty-four hours on February 14–15.

At the final G.O.C.'s Conference on the morning of February 15, I had to report that water supplies would probably fail completely within twenty-four hours, and that it would take several days to restore even the more important supplies.

In actual fact, following the cease fire at 8.30 p.m. on February 15, it took five and a half days before water reached the first floors of buildings in the low-lying areas of the town. It was ten days before the majority of buildings on low ground obtained a scanty supply. It took some six weeks before water pressure approached normal.

This was despite the fact that battle had ceased and that on their entry to Singapore early on February 16, the Japanese immediately used 200 Royal Engineers, all the municipal engineers and large gangs of Asians, to rush through repairs.

After I had reported water failure imminent at this last Conference, General Percival told the commanders present that there were only two alternatives open to us.

One was to launch a counter-attack in an effort to regain control of the reservoirs and of the military food depots in the Bukit Timah area, both of which were essential if the battle was to continue. The other alternative was capitulation, as there was every chance that a determined enemy attack might break through with disastrous consequences for the civil population.

The Official History states:

> "The Formation commanders were unanimously of the opinion that in the circumstances a counter-attack was impractical. Confronted with this and with no immediate solution for the critical water problem, Percival decided to capitulate. The conference concurred in this decision."

On the same day General Wavell had telegraphed General Percival to say:

> "So long as he (Percival) was able to inflict damage and loss to the enemy and his troops were capable of doing so, he must fight on. When . . . no longer possible . . . he was given discretion to cease resistance."

By early morning on February 15, the Commonwealth Army and a cosmopolitan Asian population of about one million people were crowded into a semi-circle some two and a half

miles in radius. The sea formed the diameter and further retreat was impossible.

All agreed that General Percival was right to surrender. The last message he sent to General Wavell said:

> "Owing to losses from enemy action, water, petrol, food and ammunition practically finished. Unable therefore to continue the fight any longer. All ranks have done their best and grateful for your help."

The conference which General Percival had called to discuss whether to surrender or to fight on, lasted only twenty minutes. General Gordon Bennett summed it up in his diary—'Silently and sadly we decided to surrender.'

On February 15, General Percival sent a joint civil and military deputation consisting of the Colonial Secretary, the chief military Administrative Officer, and a British interpreter by car up the Bukit Timah Road to arrange a cease-fire meeting. It took them some time to make contact, and when word eventually reached General Yamashita, he announced that he would only discuss terms with General Percival.

When the two generals faced each other late in the afternoon, General Yamashita demanded unconditional surrender and that hostilities should cease at 8.30 p.m. that evening. The only concession General Percival could obtain from him was that to prevent incidents, Japanese troops would not enter the city until the following morning; that a thousand British troops should remain armed to maintain law and order; and that the Japanese Army would 'protect' women and children and European Civilians.

Meanwhile, several launches for escape had been prepared some days earlier, with General Percival's permission. One of these, which was under the command of Major (later Colonel) G. C. S. Coode, R.E., left after dark on Sunday February 15 and was one of the very few little ships (4 out of 44) to reach safety in the last three days. His party reached Sumatra by sea, then crossed to Padang by road, whence they reached India by ocean-going ships. Some of these ships were torpedoed in the Indian Ocean. Major Coode was awarded the M.B.E. for his effort in saving 31 men to continue the fight elsewhere. After the war I wrote to congratulate him and to hear his story.

He explained that he had declined to take the recommended,

more obvious and official sea route, which he thought more likely to be blocked by the enemy. He added, 'I happened to know that towards the end, Intelligence in G-Branch had been lagging two days behind in the front line dispositions so their advice did not inspire confidence.'

In the confused fighting that was going on, some inaccuracy was perhaps unavoidable, but two days seems surely too much.

A few days before the end, General Percival had given me permission to escape in Coode's little ship, in which therefore I had booked a seat. After seeing that my last 'scorched earth' responsibilities had been completed, I packed my bag and went to say goodbye to General Percival at about 6.0 p.m. on Sunday February 15. However, he now wished me to remain with the Engineer troops so I cancelled my booking with Coode. He sailed at about 7.0 p.m., the cease fire being at 8.30 p.m. That last night of 'freedom' in Singapore seemed very eerie. There was complete silence after the weeks of violent explosions and other noises. The gloom that darkened the shattered buildings and deserted streets was not entirely due to the pall of smoke and soot from petrol, oil and burning buildings, some of which had raged for several days. It was partly in the mind, the bitterness of defeat and failure. It seemed to me too, that it was the shadow of a wheel which had, at last, come full circle after revolving uncertainly for so many years. For I remembered that it was about 1923, as a Staff Captain at the War Office, that I had first been concerned with one small item for Singapore's seaward defences.

Like many another soldier and civilian, I guess, I lay awake that night wondering what being a prisoner of war or internee would mean under the very different standards to be expected in the Far East; and also wondering why new arrivals always had to pay the price in lieu of those who had taken insufficient thought and action over many years back; and yet, are never even asked for an explanation of their action or inaction which speeds disaster. That is presumably one reason why our nation so often repeats the same major mistakes at the start of every war.

Early on Monday morning—February 16—I destroyed my revolver, ammunition, field glasses and private car, and happened to be taken prisoner while in the office of the Inspector General of Police. Between two young Japanese officers in the

back seat of a car, I was driven around the streets of Singapore for two hours.

It was here that I had an early demonstration of Japanese culture. Some shops were being looted. The car halted, and without an order the two guards in the front seat stood up and fired one shot each into the crowd. The crowd dispersed, and we drove on without a word having been spoken.

Near the docks we stopped again to see some fifteen coolies with their arms trussed behind their backs with barbed wire. It appeared that they had been found looting in the dock area.

There were eight Chinese among them. These were separated from the rest and they were then beheaded in front of the crowd by an executioner using a two-handed Samurai sword. The heads were later hung about the city with warnings that this was the penalty for looting. The remaining seven prisoners, who were Malays and Indians, were then released with a caution to my very great surprise. These belonged to races which Japan hoped to invite to join her Asian Co-prosperity Sphere, and who (I was to learn later) had to be treated as potential partners for this grandiose plan. The Chinese, however, were always treated as beyond the pale, beyond any mercy—an attitude of mind which bodes ill for the future.

A few days later the Japanese officially and publicly in Singapore invited those local Chinese who had helped the British, to come forward. In view of the incident just described it is surprising that some did so. A party of 104 one day and 64 next day were brought to our prisoner-of-war camp at Changi in lorries. Each party was ordered into the sea knee deep, where they were massacred by concealed machine-guns on each flank. These executions were witnessed by British officers in concealment and later British prisoners had to bury the dead.

One man in each party survived without drowning, although severely wounded. Both were hidden by the British doctors in Changi P.O.W. camp hospital. They recovered months later and managed to rejoin their families in Singapore.

All the British and Australian troops were marched out to Changi cantonment, which is 15 miles east of Singapore Town. The exodus started on February 17. Civilian European internees, the women and children, and the Indian troops were soon separated into three groups but remained in or about Singapore Town. At Changi, water immediately became an acute problem

for the supply there had been designed for a population of about 8,000 and now had to supply 51,000 white prisoners of war.

The piped supply had failed several days before capitulation, when Changi had been evacuated and the nearby naval magazines blown up, which caused some damage. This large prisoner-of-war population had to live on the stagnant water that remained in a few small concrete reservoirs (it lasted two days) and on rain water collected from roof gutters and small streams. Laundry and ablutions were done in the sea, and piped water did not begin to flow again for six weeks, reaching Changi a few hours after water pressure became normal in Singapore Town.

13

CRITICISMS OF MALAYAN GOVERNMENT POLICY IN 1940

As already stated (Chapter 8) Mr. F. D. Bisseker, General Manager of the Eastern Smelting Co. Ltd., Penang, was appointed Deputy Director-General Civil Defence and Director of Labour and Transport by Mr. Duff Cooper on January 1, 1942. Mr. Bisseker had spent the previous 3½ years in Malaya and had earlier been 20 years in China. He thus knew something of the Chinese and Malay mind, and had a knowledge of both languages. In 1940 he was elected by the Penang commercial community as their representative on the Straits Settlements Legislative Council and shortly afterwards became the Senior Unofficial elected member of that Council.

His work on the Legislative Council shows that he was a constructive, if continuous, critic of the Malayan Government's unsatisfactory preparations for war. Study of the *Straits Times* (published in Singapore) and of the *Straits Echo and Times* (published in Penang) shows that his criticisms covered a wide field of governmental activities and were frequent from about mid-1940 onwards. His criticism and constructive suggestions were invariably strongly endorsed by both newspapers in their editorials and by the public generally. This almost certainly was the basic reason for Mr. Bisseker's unpopularity with H.E. the Governor and with the Malayan Civil Service.

At the time (January 1942) I knew no more than the above broad facts. When setting out (in 1958) to write up my own efforts and failure to get useful action implemented in time in the military and civil spheres it seemed advisable to follow up Mr. Bisseker's earlier efforts, spread over a much longer period in the civil sphere, in order to see why he too had failed to get his ideas accepted, much less implemented, long before the Japanese war started.

After the war I examined the Press records. The *Straits Times* of August 27, 1940 (359th day of the Second World War; and over 15 months before the Japanese attacked Malaya) devoted a long leader and several columns to a recent speech by Mr. Bisseker in the Legislative Council. He had made many points and constructive suggestions: a warning on the continuance of subversive elements 'was particularly timely'; the danger had not passed 'because labour trouble had ceased momentarily'; the lack of Government propaganda despite its immense value on public opinion as proved elsewhere; Government 'aloofness' on war questions instead of going to the public; no war economy campaign; failure to make the most of Malayan mineral and vegetable products other than tin and rubber; no effort at encouraging maximum Malayan financial contribution to the war; the taxation muddle; corruption; no public enthusiasm for the war effort; lack of sternness and determination (in officials and non-officials) to prepare to fight; the stupid jealousies of peacetime continue . . . All these failures were still there for all to see even during the Malayan war itself some 15 to 18 months later, as has been described in earlier chapters herein and more widely in the Official History itself.

Again on November 7, 1940, both newspapers had columns and leaders on Mr. Bisseker's speeches in the Legislative Council defending free speech, public debate, drawing attention to war taxation problems with suggested remedies; the necessity for more Government support and encouragement to passive defence (later called Civil Defence) personnel, the shortage of their equipment, divided responsibility at many points as between Government, Municipality and Chief Medical Officer . . . and the suggestion that the Secretary of Defence should tour more to see the shortages in Civil Defence for himself. This last suggestion was strongly resented at the time by the Colonial Secretary personally, then acting as Governor during Sir Shenton Thomas's absence on leave in the United Kingdom.

One more Press reference will suffice. On February 4, 1941, the *Straits Times* strongly endorsed Mr. Bisseker's speech against the new War Tax Bill. He had advocated a far greater increase in the spread and amount of taxation, so as to include all classes and nationalities. Many Asians were practically exempted under the new Bill, though as well able to pay and with as big a personal stake in the country as British business men.

