AGAINST THE SUN

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AGAINST THE SUN

The AIF in Malaya, 1941–42

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Cover photographs: (left) 1941–02. Arrival of A.I.F. in Malaya. AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL NEGATIVE NUMBER (005901; (centre) Johore Bahru, Malaya. 1945–10–02. The wooden memorial cross erected at the site of the heavy fighting in the Nithsdale Estate between the advancing Japanese forces and members of the 2/18th Infantry Battalion. AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL NEGATIVE NUMBER 117912; (top right) Endau Johore, Malaya. 1941–12. An informal group portrait of members of 17 Platoon, 2/19th Battalion. AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL NEGATIVE NUMBER P0102/59/43; (bottom right) 1941–05. A.I.F. in Malaya. Diggers making their way through dense jungle. (Negative by D. McNeil.) AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL NEGATIVE NUMBER 007182.

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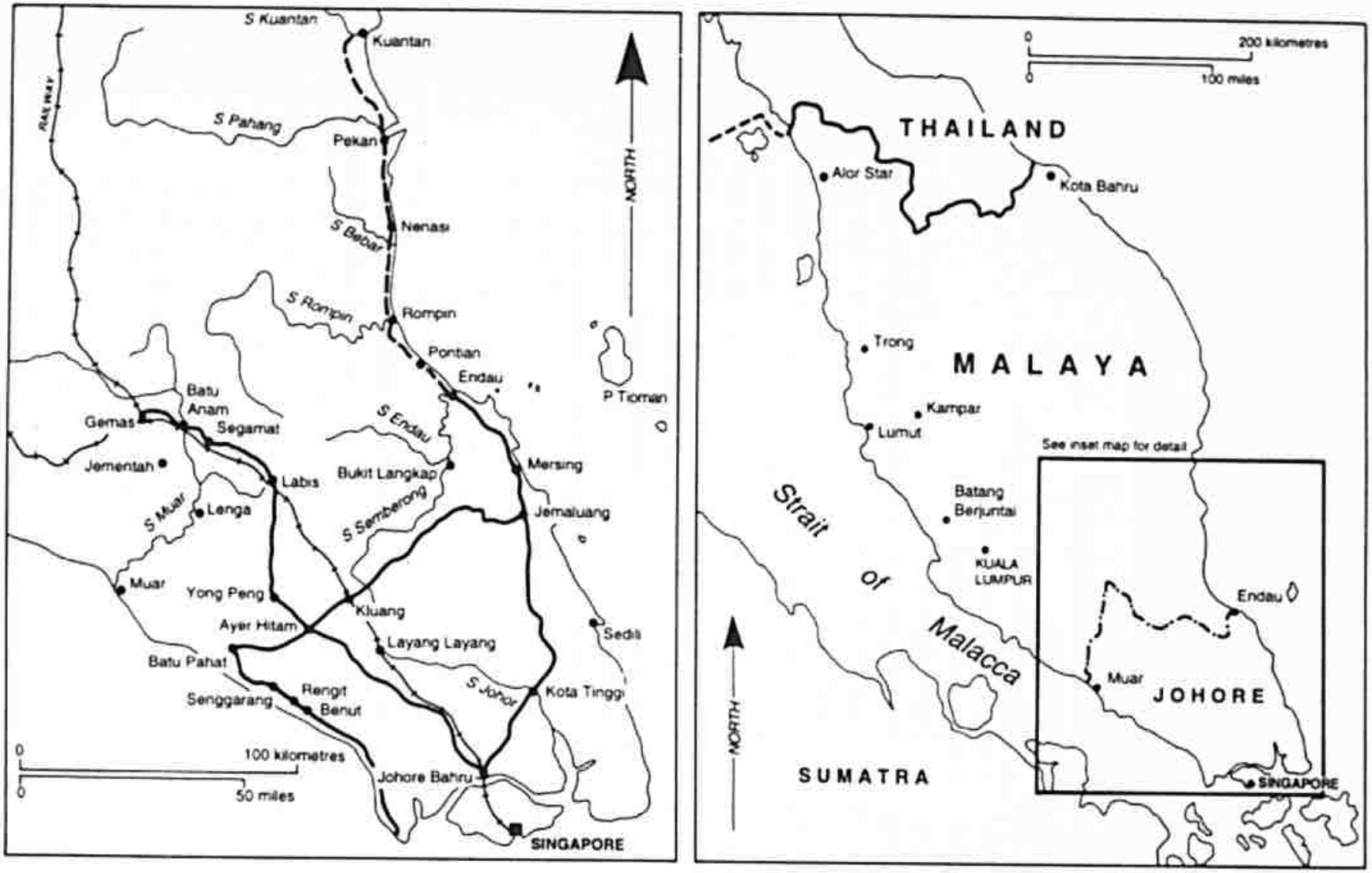
Abbreviations