The general strictures in the Official History and D.G.C.D.'s difficulties (as already described) and delays with the Governor and the Civil Administration during the Malayan war, merely confirm Mr. Bisseker's criticisms and difficulties of 15–18 months earlier. In short the Malayan Government never undertook to prepare the country adequately for war in any sphere and apparently took constructive criticism as a personal insult.

This lack of proper preparation for war by the Government and the complete failure to appreciate what war involved—including the time factor—is further exemplified by Mr. Bisseker's subsequent report after the bombing of Penang on December 11, 1941, which he witnessed. After it, he met several heads of Government Departments at the Residency. His report to his London Headquarters Office at the time states:

> ". . . in the next five days, as always, the customary tendency of drift instead of decision remained noticeable . . ."

All labour in Penang failed completely on December 12 and was never resuscitated before the final evacuation. Evacuation was ordered on December 13 and continued till the final evacuation of December 16. Yet the Resident Councillor never had a list of Europeans in Penang, much less of the more important Asians and never knew who had gone and who remained to be evacuated. And then later in the report:

> ". . . at this period it was the general belief that Singapore could stand a long siege."

Apparently a few of the more observant Penang refugees soon disabused themselves of this idea on arrival at Singapore; and the majority were to suffer the same lesson the hard way again.

Events in Penang are worth mention as being almost incredible. Enemy planes had flown over George Town twice before —without bombing. On December 11 the public again turned out in thousands to watch the air formation flying at low level —and suddenly this time the bombs descended. The casualties were very heavy and the town was badly damaged by fire. Apparently there had never been any earlier Government orders for the public to take shelter, no enemy air-raid warning, no A.A. fire which sounds incredible after two and a quarter years of war in Europe. Later the bradcasting station was not destroyed and

was used by the enemy and no ships were scuttled or removed. Both had serious repercussions.*

Many of the personnel of all nationalities in the Air Raid Precaution and Auxiliary Fire Services worked well but were just too small in numbers, with insufficient equipment—and insufficient reserves of both—to deal with the first raid by 41 aircraft.† The Medical Auxiliary Service did excellent work—there were 606 casualties treated in the General Hospital alone. Half of the A.R.P., however, and most of the Police apparently, deserted during and after the raid. However, on a third raid Penang was again bombed by 26 planes, 5 being shot down for the loss of one of our fighters.

There were clearly several valuable lessons here for coming events in Singapore and other towns which so far had been only lightly raided by air. At Mr. Duff Cooper's personal request, Mr. Bisseker was asked and agreed to broadcast the lessons of Penang for the public and Administration of Singapore and other towns. Mr. Bisseker states that the Governor then personally intervened to try to stop it, but nevertheless the broadcast was given on December 20.

On that date, as Chief Engineer, I was delivering the anti-tank pamphlet to Formation Commanders up country (see Chapter 5) and did not hear it. On December 20 also I had not yet met Mr. Duff Cooper, nor Mr. Bisseker, and was not made D.G.C.D. till eleven days later. What is certain is that, in spite of the broadcast, the Administration in Singapore took no steps whatever (with the public or C.D. personnel) to improve efficiency as a result of the Penang lessons. Even the Penang C.D. evacuees were not integrated into the Singapore Civil Defence Force. All this was done in January after the formation of the D.G.C.D. organization, and with Mr. Bisseker appointed as Deputy, despite strong objection from many Civil Servants in Singapore. The refusal of many British Singapore C.D. men to work with British Penang C.D. men caused some trouble and necessitated plain speaking by me in January.

About this same date (December 20 and during my absence up country) Mr. Bisseker reported to Chief Engineer's office, Singapore, about the unsatisfactory and incomplete demolition of the Tin Smelting Works in Penang. This had been ordered at

* Official History, page 219.
† Official History, page 218.

short notice unexpectedly, and had been done extremely urgently by local R.E. unit personnel, precluding any properly worked out plan of demolition. This mistake was avoided later at Singapore when the Straits Trading Furnaces and Tin Smelting Works were destroyed on the island of Pulau Brani just before capitulation.

Owing to lack of forethought and preparation, the evacuation of Penang was the cause of a most valuable 'present' to the enemy of tin, a metal of which he was known to be extremely short. In Penang there was a grand total of 1,299 tons of refined tin in ingot form; plus about 1,700 tons of tin in the form of alloy, slag, fume or in the furnaces. The Governor telephoned to Mr. Bisseker urgently on December 11—the day of the first bombing—to remove all tin at once. But of course it was physically impossible to do so, even to throw it into the sea, before the final evacuation of December 16, once the labour force had 'disappeared' as the result of the bombing. We always use the whip on a dead horse, never in time to win a race.

Discussing his period (1940–41) on the Legislative Council (i.e. prior to war in Malaya), in a letter to me dated September 2, 1958, Mr. Bisseker wrote as follows:

> "... To me there seemed to be some at the head of affairs who had no conception of what it meant to be at war. It amazed me that the Governor should go home on leave for a period of some months when there was a war on, leaving in charge as Officer administering the Government a man ... who on one occasion ... said publicly that the building of Air-Raid Shelters for the general public was too expensive—an attitude which I unhesitatingly criticized at the subsequent Council Meeting ...
>
> The lack of knowledge of the Eastern mind amazed me. The auxiliary services were started off with the expectation that the Chinese, etc., would join up voluntarily and without pay. When payment was introduced recruiting to these auxiliary services showed an immediate jump; but when it was announced in public in Penang, I, as the Senior Unofficial Member of Council who worked for the payment of these services, was not even invited to be at the Public Meeting and although this is really of no importance now it does indicate the attitude of the Senior Member of the Administration towards an energetic Unofficial ...
>
> ... I was always in touch with the members of the Kuala Lumpur Council ... They wanted ... to form a body of white men who could guard important points such as Transformers or Bridges,

but the Officer administering the Government was very anti this . . . ridiculed the idea and actually said to me that it would be a waste of time for them to form such a body as all they really wanted was a tin hat on their heads and a peashooter in their hands! . . ."

This letter gives some idea of the official atmosphere in Malaya after the start of war in Europe.

It is interesting to note that weakness at the top in Malayan Government had been noticed by at least one senior commander long before the (Japanese) war started. Under date August 28, 1959, Mr. Bisseker again wrote to me as follows about a meeting he had had with Admiral Sir Percy Noble. This meeting took place about August 1940 and I quote Mr. Bisseker's letter:

". . . When Sir Percy Noble moved Far Eastern Naval Headquarters from Hong Kong to Singapore . . . and had sized up for himself the state of the Civil Administration, he asked the Military Attaché at the Naval Base if he knew a civilian with whom the general situation could be discussed. The Attaché (who later became Military Attaché at Chunking) knew what I felt, so suggested me.

When the meeting with Sir Percy took place . . . he asked what I thought ought to be done. I at once said that a senior serving officer of the highest rank should be made Commander-in-Chief with plenary powers over everybody and everything. He agreed.

Sir Percy, however, said that it would be no use sending a signal to the Admiralty as the Admiralty would only discuss the matter with Sir Shenton Thomas who was then on leave at home. In view of Sir Shenton's known feelings the signal would be ignored. For the same reason he could not insist upon the Officer administering the Government cabling to the Colonial Office, so he (Noble) decided to wait until he got home himself. Shortly thereafter he left, travelling by the quickest possible route . . . with the intention of persuading the Government at home to make the suggested appointment. I always hoped that he would come back as all-powerful C.-in-C.

The Colonial Secretary at that time was Lord Lloyd. Discussion took place between them and one evening Sir Percy was going to dinner with Lord Lloyd to crystallize these ideas. At his club Sir Percy had a message saying Lord Lloyd was unwell and that the dinner had to be postponed. Very shortly afterwards Lord Lloyd died, so nothing was done.

Sir Percy not only wrote to me to this effect saying how ashamed he felt and how fed up I must have been, but also told me this when we met after the war . . .

> I have always thought that at least the Japanese success could have been greatly delayed if a man like Noble or some other energetic senior serving officer could have been appointed."

On taking over from Admiral Sir Percy Noble, Admiral Sir Geoffrey Layton sent a telegram about October 1940 to the First Sea Lord, to the effect that he was astonished at the lack of co-operation between the then G.O.C. and the A.O.C. who were not on speaking terms, adding that he was frightened to think what would happen if war started. Possibly as the result of this, Air Chief Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham was appointed Commander-in-Chief, Far East, after having retired in 1937. With a Headquarters of seven officers, formed at Singapore in November 1940, it can have had little or no effect on Malaya's problems, actions or inactions; and in the words of the Official History (p. 51), 'the appointment . . . did little more than add another cog to an already complex machine'.

From the foregoing the lack of adequate preparation for war by the civil government is clear from 1940 onwards. An earlier example exists. At the G.O.C.'s (Gen. Dobbie) request, the War Office sent out Col. F. Hayley Bell in October 1936 as Defence Security Officer to deal with military intelligence, as opposed to civil intelligence under the Governor. For two and a half years Col. Hayley Bell and his team did most valuable work uncovering Japanese espionage, and foretold most accurately where the enemy would land if war came to Malaya. At the instigation of the civil authorities, apparently, the next G.O.C. after Gen. Dobbie disbanded this excellent organisation and in May 1939 Col. Hayley Bell returned to the U.K. The discontinuing of so many of Gen. Dobbie's preparations for war was later to prove most unfortunate for Malaya.

14

HISTORICAL VERSIONS

The story I have related was in due course told to General Kirby at the Cabinet Office (Historical Section) when he was writing the Official History of the campaign in Malaya.

Before publication, I saw the first and second drafts of this work, but there was nothing in the text to show that all the commanders in Malaya had deliberately refused to have defence works constructed. It appeared that they had overlooked the suggestion; as also that attack was now considered by the War Office to be more likely during the N.E. Monsoon (see page 49).

This last point, on which the timing of air and army reinforcements was wrongly based, must have had a tremendous effect on the speed of disaster but it is not mentioned at all in the Official History except for General Dobbie's report of 1938. There were some other points which I felt should have gone into the official story of the fall of Malaya, which I placed before General Kirby.

In a letter to General Kirby dated September 21, 1953, I included the following paragraphs:

> "On going through the whole of your draft again, I am left with the impression that the engineers were partly to blame for the débâcle. The whole world knows (and particularly Duff Cooper from me and therefore almost certainly Churchill from Duff Cooper) that lack of delaying defences down the peninsula and on the landward side of Singapore Island was one important and *avoidable* reason for the astonishingly quick débâcle."

Although General Kirby knew from me why no anti-tank and other defences had been built up country or on the north shore of the Island, both before and during hostilities, he does not give the reasons in the Official History. All these seem to be important for an accurate historical record if we are to learn the lessons and

so avoid a repetition of Malaya's really astonishing vital errors of omission and commission.

My letter to him on his draft continued:

> "In fact, on more than one occasion I have been tackled by senior officers (friends and strangers) when Malaya was under discussion and they knew I was there as C.E., with 'But why on earth didn't you Sappers carry out the obvious defence measures to help the troops?' So that is what the world presumably still thinks, including some of those who were in Malaya . . ." (This book tries to answer that question.) . . . Your book quite correctly mentions about six failures on bridge demolitions, which will merely confirm the general opinion. This attitude is definitely most unfair to many . . . Sappers of all ranks, who realized at the time what work they should have been ordered to do long before the Japanese war started and most certainly during it. This goes back long before I was concerned. My predecessor (Brigadier J. A. C. Pennycuick) gave the correct advice for months. I saw all his minutes . . ."

Elaborating on this paragraph, the mention of six demolition failures, which was finally omitted from the Official History as published, represented one per cent of the total demolitions on the mainland, excluding Singapore Island which were mainly denials. These failures were probably due mainly to most demolitions being ordered and prepared far too late. The Official History also ignored the fact that the Commonwealth Engineers (British, Australian and Indian) apparently suffered about 3,000 battle casualties (dead, wounded and missing) out of a total strength of approximately 6,500. With prior preparation, this casualty figure should have been appreciably lower; and with really effective demolitions the pressure on the infantry and their subsequent casualties would also have been reduced.

My letter of September 21, 1953 to General Kirby included:

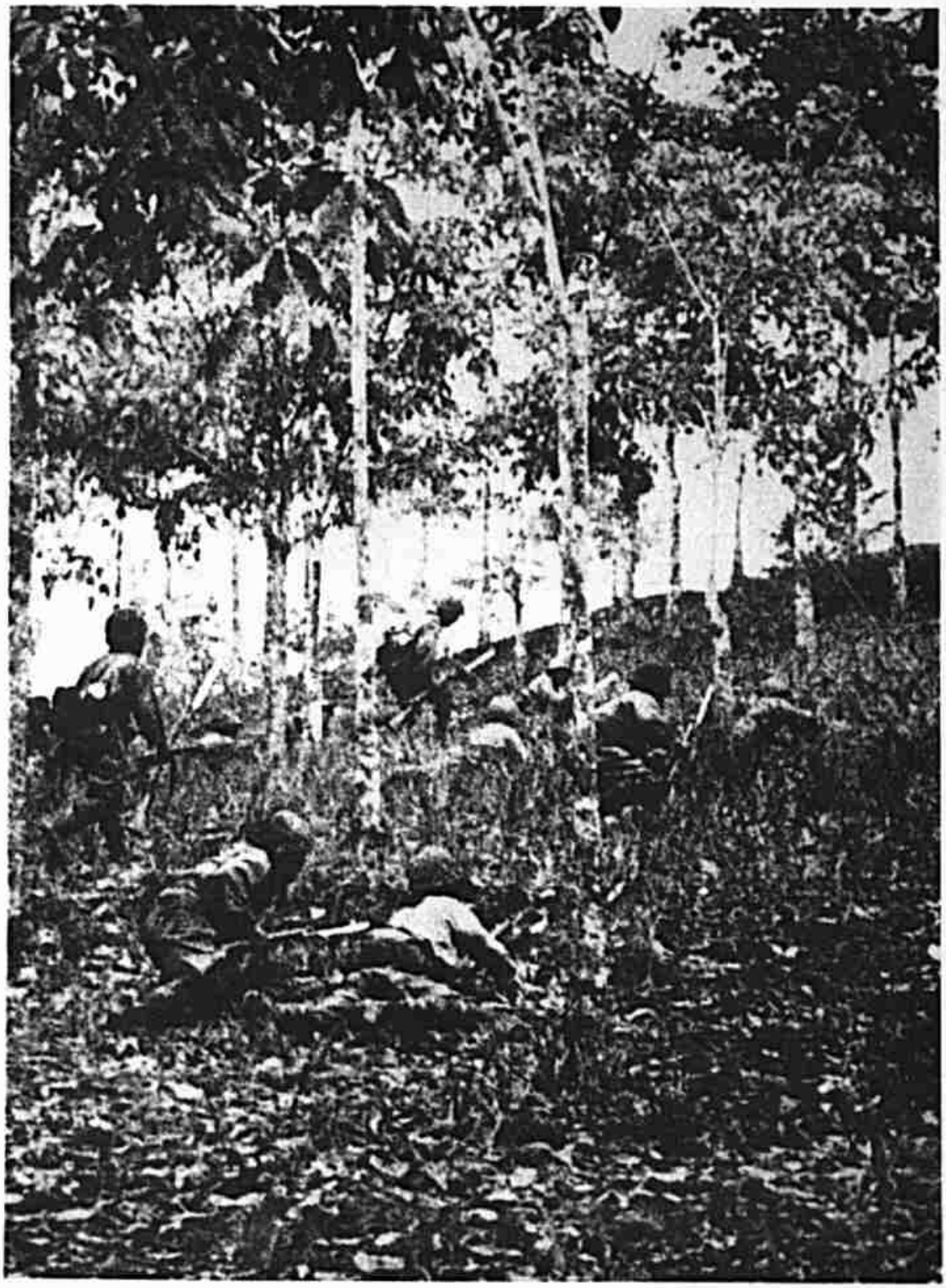
> "The various Corps of Sappers and the C.E. could not take action like the Commanding Officer of a self-contained unit such as a battalion. The Engineer advice was sound but they had to convince their Commanders before they could take action. They repeatedly tried and failed—and then went further by providing anti-tank brochures, anti-tank and creek obstacles, etc., on their own initiative. What more could they have done? This is what I should like you to bring out in your own words on the material I give you."

For inclusion in the Official History in his own words I included a draft for General Kirby's consideration of the salient

22. Australian troops digging foxholes in a rubber plantation. *Imperial War Museum.*

23. Japanese 'Bicycle' units of the type used successfully in the Malayan campaign. *Australian War Memorial.*

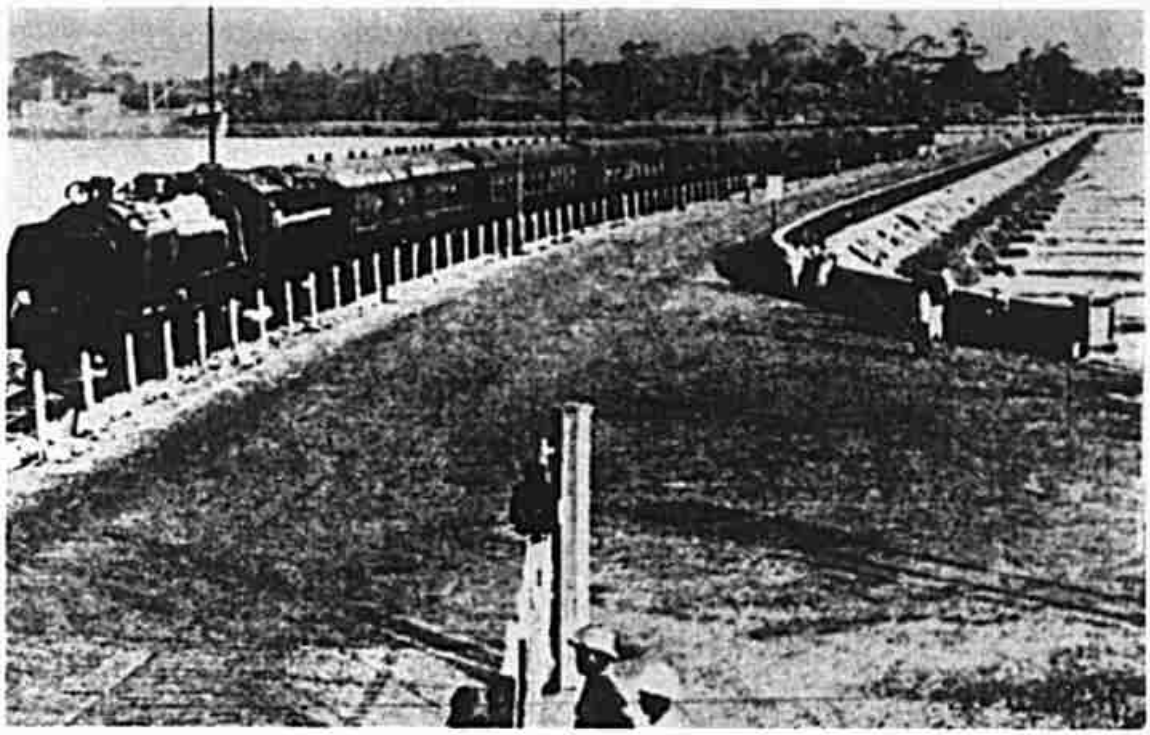
24. Japanese sappers start bridging operations, enabling infantry to cross with little or no delay. *Imperial War Museum.*



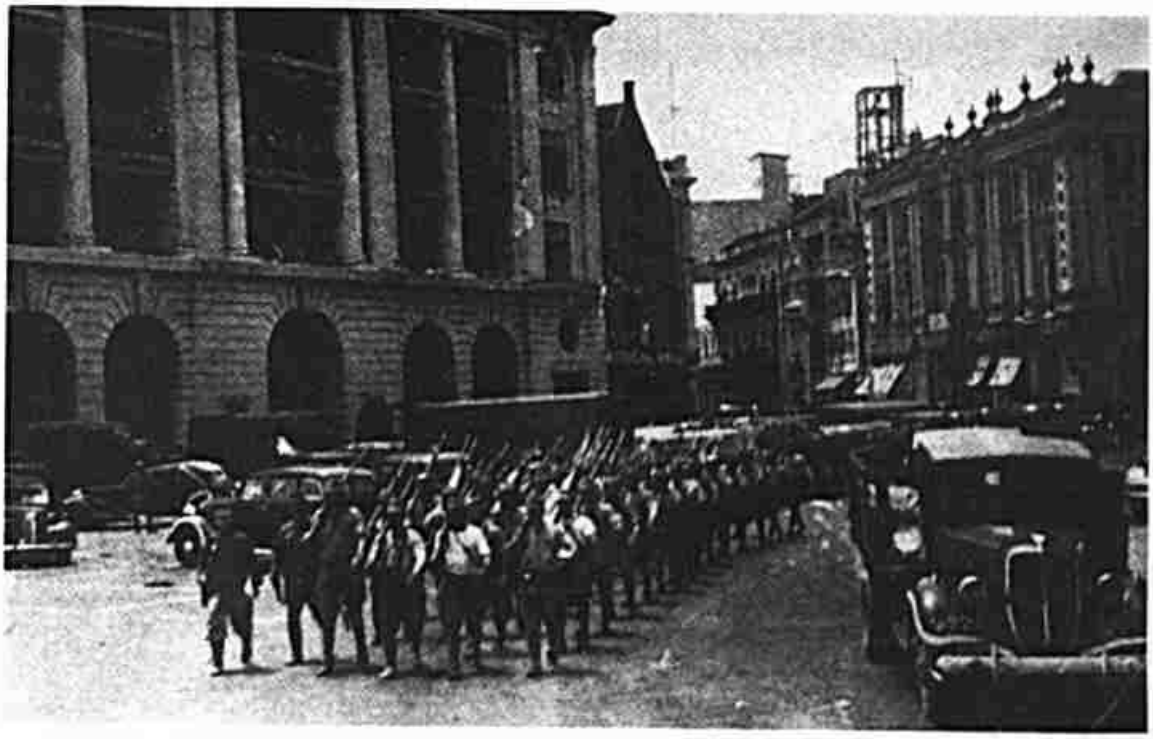
25. Japanese troops attacking in the Bukit Timah area of Singapore island. February, 1942. *Australian War Memorial.*