AA	Anti-Aircraft
AFV	Armoured Fighting Vehicle
ADMS	Assistant Director Medical Services
ADC	Aide-de-Camp
AGH	Australian General Hospital
AIF	Australian Imperial Force
AOC	Air Officer Commanding
ARP	Air Raid Precaution
AWM	Australian War Memorial
AWW	*Australian Women's Weekly*
Bde	Brigade
BGS	Brigadier General Staff
Bn	Battalion
Bty	Battery
CASC	Commander Army Service Corps
CCS	Casualty Clearing Station
COS	Chiefs of Staff
CRA	Commander Royal Artillery
CO	Commanding Officer
CSM	Company Sergeant Major
DADMS	Deputy Assistant Director Medical Services
DCM	Distinguished Conduct Medal
Don R	Despatch Rider
DRL	Donated Record List
DT	*Daily Telegraph*
Fd Regt	Field Regiment
FOO	Forward Observation Officer
GHQ	General Headquarters
GOC	General Officer Commanding
GSO1	General Staff Officer, Grade 1

GSO2	General Staff Officer, Grade 2
HMAS	His Majesty's Australian Ship
HMS	His Majesty's Ship
HQ	Headquarters
IJA	Imperial Japanese Army
IO	Intelligence Officer
LO	Liaison Officer
MDS	Main Dressing Station
MS	Manuscript
NLA	National Library of Australia
OC	Officer Commanding
OP	Observation Post
OR	Other Ranks
PBI	Poor Bloody Infantry (slang term, common in the 1940s)
POW	Prisoner of War
QM	Quartermaster
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
RAE	Royal Australian Engineers
RAF	Royal Air Force
RAP	Regimental Aid Post
RIASC	Royal Indian Army Service Corps
RMO	Regimental Medical Officer
RMT	Reserve Motor Transport
SPRO	Services Public Relations Organisation
SMH	*Sydney Morning Herald*
ST	*Straits Times*
TEWTS	Tactical Exercise Without Troops

Note that italics are used throughout to indicate quotations taken from interviews. Any excerpts taken from a written source are within quotation marks.



The southern part of the peninsula

Introduction

Apart from the Australian Official History, a history now some 50 years old, this is the first direct study of the AIF in Malaya; a book, moreover, which suggests a new narrative pattern, a pattern other than that laid down so decisively by the official historian all those years ago. No doubt, of course, a good part of this campaign has been thoroughly worked over already, in commentary, memoir, deposition, argument, report—close to two books a year, perhaps, since Percival surrendered his troops to the Japanese. Still, it's usually Singapore that matters; so much so that in popular imagination Malaya becomes just a prologue: a month and more of fighting that foreshadows that final week on the Island. So, the argument might run: as the troops 'withdraw' in Malaya, that becomes a 'retreat'; in Singapore that retreat a 'rout'; the rout a 'debacle'; the 'end of an era' or, as contemporaries recognised, the 'end of Empire'. That kind of argument assumes, of course, that this is a single campaign, Malaya and Singapore: 50 days on the mainland, a fortnight on the Island. To some extent this is true, more so if it is plotted on the movement of the opposing armies; indeed, in these terms, the campaign has to be reduced to Japanese advance, British and Imperial retreat. But this is far from being the headlong retreat of popular writing; nor the simple sequence that it may appear sketched out day by day on a map. Given the orders Percival was working to, after all, in Malaya withdrawal was inevitable; part of a deliberate strategy, devised by Malaya Command and—at least until Slim River—endorsed by the War Council in Singapore for what mattered most: the protection of the Base, the protection of the airfields. But on Singapore withdrawal was no longer a strategic option; and retreat on the Island has very different implications—like the retreat from Moscow as distinct from the retreat to Corunna. In this book I am concerned only with Malaya,

particularly the part played by the 8th Division; not a campaign the AIF was expecting to be engaged in either, not at least in the beginning.[1]