26. Japanese troops advancing in Kuala Lumpur. *Imperial War Museum.*

27. Japanese troops storm into Johore Bahru. Locomotives were immobilized by British personnel who removed and at night buried coupling and connecting rods and injectors. *Imperial War Museum.*



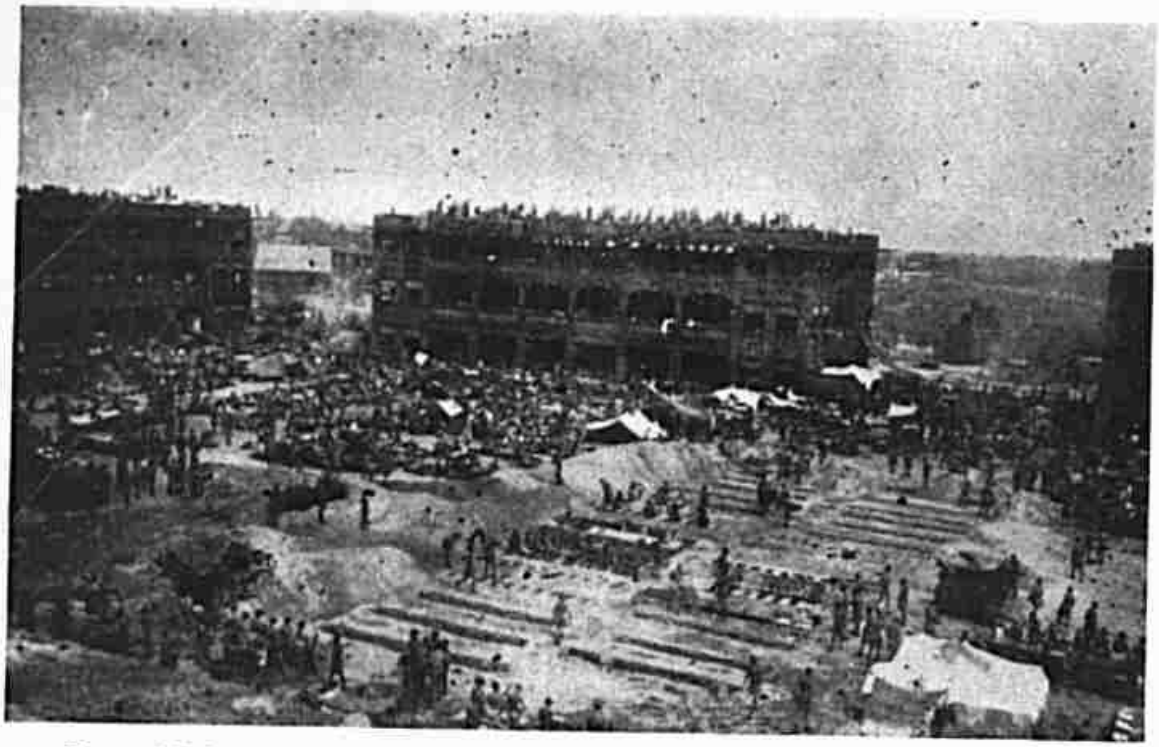
28. The causeway from Johore Bahru to Singapore island which was only partially destroyed in the retreat.



29. Japanese official photograph showing their troops marching through Raffles Square, Singapore. *Imperial War Museum.*

30. General Yamashita, Commander of the Japanese forces, inspecting damaged areas of Singapore after the surrender. *Keystone.*

31. The surrender of Singapore, February 15, 1942. Facing the camera are (seated) General Yamashita and (pointing) Colonel Tsuji. The British officers are, left to right, Major Wilding (interpreter), General Percival and Brigadier Torrance. *Australian War Memorial.*



32. Part of Selarang Barracks showing the crowded conditions for prisoners of war Latrine trenches dug by the troops are in the foreground. *Australian War Memorial.*

33. Japanese official photograph showing the fate of Sikh prisoners during the fighting around Singapore. *Imperial War Museum.*

points on which the Engineers had tried and failed to get action taken in useful time.

General Kirby was unable to accept most of my suggested additions for the Official History. He did delete some of the six failures of bridge demolitions, however, and he did delete from his draft the blame allotted (by whom I do not know) to some individuals who were most certainly not to blame for the disaster. He suggested that my story should be published as part of the History of the Royal Engineers in the Second World War.

The Official History (p. 465) states:

> ". . . to assist it (the Third Indian Corps) in carrying out this task, the Corps required every artificial device which the ingenuity of military and civil engineers could devise; prepared positions where the enemy could be held and behind which its battered brigades could rest and reorganize or from which a counter-stroke could be launched; tank obstacles at frequent intervals in all the defiles of which there were quite a number; and inundations where possible. The opportunity to provide these in the months before the war had not been taken and it is surprising that when time was all important, little was done after the true situation had become apparent on December 13 . . ." (Previously, although it proved a correct assumption, on December 13 it was known for certain that the enemy had tanks.)

Thus the Official History nowhere mentions the point that senior commanders were opposed to defences as a matter of policy 'because defences were bad for morale'; and not because of a shortage of labour, material, time, finance or ideas, which any reader might otherwise think. This 'no defences' policy left Singapore 'Fortress' deliberately without all-round defences, which is simply a contradiction in terms.

The story I told General Kirby and his assistants in 1953 included the efforts made on December 26–27, 1941 to get General Percival to build a defensive area as General Heath requested; and to get other defences built elsewhere.

These efforts failed; so that I was really surprised to learn in 1955 for the first time (thirteen years after events) that the Public Works Department's Work Groups had been formed to build defences—and this within 48 hours of my midnight meeting with the G.O.C., when he decided on 'no defences' (see page 69).

The Official History (p. 242) states:

"... On the same day Heath had sent a message* to Percival asking that steps should be taken to construct a series of defensive positions south of Kampar on which his tired troops could retire, for he was unable both to fight the Japanese and to prepare rearward positions. Percival arranged in the following week that surplus officers from Public Works Department should be organized into works groups in selected areas under the State Engineers. He informed both Heath and Bennett of these arrangements on the 29th and said that the State Engineers would report to them for orders, the object being to prepare a series of obstacles, especially anti-tank obstacles, in great depth on probable lines of enemy advance. Since Third Corps staff was too much occupied to give time to the construction of such defences well in rear of the fighting line and the P.W.D. officers could not provide sufficient labour, this effort produced little result. Had the organization of all defence works in rear areas been placed under the Chief Engineer Malaya Command, with instructions to provide permanent anti-tank obstacles in selected defiles, something useful might have been accomplished."

On the Slim River battle THE HISTORY OF THE CORPS OF ROYAL ENGINEERS, Vol. IX (pp. 147–8) says:

"... little demolition work in connection with the defences was possible as the commander was anxious about the retreat of his forward troops. The engineer work, except for assistance in the construction of field defences and wire obstacles, was chiefly confined to the laying of booby traps along the clearing through the dense jungle through which the railway passed and along the verge of the two roads that entered the position from the north. Concrete cylinders manufactured in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur on the personal initiative of the Chief Engineer, to be used as anti-tank stops, had been sent up, but many were not put in position on the roads in time for the Japanese attack ... The engineer demolition parties, which in any case had no orders, were either killed or the bridges occupied by the enemy before anything could be done ..."

Of the appointment to Director-General of Civil Defence, THE HISTORY OF THE CORPS OF ROYAL ENGINEERS, Vol. IX (p. 146) states:

"On January 1, 1942, Brigadier Simson, the Chief Engineer in spite of protests by himself, had been appointed D.G.C.D. in addition to his military appointment. Those who have recollections of the wide duties of the head of the Civil Defence organization of a

* This was the message delivered by the Chief Engineer to the G.O.C. late on December 26 (see page 68).

large city in the United Kingdom in war, will appreciate what such an appointment meant when made at the last moment, and that two years too late to be effective, for an island and city the population of which had now been swollen by refugees to over a million . . . There was no Line of Communication with its own Chief Engineer or Director of Works to administer the many engineering activities in the base and rear areas. All this detailed work as well as his duties *for direction of engineer work in the forward area* and advice to the G.O.C. fell on his shoulders. For the last six weeks before Singapore fell his duties as D.G.C.D. occupied 90 per cent of his time and most of his duties as C.E. Malaya Command thus fell to his Deputy."

I have put in italics the opinion of the former Engineer in Chief to the B.E.F. in France (1939–40) who wrote this R.E. History. It confirms the opinions expressed on pages 46–7.

Of this same appointment, the Official History (pp. 234–5), after dealing with Mr. Duff Cooper's deep concern with the civil defence position in Singapore, says:

"He (Duff Cooper) proposed that Brigadier I. Simson, Chief Engineer Malaya Command, who had had recent experience of air raids and similar difficulties in the United Kingdom, should be appointed Director-General Civil Defence. The Council unanimously decided that Brigadier Simson should be appointed with plenary powers under the War Council through the Governor. It was also decided that the Colonial Secretary should report this to the Governor on his return from Kuala Lumpur that afternoon and that the proposed terms of reference for the Director-General which Mr. Duff Cooper read out should be discussed the following day.

In anticipation of the Council's approval Mr. Duff Cooper informed Brigadier Simson that he was appointed Director-General and handed him terms of reference which gave him plenary powers for Singapore Island and Johore and informed him that all executive departments of the Government would be under his control in matters affecting civil defence. He sent a copy of this to the Governor.

The minutes of the War Council meeting on the following day record 'The Governor will issue a statement which briefly is to the effect that Brigadier Simson would be responsible to the Governor (who would appoint him), who would report in turn to the War Council.' The communique as issued made no mention of plenary powers nor of any authority in the State of Johore; it merely substituted Brigadier Simson for the Colonial Secretary as the head of

the existing civil defence organization. Simson therefore had no special powers to enable him to compel Government departments and civilian organizations to take such action as he considered necessary and, further, his activities were confined to Singapore Island only. Mr. Duff Cooper's plan to appoint one man who would have unhampered control did not materialize.

The selection of the senior Royal Engineer officer in Malaya for the appointment of D.G.C.D. at a time when it was possible that Singapore might be invested and when all the available engineer effort should have been concentrated on the construction of defences, seems in retrospect to have been a mistake. Indeed, Brigadier Simson who from the moment of his arrival in Malaya had advocated the construction of considerably more field and anti-tank defence works than had been authorized, accepted the appointment only under pressure. Not only did he consider his task as Chief Engineer to be more important, but in his opinion it was too late to reorganize effectively the civil defence, especially in a cosmopolitan area already under bombardment. Nevertheless he did what he could, and it was largely due to his efforts and to the devotion of duty of the members of the various units that, when put to the test, the civil defence services functioned as well as they did . . ."