The 8th Division was raised just after the Fall of France, a time when at least 57 000 men joined the AIF. The 22nd Brigade went to Malaya in February 1941, as the brigade group the Australian Government was asked for at the end of 1940, a time when the British Chiefs of Staff recognised that Malaya could be reinforced neither from Britain nor India. It was supposed to stay until May 1941 when it would be relieved by an Indian Division, and the whole of the 8th Division then concentrated, with the Australian corps, in the Middle East. Yet, by the end of May, though two additional Indian brigades had been sent in and though the situation in the Middle East was at its most precarious, 22nd Brigade was now committed to Malaya: so much so that, even with this one brigade group, General Bennett was pressing for a definite role for the AIF. In August, about a month after Japan had moved into southern Indo-China, the 27th Brigade reached Singapore, the Australian War Cabinet finally ordering to Malaya one but not both of the groups the British Chiefs of Staff were asking for—a second of Bennett's brigades, and in fact Australia's last uncommitted trained force.

In December, when the Japanese came ashore at Kota Bahru, the AIF in Malaya consisted of Divisional HQ, two brigades and attached troops. Australian infantry, of course, did not formally engage with the enemy before the middle of January. Still, the Division was in action from the first day: its 2/3RMT, seconded at the end of 1941 to 11th Indian Division, fighting right down the peninsula and on to the Island. Indeed, first day, first death—Jim Tucker's—and Sid Baines the first wounded. And, by 15 February, some 2500 men from the Division—one in six—were dead or missing; another 1500, even on official figures, wounded: more, its 2/19, in just 22 days of fighting, suffered more dead, missing and wounded than any AIF unit in the Second World War.

As for the campaign itself, it is true that the major actions Australian troops were involved in—Gemas, for instance, or Muar—found a place in the story immediately, and were taken up almost at once into the narrative tradition: 'at Gemas ... the Australian Imperial Force gained honor ...'; and an account published just the next year is quite unequivocal: 'And Parit Sulong is one of the unforgettables'.[2] But what matters in any narrative is not simply the events, the incidents themselves; it is rather the context they

are placed in, what in a novel would be called the 'plot', where actions are read—or become intelligible—by relating them to their consequences. And when one places actions in sequence like that, then, by their very ordering, they are seen as having an interior and necessary logic of their own. For this campaign, the Official History has proved decisive: after it was published the same incidents are regarded as central, interpreted in much the same way. And even matters of dispute—like the evacuation of Kuantan airfield perhaps, or General Bennett's deployment of his troops in north Johore—have not proved critical enough to shift the accepted line of argument. Indeed, even the unit historians follow it unquestioningly, though the very material they are drawing on—material from their own members—indicates that the 'official' pattern will not hold. In part, of course, Wigmore is writing within constraints imposed by the brief any official historian had to work to; the constraints imposed by his sources, material like the War Diaries—all fragmentary, incomplete. Still, in his reading of the action in Malaya, what happens in east Johore, for instance, amounts to not much more than a number of discrete patrolling actions, a few artillery engagements, and the ambush at Nithsdale; and this, it turns out, is because his sources gave him very little to go on. And that raises questions about sources, about interpretations, about the relations of historical truth to narrative truth, which lie at the heart of this book.

This is why what the men themselves say—men who were there—proves so important for this book. What I have attempted is not simply a matter of collecting stories—nothing new, after all, in that. And nothing of much consequence either if that material were used, as it commonly is in what's called 'oral history', to elaborate points made, to expand or amplify detail and occasionally to correct it, to explore the experience of men in battle. But here, if these stories mattered, it was precisely because they went a long way to establishing what is to count as data, the 'facts' which written documents are commonly expected to provide. On one hand, this meant that the men whose story it is shaped the final narrative as decisively as official sources usually do. And more importantly still—indeed, essential for this book—what they said proved the only way of moving from what's written to what's written about; and even of finding the gap between the two. That there is such a gap seemed certain; ways of finding it were not. Truth, whatever else it might be, is more than a series of propositions, more than a tangle of syllogisms; it has, whatever else, a human face.

This is the point then to acknowledge and to thank those who made this book possible: first, those men who appear in the pages that follow; and no less others not named in this book, who gave no less of themselves, of their time, of their memories. And beyond that, others: the Australian War Memorial for a grant in aid awarded under the Australian War Memorial Research Grants Scheme and for permission to use photographs from their collection; Nancy Cogan; Bernie Perrett; my sister Marie Louise Uhr; Paul Ballard who drew the maps; Merv Alchin and the ABC for kind permission to reproduce this interview from *Survivors*, broadcast on Radio National; Christa Munns at Allen & Unwin who has saved me from innumerable blunders; finally, John McCarthy, editor of this series, whose touch is as firm as it is light. And whatever faults this book has now are surely my responsibility ...

1

Arrival

I

Mid-afternoon, Tuesday, 18 February 1941. Rain splintering the hot sunlight and the ship moving up through the narrow waters, low placid hills to one side, to the other a tangle of steel and concrete towering over the figures below.[1] Faces staring up, above naval whites, above khaki—*all that line of Pommies: big Brass;*[2] a civilian or two, and further back the grey striped turbans of the naval police. Somewhere down there a band is playing popular tunes; and from the ship the cheering and whistling turn into 'Roll Out the Barrel', the song swelling to fill all the space there is. A chinkle of coin falling on the dock; a Malay darting forward, wincing as he picks one up; and officials entering into the joke, reaching forward, wincing too: *saw the GOC—well, bloke with lots of red … dropped his, quicksmart.* The gangway clattering up for the Governor and his wife, for the Colonial Secretary, for the Rear Admiral Malaya; a speech of welcome; and the boots, thousands of them, scraping over the wood as the lines of laden men inch down. Gone now, that rush of sound: not a trace of it, not the singing nor the speeches, except perhaps in those distant stars. But in the archives some images survive; not exactly what you saw then probably, looking down from porthole or deck or lifeboat; nor those other eyes looking up. Another eye: another I: a little apart, a little to one side: caught the men on the wharf and the spaces around them; caught the stocky figure of the Governor; caught the circle behind him held in a conversation of their own; caught the most trivial gesture and gave it somehow a weight and meaning beyond the moment. Sir Geoffrey Layton, Commander in Chief China Station, scratches his chin in surprise, dismay, even deprecation; to his right an army officer, impassive, echoes the gesture; Group

Captain Brownell, OC RAAF Malaya, turns aside, arms folded. And the same camera caught you as well, waving from a crowded deck; caught the officers lined up for the Governor; caught you on the wharf holding a mascot, talking with two Malay ratings, lounging around the door of the train, 'inspecting the locomotive'. And once at least it caught something more: that precise moment when waiting men become rank and file; and even within that, unknowing, something else again:

> *2/3 Ordnance company—me, right at the back, in the centre. And that bloke there, he ... not many to remember him now, but that bloke, in training ... a grenade, someone dropped it. Pin out. He threw himself on it. Copped it of course.*[3]

Another hour, two perhaps, and the first two long trains took you out of sight, singing 'The Maori Farewell'. And by next day you'd gone most of you, into the towns and villages upcountry: Malacca, Port Dickson, Seremban, Kuala Lumpur.

Singapore was surprised, the *Straits Times* reported, but not 'unpleasantly surprised'. Still, its response was ambivalent: far less open, far less immediate than that singing and waving. As the paper reported it, noting the larger details, the afternoon was rather like a carnival: men everywhere, throwing down those heated coins, hanging over rails, sitting out of portholes, waving mascots—a bear, a pink and blue doll—conducting the singing with a shirt on the end of a stick, playing two-up in one corner of the deck, and breaking off to ask, 'When's the balloon going up?' Hard not to sense an element of self-parody somewhere here; inevitable perhaps when the AIF comes up against British phlegm. And hard too not to recognise the effort that journalist is making to hold his story at one level, dispassionately, especially since other meanings explicit in a phrase like 'unorthodox antics' will keep breaking in. That barracking, those heated coins—there's a very British eye on these, on 'the bronzed carefree orang puteh who sang such weird songs'. And a British eye, too, on the discipline as the AIF disembarked: no hurry or bustle; admirable discipline in this 'democratic army' where, as the *Straits Times* pointed out, 'a solicitor can be a private in a company commanded by one of his clerks' and where '25% of the men are held to be potential officers'. All the same, when British reinforcements arrived four months later, they came—Singapore radio is recorded as saying—'quietly, not singing and shouting and certainly not throwing coins