In his book THE SECOND WORLD WAR Vol. IV, Sir Winston Churchill writes on page 81:

"I judged it impossible to hold an inquiry by Royal Commission into the circumstances of the fall of Singapore while the war was raging. We could not spare the men, the time or the energy. Parliament accepted this view; but I certainly thought that in justice to the officers and men concerned there should be an inquiry into all the circumstances as soon as the fighting stopped. This, however, has not been instituted by the Government of the day. Years have passed and many of the witnesses are dead. It may well be that we shall never have a formal pronouncement by a competent court upon the worst disaster and largest capitulation in British history . . ."

Since the end of the war there have been several Labour and Conservative Governments, including a period when Sir Winston Churchill himself was again Prime Minister, but no official investigation was ordered while most of the leaders were still alive to give evidence. It is left to individual historians therefore to decide what blame was due to local leadership for their many major mistakes, what was due perhaps to excessive

War Office centralized control from London and excessive financial limitation of the G.O.C.'s powers, and whether it was a failure of individuals or of the whole system since so many military and civil leaders were personally involved for many years.

What always appeared certain in Malaya, was that with Great Britain fighting Germany and unable to spare much in the way of men and equipment, local leaders should have shown more initiative and been given greater local powers to work out their own salvation. Over-centralization of control in London must always affect overseas leadership adversely if leaders are forced to look to Whitehall for practically all decisions. There is much that enterprising local leadership could have done without London's help.

The loss of Malaya is usually ascribed to the shortage of trained men and modern equipment, which the United Kingdom required for use elsewhere. This is perfectly true but it is a convenient oversimplification to hide the major errors made in Malaya itself over a long period. Since the Royal Navy and R.A.F. had too few modern ships and planes, the Civil Government and the Army should have realized that such obvious weaknesses encouraged attack—and looked to their own means of ensuring safety; strenuous jungle training, far greater use of the indigenous population, strong defences, study of the possible enemy methods, for example, invasion during the N.E. Monsoon period.

The Official History indicates that Commonwealth troops generally fought well, though many had arrived in Malaya grossly under-trained. There is little evidence that they failed for other reasons. Although weaknesses in training, etc., were fully realized, little seems to have been done to reduce such handicaps.

There is clear evidence in the Official History (and elsewhere) that the Civil and Army leaderships were responsible for failing to institute essential or even adequate preparations for invasion long before and even after the war started in Malaya. What was done was on too small a scale and too late. Thus the speed of our collapse was due to our own many lapses, notably inadequate jungle training, non-existent landward defences and internal friction between the Services, and between the Services and the Government, weaknesses in food storage and water supply, etc. We never realized our weakness, but the Japanese did. General Wavell wrote on news of the Malayan disaster:

> "The trouble goes back a long way; climate, the atmosphere of the country (the whole of Malaya had been asleep for 200 years), lack of vigour in our peace-time training, the cumbrousness of our tactics and equipment, and the real difficulty of finding an answer to the very skilful and bold tactics of the Japanese in this jungle fighting."

An article on efficiency in the colonies in THE CONTEMPORARY REVIEW, April 1960, says that civil servants and other administrators in overseas territories may sometimes develop almost a pathological condition of megalomania in various degrees. Without mentioning areas or personalities of that time, the cap certainly fits for Malaya.

General Sir Edward Spears wrote after the fall of France in 1940 in ASSIGNMENT TO CATASTROPHE:

> "Democracy is a splendid conception but has the disadvantage on occasions of placing in the lead men who will sap the strength of a country over a period of years, disrupt an empire in a matter of months and encompass the defeat of a great nation in the space of a few days."

This is true of the collapse of France in 1940; and a verdict which can equally apply to the collapse in Malaya.

A fully developed democracy, as history has repeatedly shown in past centuries, invariably causes softness, divided counsels, the placation of an easy-going public whose votes are necessary to keep the Government in power. Such a public invariably demands maximum comfort and ease of living, invites attack with too little overall preparation for adequate resistance and is finally overrun. All history proves it. The tougher 'barbarian' has repeatedly overthrown the softer civilized nation. Are we reaching that condition in the United Kingdom today? As individuals age mentally and physically so do nations.

15

OTHER RECORDS AND SUGGESTIONS

Factors which contributed to the tragedy in Malaya were undoubtedly the friction, disunity and lack of co-operation between the various Services among themselves and between them and the Civil Government. With a few magnificent exceptions, morale and discipline proved weak in the cosmopolitan civil population and in some recently recruited Army units. The civil population were never given a firm lead as to what war meant and where their help would be required.

On the friction between Services and civil administration, in Malaya the Official History states on pages 468–9:

> ". . . there is one factor, however, which appears to run like a thread throughout the whole of the many tragic blunders which were made in the twenty years from 1921 onwards—the lack of unity. It existed between the various authorities within the British Colonies, between the Services themselves and between the Malays and Chinese . . ."

This phenomenon existed everywhere and at all levels. There are many examples cited in the Official History and others have been indicated in earlier chapters of this book.

As Mr. Duff Cooper discovered, when he considered appointing a military governor with dictatorial powers while the emergency lasted, few departments or individuals would sink their own prestige, or surrender their own powers for the public good in war. Although I had not much personal knowledge of it, this corrosive lack of unity had existed long before the war—see Chapter 13. Officialdom in Malaya was astonishingly disunited.

On the civil aspect of this problem, Mr. Ian Morrison, a journalist in Malaya at the material time, stated in MALAYAN POSTSCRIPT published in 1942:

"The fact remains that British officials and merchants were out of touch with the people . . . After a hundred years of British rule, direct and indirect . . . Asiatics were not sufficiently interested to take any steps to ensure its continuance . . . Singapore was crying out for leadership. There was a good deal of defeatism about, especially among the British . . . The Japanese out-fought us and out-thought us in Malaya . . . The arming of Chinese volunteers began two years too late. They had what (others) lacked, a personal venom against the Japanese."

Mr. E. M. Glover, a Malayan resident, also wrote a book in 1942 called IN SEVENTY DAYS—THE STORY OF MALAYA, in which he states that Sir Charles Vyner Brook of Sarawak told Australian reporters that the disaster in Malaya was due to the

"'gross incompetence and almost criminal negligence' of military and political leaders in Singapore . . . whom he termed 'incompetents who are responsible for the fantastic position in Malaya'."

Mr. Glover also stated that the Singapore authorities failed to recognize the sincerity of the Asiatic people or to harness them in an effort against the Japanese, and he condemned the methods of appointing governors.

He says that men were sent at invervals from other colonies, their last appointment—a plum—before retiring. He listed three excuses associated commonly with the Malayan civil service (*a*) It has never been done before (*b*) The present is not the time for it (*c*) There is no financial allocation for it.

On the even graver issue of lack of fighting spirit in the Services, General Kennedy, then Director of Military Operations at the War Office, summarizes what was felt during and after the Malayan campaign.

In his book THE BUSINESS OF WAR, he states:

". . . the real trouble is that for the time being we have lost a good deal of our hardness and fighting spirit. Until we have soldiers capable of marching 20 to 30 miles a day for a number of days running and missing their full rations every second or third day . . . we shall not recover our morale or reputation."

General Kennedy attributes the above remarks to Lord Wavell. He added himself:

"We had cause on many previous occasions to be uneasy about the fighting qualities of our men. They had not fought as toughly as Germans and Russians and now were being outclassed by the

Japanese. First reason . . . that it takes three years to organize and train and equip troops . . . Second reason . . . We were undoubtedly softer as a nation than any of our enemies except the Italians . . . Modern civilization on the democratic model does not produce a hardy race."

General Kennedy also quotes proposals made by General Brooke, when he was C.I.G.S., which were subsequently used in special schools to toughen up training.

General Brooke's points were:

"First, leadership, the most important of all. I wish all Commanders-in-Chief to devote particular attention to the selection of commanders. Too many officers have been and are being promoted even to high command because they are proficient in staff work, are good trainers . . . have agreeable personalities or . . . are clever talkers . . . We must be ruthless in elimination of those unlikely to prove determined and inspiring leaders in the field . . . Second, the morale and discipline of the Army must be vastly improved . . . We can do much ourselves to raise morale and tighten discipline. Our troops have not always fought as well as they could and should . . . due to low standards of leadership and true fighting morale."

While prisoners together in Formosa, an American senior officer gave me an old book on morale called BATTLE STUDIES—*Ancient and Modern Battle* by Colonel Ardant du Picq. This French classic was used by the French Army prior to 1914 and was apparently used by the United States Army after 1921. Most army officers know Napoleon's dictum that morale in importance is worth 3 to 1 of other factors. Few know, and fewer still implemented, the successive steps which are essential in order to achieve real morale in a fighting unit.

At any rate, in Malaya the steps were seldom used. By and large, civilian and soldier were in many ways encouraged to develop that false morale, which collapses quickly when the test comes; and then to discover also that he has been completely misled by his leaders. Better to tell the civilian and soldier the truth, even if it frightens him.

Certainly what must never be done is to create an atmosphere of false security among troops or civilians. The very first setback, or series of setbacks then gives such a shock that the effect on the individual man or woman can become exaggerated; scepticism and cynicism sets in and morale decays still further.

From long before the start of war, the authorities in Malaya indulged in oversimplification and exaggeration of the facts. An Order of the Day was issued on December 8, 1941 which horrified those few prominent civilians, journalists and military officers who had travelled about Malaya and seen the astonishing weaknesses everywhere. It certainly gave me a shock when I read it.

Here is an extract frem the Order (Official History, p. 525):

> "We are ready. We have had plenty of warning and our preparations are made and tested . . . Now Japan . . . will find out that she has made a grievous mistake. We are confident. Our defences are strong—our weapons efficient . . . We see before us a Japan drained for years . . . by her wanton onslaught on China. We see a Japan whose trade and industry have been dislocated by these years of reckless adventure . . ."

It seems improbable that General Percival ever agreed to the wording, and the Official History says the wording and the Order were prepared as early as May 1941 for translation and printing in the vernacular languages. It comments, with restraint, 'The wording . . . showed how much the official view of the situation on the outbreak of war was out of touch with reality.' After four years of war in China and no attack on her own homeland, the Japanese nation was probably in 1941, far better geared for war than ever before.

This Order of the Day, however, was probably intended as a stimulant to the Asians as, at that time, the war generally was not going well in Europe and Africa. The morale and attitude of the local population did cause the Governor worry from time to time. Sir Winston Churchill has expressed a definite opinion against misinforming a public on grave issues.

He said in the House of Commons on January 27, 1942, when the loss of Singapore appeared likely:

> ". . . It was necessary above all to warn the House and the country of the misfortunes which impended upon us. There is no worse mistake in public leadership than to hold out false hopes soon to be swept away. The British people can face peril or misfortune with fortitude and buoyancy, but they bitterly resent being deceived or finding that those responsible for their affairs are themselves dwelling in a fool's paradise.
> I felt it vital, not only to my own position but to the whole conduct

of the war, to discount future calamities by describing the immediate outlook in the darkest terms . . ."

There was nobody in Malaya big enough to make a corresponding announcement, which might well have brought a far greater effort by all nationalities in Malaya, if made after the war in Europe had started. This certainly greatly increased the danger to Malaya.

The people of Malaya basked in the false confidence which reached them from above from 1939 onwards when the danger steadily grew. The Army also relaxed, the direct opposite to what was happening at home. Headquarters, Home Forces were insisting on units with strong discipline, hard training and physical exercises to make the men self-reliant, and to develop faith in themselves, their arms and their leaders. Moreover, some Commanding Officers who failed meticulously to carry out the H.Q. orders on this subject were ruthlessly superseded. This produced good results. Real morale can be built up fairly quickly, but never by exhortation at the last minute, which the authorities in Malaya attempted to do.

A smaller example of how morale can be adversely affected is related by Brigadier C. H. Stringer, Deputy Director of Medical Services Malaya Command, and concerns the siting of hutted camps in North Malaya.

He wrote:

". . . It was further decided that these camps should be located in rubber plantations so as to be invisible from the air. Major-General Murray-Lyon (commanding 11th Indian Division) was the chief exponent of this policy and his views were accepted by the G.O.C. Superficially the policy seemed a sound one but in the long view it was considered by me to be unsound. It was pointed out by me that when these camps were liable to air bombing the troops would all be out in defence positions and that at other times they would be unhealthy owing to gloom, damp, lack of air and sunshine. The result justified this view. Such a camp had only to be lived in for a very short time to realize its depressing effects. The cathedral-like gloom, the hot steamy atmosphere, the lack of air movement, produced a most unhappy reaction on all who had to live in the camps and especially on those whose duties tied them to the camp most of the time. In some cases adverse mental reactions were noted. It was an unfortunate prelude to a campaign where high morale and supreme physical fitness were essential to cope with an enemy who was supremely fit and well-trained physically."

After the wastage of two world wars, the shortage of good senior leadership must be marked in most countries. It is probably true to say that France's collapse in 1940 was due to her frightful casualties in 1914–18 when so many of her future potential leaders were killed or incapacitated. The German staff officer Ludendorff virtually forsaw this in his recommendation for an Armistice in 1918, to be followed by another war later. If to a lesser extent, the same shortage for the same reasons brought disasters to some Commonwealth armies in 1940–42. After that, by a ruthless process of elimination, because we were given the time and the French were not, the best leaders reached the top in time to command the more numerous, better-equipped, better-trained armies that were being formed. Then, because of the breathing space allowed, the tide began to turn. But as for France, there was no second chance for Malaya in the Second World War.

One can never teach a future commander to cover every eventuality. There is no rule book which covers everything that can happen between opposing armies. One can teach the future staff officer faultless staff work and how best to implement a plan by using the troops available to best advantage. But good staff officers don't very often make good field commanders, and good field commanders don't necessarily make good staff officers. Field-Marshal Montgomery has observed that all the Staff College did for him was that it taught him to think logically.

While this is certainly important, many officers have learned to think logically even earlier than at Staff College, at school or university, but can still be unfit for high rank and responsibility. The question arises therefore, whether the Staff Colleges should be the only source from which to pick our senior commanders.

Fortunately now when selecting potential field commanders not so much importance is attached to personality and presence. Personality was more important in the days of massive troop concentrations. Today the accent is necessarily on dispersal with rapid concentration just before operations. The field commander today is often in contact only by telecommunications and so can seldom see or be seen by the bulk of his troops.

It is generally conceded that a fine field commander and an equally good staff officer are seldom interchangeable. Yet this is the mistake the British Army seems to make more than any other; possibly because both are chosen only from Staff College

graduates by older Staff College graduates. In time this is bound to develop a form of 'old school tie' or 'Trades Union' mentality which is quite inapplicable for a whole nation in peace or war.

One really remarkable point emerges from the Malayan complexes on 'no defences' and 'no attack possible during the North-East Monsoon'.* Both were obviously points of the very greatest importance to Malaya, should it ever come to war; both were brought to the notice of several senior responsible men from September onwards; both were stated to be very recent War Office opinion and a check back to London was repeatedly requested. Yet no action at all was taken by anybody to verify from the War Office, statements made by a senior and presumably responsible officer newly arrived from London. It is true, yet it sounds absolutely incredible when one thinks of the trouble taken to question and cross-question enemy low-rank prisoners of war in order to establish even relatively minor points on which definite information is required. To what can such supreme complacency be ascribed? There is something wrong with a system which allows this sort of thing to happen without any subsequent inquiry; and whatever the reason, it was most unfair to Malaya by those who undoubtedly had Malaya's welfare at heart.

Good leaders have been thrown up during war who would never have been heard of in peace-time because they could not put p.s.c. (passed Staff College) after their names. To name but two, one from each war, Freyberg of New Zealand and Orde Wingate from Britain. *The Times* leader of December 8, 1958 in discussing this question, maintained that for good leadership the rule should be 'to promote officers according to their abilities rather than their qualifications'. It deserves study.

Today virtually the only route to high rank is still via the Staff College (Camberley) or the Royal Military College of Science (Shrivenham). P.s.c. and p.t.s.c. are the equivalent of University degrees, but such do not necessarily make great and creative leaders.

For the Staff College a fine junior leader is chosen when he is aged about 25 to 30. A good junior leader by no means always develops into a fine senior leader which requires a far wider viewpoint and experience. This can certainly be increased at the Staff Colleges or later at the Imperial Defence College. It

* See page 49.

can also be obtained by thoughtful reading of history by those who can never have the advantage of higher teaching at Staff Colleges or Imperial Defence College, owing to the method of choice for aspirants. For the benefit of the nation, one would have thought that a man for high civil or fighting service appointment could best be chosen between say the ages of 35 and 40. At this age the other essentials in the individual who is fit for the top, are beginning to show far more clearly than at 10 years younger. There would be far less chance of a mistake being made. This point was discussed at the Senior Officers School (Sheerness) many years ago with the then Commandant who stated that, during his tenure of the appointment, four non-p.s.c. men had passed through this School who were in every way as good as any of the p.s.c. men. One he considered to be really outstanding, yet for most of his life he had served in a military backwater in India! Apparently he had studied military history carefully, at every annual opportunity he had attended manœuvres, attaching himself to some British or Indian Infantry Battalion or other unit. He was a 'natural' and knowledgeable leader of men, yet he and the other three non-p.s.c. officers were all in due course retired as Colonels. This seems to be a loss of first-class leadership material which the nation can ill afford; and it continues today, though p.t.s.c. has widened the field of choice, but probably not really enough.

The road to high promotion in all Government Services could with great advantage be widened to include the non-p.s.c. and non-p.t.s.c. man—and all chosen at a later age. It is not p.s.c. or p.t.s.c. that makes the good leader but the subsequent experience that arises from it. Give that experience to some picked non-p.s.c. men and the results should prove good for the nation. Look at successful leaders in all walks of life in the last fifty years. There are many who possessed abilities but no 'qualifications' to use the expression of *The Times*, and Sir Winston Churchill is probably the best example of all in our time. This nation is short of first-class leadership today. Let us hope the promotion net is widened in all fields, as it appears to be in other nations.*

In India about forty years ago a well-known commander seriously suggested tactical exercises with and without troops with opposing sides commanded and staffed by p.s.c. and non-p.s.c. men respectively. I do not know if this was ever tried out

* Rommel is, of course, a classic example.

in practice later; but such a match of 'possibles' versus 'probables' should prove useful—prestige should not be allowed to interfere. It would bring men to notice who otherwise can seldom be seen or appreciated by those on whom their promotion really depends. In peace-time the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force have two great advantages over the Army. In peace-time their personnel are often forced to use the same initiative and speed in vital decisions as they would in war. Ships and aircraft can often be presented with a dangerous situation from the elements or from breakdowns and faults developing at any time. The Civil Service is in the same position as the Army in that both are very rarely asked for really prompt decision and action in time of peace. Thus both can and do become sluggish in reacting to an emergency. The only solution to this problem would appear to be more combined exercises, but with real penalties for slow decisions and action by any individuals. The other advantage the Navy and Air Force have over the Civil Service and Army is the system of court martial or court of inquiry on officers for 'hazarding their command'. This system keeps officers up to scratch. It has another advantage, too, in that it either absolves or blames a man for his mistake and the result is carefully studied by others not directly involved. If Civil Service and Army officers were subject to real penalties for inexcusable mistakes and for slow decision and action at all levels, fewer unsuitable men would also risk seeking high promotion. There is no punishment for a senior officer who is responsible for enormous losses of blood or treasure (e.g. East African ground nut fiasco) by his carelessness or lack of thought; whereas a junior officer can be cashiered for a minor slip such as losing the key of the safe, which causes the slightest loss of government money.

Civil and military leadership, particularly abroad, is very apt to become too old, to get out of date, slow in action and 'set' in ideas and procedure. Safeguards are necessary to ensure that this cannot happen. The structure of any Civil Government often becomes incredibly complicated over the years. Possibly for political reasons, it became so in Malaya. Yet all government departments should surely always be kept as simple as possible so that they can be expanded or contracted and able to act quickly in time of emergency. Moreover, far too much seems to be covered by regulations in all Government Services. The

individual thus protects himself by obeying a regulation, which must tend to prevent individual thought, decision and action at all levels—a poor training. Using the regulation a man never makes a mistake and gets automatic promotion.

At the first hint of possible hostilities, nearly all the problems become primarily military ones. A senior serving officer with advantage could speedily be appointed as local supremo over the three fighting services and the civil service. Since in this age emergencies can flare up quickly, it might even be wise to keep up to date a roster of officers-designate. The tendency to appoint a senior retired officer as a commander-in-chief, at home or abroad, has very seldom proved successful for any European country. On retirement any man gets out of date very quickly and a sense of urgency quickly reduces with age.

Another precaution against disasters of the Malayan type is to institute periodical visits to remote oversea Governments and establishments by a small Inspectorate of three or four young, carefully chosen, up-to-date officers; whose reports should go uncensored to their London Ministries. In the military sphere Field-Marshal Montgomery used such a system from 1942–45. He used a very highly selected small team which collected information at the front. Some commanders objected to it because it circumvented them, but their objections were overruled. Individual prestige should always be made to give way to national interest.

Had such a small Inspectorate for example visited Malaya and other oversea areas say every few years prior to the war it would almost certainly have noticed the many weaknesses which existed everywhere in the country and brought them to light in time for remedial action on orders from the responsible offices in Whitehall. The Inspectorate should have the right to render their uncensored reports direct to the Whitehall Ministries. The point of course is that an observant man new to any country can often at once see so much that is capable of improvement in various directions, to which the old resident, in any walk of life, has got accustomed and takes as a matter of course. The long-resident Government official or business man continues to do what has proved successful for years. He may not realize what others are doing for peace or war—until it is too late.