The AIF arriving in Malaya, 'for garrison duty' as the *Straits Times* reported; 'but,' it went on, 'you could tell from the tone of their voices as they told you, that they lived in hope of something more lively'. AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL NEGATIVE NUMBER 005901

to the high dignitaries on the wharf. And when the bands played, they listened, and clapped with appreciation at the end.' In brief, the *Straits Times* moves uneasily in that familiar tension between the 'larrikin digger'—the AIF in these pages would be perfectly at home in the Wazir—and the 'bronzed sons of Anzac'. If the

balance shifts, for the moment it's to the larrikin digger. And a story in the children's section of the *Straits Times*, the more convincing because the more oblique, makes the point very neatly. No accident that this—now that the Australians are coming to Singapore—should be about the kangaroos at the Ponggol Zoo, where Digger gives a party and talks about his experiences at home. No accident either that his pouch is full of souvenirs—a penknife, a mug with 'Brighton' on it, a handkerchief with 'forget me not' embroidered on a corner; that he gets some of 'Waltzing Matilda' wrong; that the party ends in a brawl. That, much of the reporting implies, is precisely what Singapore might expect.

That night the Governor broadcast a speech of welcome; Gordon Bennett, as GOC 8th Division, replied. That night, too, Malaya Radio had an eyewitness account of the *Queen Mary* arriving, the men disembarking—an account relayed back to Australia with a few interviews and a message or two. From one Australian officer: the voyage could not have been smoother or the food better; no need to worry about us. Behind him in the gathering darkness, butter crates, oranges, chicken bones spreading over the wide seas, floated home:

> *We could see it as we came close to Singapore—a trail of chicken and pork and all those goodies, just floating away. A British ship, see, and British kitchen staff—they knew that if it wasn't all gone when they hit port they'd never get the same amount again. Officers. We'd been eating Windsor sausage and boiled eggs until we were sick of it. Someone went down—Tynan, I think; found for two bob you could get a box ... three chickens to a box. Blew ourselves silly over it.*[1]

Other voices: Private Martin had a word for his daughter in Sydney; in the background someone yelled to Lieutenant General Bond, GOC Malaya, 'This is going to make a lot of extra work for you, brass hat'. And for the next few days the AIF is everywhere in the local press. Bennett is interviewed again, this time with General Murray-Lyon; 10th Australian General Hospital (AGH) settles into Malacca. And across the pages men march from the padang, play with their kangaroo mascot, eat in messhuts, go sightseeing, peg out washing, visit a Chinese temple. On Active Service: yet ordinary, domestic, settled: a presence. And, as editorial comment makes clear, neither in Singapore nor Malaya is there any doubt at all why the Australians are there.

II

For over twenty years, for defence planner and politician alike, any problem about British security in the Far East had been posed in terms of naval power, of the Main Fleet which could—or would—protect imperial interests half a world away: the Singapore Base for all that time had acted as guarantee of that.[5] On one hand, it had been designed to hold out for 70 days, the 70 days that the fleet would take to reach Singapore from the Atlantic once the Washington Conference had put paid to any idea of a permanent fleet out east. But even if no ships arrived, Singapore would become more important, not less. Its very existence after all, while the garrison held the enemy off, should prevent him moving freely on the sea lanes. And that in turn—surely—would mean his having to despatch a very strong force, stronger perhaps than he could afford, to succeed. But the Base as it had been designed was one thing; the Base as it was finally built another. Simply as a dockyard it was inadequate—unable, as the British had to admit to the United States in February 1941, to deal with ships like HMS *Barham* or HMS *Illustrious*. That would not have mattered had it worked as a 'fortress', the fortified base that the Singapore strategy itself assumed; but the fundamentals of defence had shifted in those years and shifted again as the Base was opened in 1938. The Chiefs of Imperial Defence, instead of finding a different answer to what, with one of the terms of the equation changed, was now a new problem, still had only the old answer—Singapore.

When the Base opened, the greater part of its defences—at least the more obvious part—were the coastal batteries: those guns of legend, turned out to sea. Twenty years earlier the defence planners had rejected the notion that an enemy might come overland through Johore, not least because that in itself assumed that he was free of the South China Sea. But after the war games of the mid-1930s that was generally taken for granted—in Percival's Appreciation of 1937, in Major General Dobbie's a year later. And once airpower became significant, the defence of the Base had to extend beyond the Island, even to building new airfields in Malaya itself. And if the RAF was reluctant to keep a large number of squadrons in the country permanently—one of the Service's most fundamental doctrines was that the airforce had to be strategically mobile—this meant a chain of landing fields, stretching back into India, designed precisely to allow any reinforcing squadrons to fly in, squadrons intended to destroy the invader before he reached

shore. But these fields then had to be defended, to be held secure against an enemy who might use them to mount his attack on Singapore. And that in turn meant deploying army units in some strength north of the Island. Since by 1937 it was clear—as General Dobbie then GOC Malaya argued—that the Main Fleet would not arrive within 70 days and that the period of relief was 'indefinite', defence planning depended from that point on both airforce and army.

That year in the Malayan combined exercises, Dobbie, then GOC, established that the enemy could attack the Base through Johore: it was quite possible to land on the east coast during the northeast monsoon. In his Appreciation eleven months later, Dobbie's Chief Staff Officer, Colonel A.E. Percival explored further the kinds of operations Command might expect: even though he mentioned possible landings in Penang, in the Kra isthmus and at Kota Bahru, he saw these primarily as holding operations, subsidiary to a main offensive on the east coast further to the south. As he'd summed it up the year before, the general problem had been to prevent the enemy from establishing himself on any of the landing grounds, a task that—as he pointed out—the army could not at the moment carry out. If the enemy did land at Penang or Kra, he argued, it would be to cut the lines of communication and to establish airfields to attack Singapore from. Nonetheless, whatever the strength of this air assault, as far as Singapore was concerned the main attack—as Percival saw it—would come from the southeast coast. And a year later Dobbie supported that argument to conclude that an enemy would come in at Mersing, or up the Endau River to Kahang and down the Kluang–Ayer Hitam Road, or up the Sedili Besar to Mawai, and then down the Kota Tinggi Road. As for a landing on the west coast, this—if it happened—would be, he argued, primarily diversionary and in Johore again—perhaps at Pontian Kechil, perhaps Muar, perhaps Batu Pahat. To hold Singapore meant holding Penang; it meant, more importantly still, holding Johore. And this is why Dobbie pressed for a fortified line, running from Kota Tinggi to Kulai, from Kulai to Mount Pulai. But once the period before relief was extended formally to 180 days as it was a year later, then clearly one might expect the Japanese to mount a deliberate attack, more protracted and more leisurely than the *coup-de-main* authorities had been thinking about earlier. Even then, as Dobbie's successor Lieutenant General Bond pointed out, he still had only the few pill boxes around Kota Tinggi: little

enough, so he wrote, when the situation had so changed that he would have to defend the whole of Malaya.

Five months later in August 1940 with Indo-China in Vichy hands and the Japanese controlling Haiphong harbour and five airfields in the north, the Chiefs of Staff in their Far East Appreciation—the first since 1937—took it for granted that the Fleet could not be counted on. The RAF, they were to argue now, had to be responsible for the defence of Singapore. And when a few months later it was decided to establish a system of unified command for British forces in the Far East, then to this position they appointed not a military nor a naval but an RAF officer: Air Chief Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham. And from November 1940, Brooke-Popham was responsible for the strategic control of the British land and air forces in Malaya, British Borneo, Burma and Hong Kong. The General Officers Commanding, Malaya, Burma and Hong Kong, and the Air Officer Commanding, Far East, were all to be subordinate to him. And at the same time, the control of naval operations was to remain directly under the Commander-in-Chief, China. The Base was still central—not, as Brooke-Popham himself was to point out, as an 'isolated fortress', but as a 'naval base that [could] be used by His Majesty's ships'. And that demanded 'the resisting power of an army with the striking power of an Air Force'. If—the Appreciation went on—the Japanese had anything like the force that British intelligence was assuming, perhaps 600 aircraft, ten infantry divisions, about ten capital ships, then Malaya would need three times the number of squadrons that it had and about twice the number of infantry brigades. Easy enough to redeploy in Malaya 2/East Surreys withdrawn that very month from Shanghai; and easy enough to send in two brigades of 11th Indian Division a month later. But reinforcing squadrons proved much harder to come by, particularly late in 1940. And as Churchill was to find, the United States—far from agreeing to base part of its Pacific Fleet in Singapore—was refusing to accept that Singapore was at all essential to the Malay Barrier, or even that, with the Japanese in Indo-China, it could be defended at all.