Field-Marshal Slim's book DEFEAT INTO VICTORY is a remarkable testimony to what happened in Burma against the same

enemy, same tactics and magnificent, if somewhat fanatical, courage displayed by the Japanese in Malaya. It deserves careful study by every civil servant and army officer. Burma had one advantage over Malaya in that the Commonwealth troops had the space to retreat westward 'for ever', falling back towards their own base, India; while the R.A.F. were able to reach and help the fighting front. The enemy's supply line gradually got stretched to an impossible length through difficult country. In Malaya none of this applied. Our fighting troops could only retire about 500 miles until they reached the sea. Even if the men had been available it soon became impossible to supply them as the enemy controlled the sea and air all round Malaya. Thus Malaya was completely overrun and 'extinguished' in 70 days; whereas it took about 3 years to build up the Commonwealth forces to the point of being able to extinguish the enemy in Burma.

Apart from this, the conditions in Burma* and Malaya were similar and what Field-Marshal Slim writes of Burma for the early half of the war applies equally to Malaya. He considered the senior government officials too old, too inflexible in mind and too lacking in energy and leadership to cope with the immense difficulties and stark realities of invasion. The Allies had been out-manœuvred, out-fought and out-generalled. The jungle was an obstacle to movement and vision to us; to the Japanese it was a welcome means of concealed manœuvre and surprise. The Japanese reaped the reward for their foresight and thorough preparation; we paid the penalty for lack of both. Japanese leadership was confident, bold and so aggressive that they never once lost the initiative. Their clear objective was the destruction of our forces; ours a rather nebulous idea of retaining territory.

Later, when the roles were reversed and our troops were advancing in Burma, Field-Marshal Slim states that the enemy bunkers (5 to 20 men) were in groups for mutual support. Field artillery and bombs seldom penetrated. The enemy's 33rd Division at Imphal showed supreme courage; and the Field-Marshal states that he knows of no army who could have equalled them. The proportion of prisoners to killed was about 1 to 100. Resistance was fanatical; for example, to stop our tanks a Japanese soldier would occupy a pit with a 100-kilo bomb between his knees and a stone with which to detonate it when the

* I was C.R.E. in Burma in 1932–33.

tank passed over the pit. (This was the army equivalent of the Kamakaze Japanese airmen trying to stop the American advance across the Pacific by flying their machines with bombs or torpedoes—and themselves—into an aircraft carrier or battleship, to ensure maximum damage.)

Both in Burma and Malaya the Japanese certainly had 'a perfect instrument' in their very highly-trained homogenous army units—all of first-class quality and experience. Our forces and general staff in Malaya—with a few magnificent unit exceptions—were often recently recruited, undertrained, inexperienced, not acclimatized.

The failure in Malaya was, of course, primarily a military one. Whatever the Civil Government in Malaya could have done—except to have encouraged the use of the indigenous population to the maximum for fighting units, guerrillas, labour, etc.—would not have mattered as things turned out. However, had the Army been able to hold out longer, the major mistakes made by the civilians would soon have forced the capitulation of Singapore for the many reasons stated earlier—doubled population, losses of food and water, etc.

16

ENEMY EPILOGUE

From the Japanese account of the fall of Singapore, we readily see how much was thoroughly planned in advance and implemented in operations to make victory practically certain for them; and, by contrast, it makes one realize how very little was done by us in counter-preparation.

First published in Japan in 1951, it was translated in Australia and the English language edition of SINGAPORE, THE JAPANESE VERSION by Colonel Masanobu Tsuji was published in London by Messrs Constable Ltd. in May 1962. It carried an introduction by Lieutenant-General Gordon Bennett, who commanded the Australian troops in Malaya. The author, Colonel Tsuji, was the chief of the Operations and Planning Staff of the 25th Army which was delegated to capture Malaya. Significantly too this officer was in charge of the Taiwan Army Research Section on Formosa, which instructed troops in jungle fighting and attempted, where possible, to train them in country similar to Malaya where they would eventually fight.

It is always fascinating to see what the enemy has to say and Colonel Tsuji's book contains much of interest. For example he confirms that Malaya had been the target for many years of Japanese resident 'sleeper' agents. These spies, while engaged in ostensibly harmless and respectable business pursuits in Singapore and up country, reported every detail of military interest on Singapore Island.

The British and Japanese officers all in civilian clothes actually met each other on one occasion, when both were in Neutral South Siam checking details respectively for Operation Matador and for their route of advance from Singora and Patani, the chosen landing places.

In Singapore, Japanese officers in civilian business as photographers, hairdressers, etc. were rounded up at the start of war.

Their work was already completed, however. They had already pinpointed and reported all the weaknesses in defence, the numbers and quality of troops, shortages and obsolescent aircraft, the lack of landward defences, the lack of tanks . . . The Japanese version was originally written several years before our own Official History was published in 1957, but was able to quote from Sir Winston Churchill's *History of the Second World War, Volume IV*, which was published in 1951.

Colonel Tsuji remarks on the fact that Imperial H.Q. originally proposed that five Japanese divisions should be detailed to capture Malaya. Then, because of our known weaknesses, the figure was reduced to four divisions. But, then again, we read:

> "General Yamashita, after consideration of the fighting capacity of the British Army at the beginning of the campaign, decided that three divisions were sufficient."

So three Japanese divisions, the Imperial Guards and the Fifth and Eighteenth Divisions, and the Third Tank Group, with eighty medium and one hundred light tanks, became the invasion force. At the start of war the approximate figures in brigade strength were nine infantry and one tank group attacking ten Commonwealth infantry brigades. The British had numerical superiority on paper although without tanks and modern aircraft, because there were additional Fortress troops and other ancillaries in Singapore and Penang; and later three more Brigades (18 British Division) arrived shortly before the end plus two newly recruited Indian Brigades.

The lesson from this is the undoubted optimism and confidence of the Japanese for it is rare that a commander himself reduces the number of troops allotted to him, and still rarer that he reduces them to numbers less than the known enemy forces. It becomes remarkable when he is attacking a numerically superior enemy, who can be expected to have built defence positions after the start of war. Even with his deliberately reduced forces, he beat his own scheduled time-table for the capture of Malaya and the Singapore 'fortress'. A hundred days were estimated in Japanese planning; as we have seen, General Yamashita completed his victory in seventy days.

All this underlines the message for all Commonwealth Governments to put their respective houses in order. For while it is true

that the Japanese had complete air and naval superiority and also had the initiative on when and where to attack, this alone cannot explain away the magnitude and speed of her victory.

We take a civilian off the street, put him into khaki and call him a soldier. But he is completely untrained and quite unable to engage the fleeting targets of war with his gun, machine-gun or rifle. Colonel Tsuji's book shows us that the Japanese Fifth and Eighteenth Divisions in particular had trained and worked together. They were physically and technically of superb quality. They were confident and they knew and had faith in their own commanders and in the units which were supporting them on either side. None of this applied to our cosmopolitan forces.

We had troops of potentially good quality who had not been trained sufficiently nor did they have any specialized knowledge of local conditions. Many in fact were raw recruits and morale was largely lacking in the mixed Commonwealth forces. Fighting units of the five nations involved in Malaya (British, Australian, Indian, Gurkha and Malay) had in fact different standards of training, equipment, discipline, food and sometimes language. They never really got to know each other nor did their respective leaders. Realism could be expected to dictate conformity in a theatre of war for the sake of efficiency. If implemented this would mean a reduction to the minimum of the numbers of Commonwealth countries involved in each theatre; instead of the apparent policy of each country providing contingents, largely as a matter of prestige, in every theatre of war. This greatly increases the political, military and administrative difficulties in each theatre.

The Japanese left little to chance, as Colonel Tsuji shows. Despite the experience they had gained since 1937 in coastal invasion landings, the Japanese forces scheduled to invade Malaya had two thorough rehearsals. The first in February 1941, which lasted a fortnight, was the 'invasion' of Kyushu in Japan from Formosa which was a thousand miles away. This was useful in bringing together talented officers of all services. Later still, more detailed manœuvres were carried out with the invasion of Hainan from the mainland by a spearhead battalion of infantry, a battery of artillery and a company of engineers.

The latter operation took place within a circumference of 1,000 kilometres. Bridges were blown and then repaired or replaced and assaults were carried out. This gave the advance

forces the necessary experience for landings and operations under jungle and tropical conditions as they would be met in Malaya. It is a pity that we did not carry out anti-invasion exercises, as suggested, for Kota Bahru and elsewhere, along the lines tried out in Scotland—which showed up weaknesses in defence. We seldom face up to the expenditure involved in realistic training.

At the planning stage there was much argument among Japanese senior officers on whether to employ orthodox or unorthodox tactics in the invasion. Japanese Imperial H.Q. favoured the orthodox, but 'The Malayan campaign could not be won by orthodox tactics,' writes Colonel Tsuji because the terrain was largely mountain, or swamp and jungle.

For the Japanese, air reconnaissance over the far north and in the Singora (Siam) area had confirmed that:

> "For about a kilometre each side, the road was lined by rubber plantations. On this frontage alone would movement only be possible for all arms of the services. Even an army possessing superior numerical strength would find the road always the centre of its battle front with its flanks extending not more than a kilometre to right and left . . . consequently there was no need to worry about the superior numbers of British troops who could be effectively engaged on either side. In the rubber forest and the jungle the authority of the naked sabre would be conclusive. For us the terrain provided ideal fighting conditions."

These conditions, of course, applied to the whole of Malaya and not only to the far north. It was realistic and accurate thinking on an obvious point but one which seems to have largely been missed by Commonwealth staffs and troops who had long been resident in the country. At least if any of them realized it, they did not act upon it. Some newcomers and others did realize the danger. One of these was Lieutenant-Colonel Stewart who trained his 2nd Battalion Argyll Sutherland Highlanders to perfection with his own ideas of how to make war in the jungle (see Chapter 4, pp. 42–44).

It is worth recalling the opinion expressed about Colonel Stewart at Malaya Command H.Q. about three weeks before the Japanese attacked, that Colonel Stewart was a crank (see Chapter 4, p. 42).

So the Japanese chose unorthodox tactics for the Malayan attack. The keynote was speed, always speed and speed again in pressing the continuous attack, even at night, often by very small

units. Fatigue was ignored, with some Japanese units fighting for forty days without respite.

Their tanks were used to drive Commonwealth troops off the road and railway and into the jungle, where the advantage was with the better jungle-trained Japanese.

The colonel's book pays tribute to the bravery of the Australians but bravery alone is very seldom enough against armour. The Australian anti-tank gunners were magnificent on occasion but because of insufficient defensive protection, had little chance of survival. Although not stated when it was taken, a widely publicized photograph shows an Australian anti-tank gun and crew in full view from the Johore shore at a range of about 1,000 yards. It is to be hoped that this photo was taken before the Johore shore was occupied by the enemy.