Over the next six months, complex as Japanese diplomatic negotiations proved to be, those of the Anglo-Saxon powers and the Dutch were equally so. Indeed, any agreement proved so tentative, any commitment so qualified, that late in 1941 at the end of the sixth conference, when it was agreed that Japan would probably strike at Malaya before the Netherlands East Indies, neither the British nor the Dutch—even up to 7 December—could assume

that any attack would bring the United States in: just as to the end Britain remained unwilling to promise that, were the enemy to move against the East Indies, then it would declare war too. At the end of July, London had asked Australia for a division and two squadrons, which the Chiefs of Staff, strongly committed to the Middle East, flatly refused, even after reading the Appreciation, an Appreciation very much at variance with Churchill's covering note. (Churchill had wanted the Appreciation amended before it went out.) By the end of October, however, stressing that Australia would itself have to ensure the defence of Malaya, they were urging that a brigade of the newly formed 8th Division be sent across, at least for a time. And this on 23 December Churchill accepted, without, however, revealing much at all about the fine and increasingly precarious point on which the entire strategy balanced.

Initially the AIF was to be used as command reserve; to be sent where Malaya Command decided: either to the north as Command intended in May, or more definitely to Kedah supporting 11th Indian Division; and this Percival ratified when he took over as GOC in May 1941. At the end of August, however, he ordered the brigade to the east coast, to replace Brigadier Paris's 12th Indian Brigade around Endau–Mersing. In part this was, so Percival was to write, a response to Bennett's urging: with the 27th Brigade arriving on 15 August, he now wanted the AIF—like the other two divisions—to have a definite area to be responsible for. But in part, also, it came out of a general reorganisation that Percival was working on, a reorganisation made the more urgent by the Japanese military occupation of southern Indo-China at the end of July. Admittedly the Japanese already controlled Haiphong harbour and the railway as far as the Chinese border; its military had five airfields at its disposal. But this move into the south was hardly accidental, nor was the agreement signed with Vichy France—for one thing it meant Singapore was within striking distance of Japanese aircraft; the naval bomber the 'Betty', for instance, had a range of over 2000 miles, twice the distance to Singapore and back, the 'Sally' and the Navy O a range of just over half that. But there is nothing in these new plans of Percival to suggest that the airfields in northern Malaya were no longer as important. If army units moved—as the AIF did—the general dispositions remained the same, much as they were until 8 December. Command, it's sometimes argued, was still rejecting any notion that the Japanese would come from the north, overland; relying—so the story goes—on the 'impenetrable' jungle.[8] But even if that were true—and after

August such arguments are rare, even in journalists' reports—by late 1941 Percival was expecting, even planning, for a move through Thailand. Indeed the very fact of Matador—the planned pre-emptive strike to hold Singora—proves that. So he had the 11th Indian Division deployed near Jitra close to the border, with units in Kroh prepared for a move into Thailand up the Patani Road to prevent the enemy cutting in behind the rest of the Division to the west. But, committed as he was to the defence of the airfields as the defence scheme had determined months before, Percival—or his subordinate commanders—had to place their troops in areas unsuited, either strategically or tactically, to the kind of defensive battle he had to anticipate. At Jitra, for instance, in spite of swamp and hill, the defending troops were awkwardly placed; they were at least forward of Alor Star, a field important particularly as a staging point on the route to India. And on the northeast coast, at Gong Kedah, at Machang and Kota Bahru, the airfields were so close to the sea that Command had to order its forces to meet the invader on the beaches, a tactic that rarely worked. At Kuantan to the south, the miles of beach and the rivers running into the sea made whatever dispositions 22nd Indian Brigade took up thoroughly unsound, since the troops could not cover all possible approaches: not the beach, the river with its ferry and the road from Pekan, still less the rivers to the south, or points like Gambang where paratroops could make a landing. And as for the AIF in east Johore, over three months, the unit positions shifted a little, particularly as 27th Brigade settled in. But the final dispositions, the dispositions that the Australian units had taken up by 8 December—these were determined as much by geographic as by strategic realities.