Colonel Tsuji stated that the Japanese were not specifically trained for jungle fighting by December 1941, and this statement must be accepted. However, by 1943 we, as prisoners of war, lived alongside a jungle training camp in Formosa, and we heard and saw battalions undergoing night training in jungle conditions. It is not known when this school was started, but their approach march through jungle to their objective (our P.O.W. camp) was considered masterly by those few British officers who often stopped up half the night to hear the animal noises, bird calls, etc., in the jungle by which their units kept in touch prior to reaching their assault positions. Suddenly bedlam broke loose with 'Banzais' and the final charge up to our wired stockade, as we melted away to bed. In 1941 Japanese infantry were usually superior to most Commonwealth troops in their ability to travel quickly through jungle and to sustain themselves in the process. They were supremely fit, carried lighter arms and ammunition, and per man weighed less than we did. They were accustomed to making one bag of rice, which each man carried, last several days while they were away from normal supply lines. Added together the above items gave the Japanese a considerable advantage.

Hitherto the Japanese divisions earmarked for Malaya had fought only in the cold climate of Manchuria, and tropical and jungle experience was lacking.

So Colonel Tsuji's Formosan research unit collected the necessary information. Some ten months before the Malayan attack came, they produced forty thousand copies of a book entitled

READ THIS ALONE—AND THE WAR CAN BE WON. It told the Japanese soldier what conditions he could expect in tropical jungle and how he could combat them.

The books were issued to the troops before they embarked for Malaya. One can only wish that our own General Staff in Malaya had produced something similar for training our own men in jungle tactics and, at the same time, had also expanded the War Office anti-tank instructions into a book for local use long before the war started. The first objective surely for any units arriving in a new country is to adapt themselves and their battle tactics to fit the terrain and climate.

Colonel Tsuji's book shows that the Japanese plan for the capture of the Singapore naval base, which was their main objective, was based on three main facts, which can be briefly listed as:

1 The naval base has a very strongly defended sea front, but then we are told 'the rear of the fortress was very unprotected.'
2 Enemy forces are disposed mainly about the central portion of northern Malaya—and these forces were to be eliminated before they could get back to Singapore.
3 The enemy air force was weak. Could it be that the enemy believe there would be no Japanese attack between November 1941 and March 1942, the period of the North-east Monsoon?

We must prove that attack then is possible and can prove to be successful.

Clearly the Japanese exploited in paras 1 and 3, British weaknesses which the War Office in London had realized but which Headquarters Malaya Command had ignored and declined to check or correct when brought to their notice.

As regards item 2—the destruction of units before they could fall back on Singapore Island—the Japanese largely achieved their object, since the equivalent of about four brigades in strength, were destroyed in tank and night attacks before they could reach Singapore.

Of the greatest of the Japanese successes, the Battle of Slim River, Colonel Tsuji says that this victory was primarily won by ten tanks commanded by two subalterns. At the first bridge, the officer in the leading tank jumped down and cut the exposed leads to the demolition charges with his sabre. All the tanks stormed over the next three bridges with no difficulty. At the fifth bridge, Colonel Tsuji writes that again visible demolition

wires had to be cut by machine-gun fire because 'Lieutenant Watanabe had been wounded in the right hand and could no longer use his sabre'. He added that 'single-handed fighting by the ten tanks continued for about three hours'.

This Japanese account of Slim River cannot be reconciled with the British Official History or other accounts, as summarized in Chapter 6. Even so the events by any account were incredible in January 1942, after several experiences with enemy tanks in Malaya itself in the previous four weeks.

One cannot blame the Indian infantry for their ignorance of the tank risk and for lacking knowledge in combating it. Nor can one blame the Indian Sapper and Miners parties for leaving exposed demolition leads. Although the bridge demolition parties are not mentioned anywhere, one suspects that they received orders too late to plan or to implement them properly; and were perhaps killed before they could finish the actual demolitions.

The sustained speed of the Japanese advance throughout the 550 miles from Singora to Singapore Island always seemed remarkable, despite resistance, their supply problem and delays due to demolitions. Colonel Tsuji believes the achievement was due to 'the equipping and training of the infantry formations and the great achievement of the Engineer Corps.' Motor vehicles and bicycles had replaced the formations' horses. Everybody rode something. If an officer or an enlisted man was not riding in a truck or a car, he was mounted on a bicycle. When units went into the jungle, bicycles were left under guard just off the road. When they had to be moved forward without their riders, the local population was impressed to mount and ride them to the new destinations.

The bicycle thus came into its own and solved many problems. It was faster than foot-slogging and less fatiguing. It did not create problems when there was a petrol shortage. It could easily be carried across or around obstacles. And with the bicycle, as Colonel Tsuji says, 'with excellent paved roads the assault on Malaya was easy.' The bicycles were not only landed with the assault troops but could be easily replaced when they broke down because a large number of bicycles were owned by the local population, over the full length of the peninsula.

If bicycles had been suggested for any other army before this time, there would have been derisive laughter, but the Japanese

Engineers were one of the first units to receive a citation. The cycling Engineer commander and his engineers could apparently always be seen near the head of the vanguard troops, ready to deal quickly with a destroyed bridge or any other problem which might cause delay.

Closely following the enemy engineers were trucks of material and, although not mentioned, repair work may have been assisted by stocks of timber for repair, stacked by Commonwealth engineers nearer the larger bridges in case they were bombed. In short, Japanese engineers throughout gave close support and real help to their fighting men.

Colonel Tsuji also mentions the help the Japanese troops received from what they called 'the Churchill Supplies'. These were the large quantities of food and petrol they captured intact in towns.

On airfields they found high octane petrol and bombs, and undamaged cars and trucks. Such supplies were apparently found all the way down the peninsula and used against our troops.

The Japanese transport problem thus almost ceased to be one. With the exception of guns and ammunition only, plus assault boats required for the attack on Singapore Island, they needed to transport little. No explanation is found in the British story of the disaster; but the reason why so much material was left behind undamaged or undestroyed was presumably because of lack of earlier planning for possible evacuation or destruction.

If plans were not formulated for demolition before the war started, they should certainly have been delegated to an organization within two weeks or so of the outbreak of hostilities, when it became apparent that the Japanese were advancing quickly and successfully. In fact, I personally reacted strongly when the Royal Engineers were asked by the R.A.F. about December 15, to 'demolish' certain forward airfields at impossibly short notice; especially as engineers had suggested it be planned much earlier and none of them were now available near the airfields in question.

The R.A.F. had earlier undertaken to demolish their own airfields and equipment before evacuation. I now offered to prepare demolitions and deal with airfields farther back if the R.A.F. could not do this themselves. But this offer was seldom accepted and much useful material was left intact on airfields.

In 1963 a second book was published in Britain telling the Japanese side of the story. This was A SOLDIER MUST HANG by John Deane Potter, which included the diaries of General Yamashita, the Japanese Commander-in-Chief in Malaya, who was executed after the war by the Allies in the Philippines for atrocities committed by his troops.

General Yamashita's forces apparently numbered only about 30,000 men, which was far less than was estimated by us at the time. Our own Official History puts them at about 55,000 to start with. However, Yamashita himself had underestimated the numbers of the British Commonwealth forces, and was astonished to discover later that they totalled, he reckoned, some 100,000 men (army forces) which is too high including fortress troops. There was, however, a much higher percentage of fighting troops in the Japanese figure than in the British figure.

According to A SOLDIER MUST HANG, General Yamashita described the situation thus:

> "My attack on Singapore was a bluff—a bluff that worked. I had 30,000 men and was outnumbered more than three to one. I knew if I had to fight long for Singapore, I would be beaten. That was why the surrender had to be at once. I was very frightened all the time that the British would discover our numerical weakness and lack of supplies and force me into disastrous street fighting."

On reflection, the early and brilliant British staff appreciation of Japanese probable landings at Singora, Patani and Kota Bharu was completely nullified a few years later when such landings took place. There were few plans or preparations at all to thwart landings or block enemy advances or to protect the naval base from landward attack. That surely is the real tragedy of what Churchill considered to be our greatest defeat in history which the loss of the Singapore naval base undoubtedly was. The Official History states that the Commonwealth battle casualties in Malaya were of the order of 8,700; and the Japanese 9,824. In addition the Commonwealth military forces lost over 130,000 as prisoners of war*—say fourteen times the Japanese casualties in overall figures—a really terrible balance sheet.

That is why our failure in Malaya deserves the most careful study by all the governments and the services who were involved.

* Total of Navy, Army, R.A.F. and Volunteer local forces.

All had a hand in our crushing defeat by a smaller armed force which was weaker than we were in numbers, but generally superior in training and equipment. As history shows, this is the usual finale to an easy-going democracy.

To talk about insufficient naval backing and inferior and too few R.A.F. planes, though true, is really a red herring to cover our quick defeat on land.

The speed of collapse was due mainly to acts of omission and commission by the civil and mainly the army authorities in Malaya; aided always by our inability to produce sufficient trained and equipped troops quickly for any emergency. In this case, the few fully trained troops available were required nearer home; but it is probably no exaggeration to say that with the speed of modern war, the next major war will really be won or lost before a shot is fired, by the decisions of the Government of the day on the strength of fully trained and equipped armed forces made in London some years earlier. It is still true that:

> "When a strong man armed keepeth his palace, his goods are in peace."

You cannot have national security without effort and cost. Social security is no substitute for national security.

Appendix

GENERAL YAMASHITA'S LETTER

Lieut-General Tomoyuki Yamashita
High Commander of the Nippon Army

To the High Commander of the
British Army in Malaya *Feb. 10th 2602**

Your Excellency,

I, the High Commander of the Nippon Army, based on the spirit of Japanese chivalry, have the honour of presenting this note to Your Excellency advising to surrender the whole forces in Malaya.

My sincere respect is due to your army which true to the traditional spirit of Great Britain, is bravely defending Singapore, which now stands isolated and unaided. Many fierce and fearless fights have been fought by your gallant men and officers to the honour and glory of the British warriorship.

But the development of the general war situations has already sealed the fate of Singapore, and continuation of futile resistance would not only serve to inflict direct harms and injuries to thousands of non-combatants living in the city, throwing them into further miseries and horrors of war, but also would not certainly add anything to the honour of your army.

I expect that Your Excellency, accepting my advice, will give up this meaningless and desperate resistance and promptly order the entire front to cease hostilities, and will dispatch at the same time, your parlementaire according to the procedure shown at the end of this note.

If, on the contrary, Your Excellency should reject my advice and the present resistance be continued, I shall be obliged, though reluctantly from humanitarian considerations, to order my army to make annihilating attacks upon Singapore.

* The year is according to Japanese reckoning.

In closing this note of advice, I pay again my sincere respect to your Excellency.

Lieut-General Tomoyuki Yamashita
High Commander of the Nippon Army

N.B. 1 The Parlementaire shall proceed Bt. Timah Road.
2 The Parlementaire shall bear a large white flag and the Union Jack.

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