III

North from Singapore the road out of Johore Bahru winds through rubber estates, through the great Lee pineapple estates towards Kota Tinggi 30 miles away. Not much there—a few huts, a concrete bridge; and then ten miles on, a side road to the small village of Mawai on the bank of the Sedili Besar. Between the road and the coast small hills rise 100 feet or so, to fall away into swamp and forest reserves cut by rivers like the Sedili Besar, running into the tidal swamps along the coast. West, the country is more broken, rising steeply, though the hills themselves are no great height, perhaps 500 feet. And from Kota Tinggi up towards Jemaluang, the

road runs straight and undeviating through virgin jungle. At the Crossroads a little south of Jemaluang (looking more like a junction road on most maps), a road runs west towards Kluang and the new aerodrome: the old road this, important even now when the monsoon cuts the Mersing–Kota Tinggi route. But the main highway continues north, up past Jemaluang—a few shops, a few houses, the big Chinese bell on the stone base outside the school, the police station and the Public Works Department. Hills now to east and west, and the workings of tin mines; rubber estates on both sides of the road right down to the bitumen: Joo Lye, Nithsdale, Hoon Gin, Anglo North.

Near Mersing the road comes closer to the coast about two miles away; and then into the town itself, the river bending away to the west into higher ground. Just a fishing port Mersing, clustering rather untidily around its single hill—hospital, rest house, barracks; and to the east the sea, and the great brown sails of the boats moving out into the dawn. Five years ago the road stopped there; now it goes on, over the new concrete bridge, up to Endau 23 miles north. Between the road and the coast, there's more rubber, and rubber to the west of the road as well: rubber and swamp and lalang, now and then grassy patches and thick jungle, right down to the sea. That looks hard to cut through, but there are always tracks: animal some of them, others winding into timber camp or small kampong or solitary Chinese hut. At Endau the road ends on the south bank of the wide Endau River, with its opaque grey-green waters; over the river, Pahang; north again, Kuantan 100 miles away.[7]

Nearly a year ago, Command had recognised that the enemy could land almost anywhere on those long eastern beaches; not only would it be hard to prevent them coming in at every place, but any attempt to hold the beaches—given that there would never be enough troops—might end in a 'purely linear defence with insufficient troops in hand for counter-attack'. But whatever the AIF determined on, the essentials of the tactical planning had been laid down already by the decision that the beaches were to be held, even though that might mean a purely linear defence. In the Appreciation he wrote in August as his troops were moving east—his only formal statement of how he saw the position he was faced with—Brigadier H.B. Taylor commanding 22nd Brigade wrote as though a seaborne landing was a foregone conclusion. And this the deployment of the six AIF battalions fully supports. Two battalions of Taylor's own brigade were placed right on the coast, the

third further south with perimeter defence for units mutually supporting each other; the second brigade intended for counter-attack and defence around the Crossroads: the whole deployment not unlike that of the units to the north around Kota Bahru or around the border near Jitra. But where Dobbie four years before had regarded Mersing, Endau and Sedili Besar as critical, Taylor noted six places at least where the enemy might come in, all of them providing openings on to the Mersing–Johore Bahru Road if the beach defences were overcome. What mattered, he argued, was first the Endau River, since that was a way to the Kahang landing field, and presumably to the Kluang–Ayer Hitam Road running east–west across the peninsula; and second, the Endau–Mersing–Jemaluang Road, since that runs straight to Johore Bahru and Singapore. The Japanese, he thought, would thrust between Kuala Jemaluang and Mersing five miles to the north, moving to cut the road and make south—a thrust supported perhaps by another landing north of Mersing and another again up the Endau River by way of Point Kempit. And if his dispositions confirm this, they indicate too how he planned to counter the invading enemy.

Endau, Taylor covered with a single company, much as his predecessor had done—the 120-odd men of C Company 2/20 replacing a company of 2/Argylls. And two more companies of 2/20 he used in much the same way, deployed along the line of the Mersing River facing north, with instructions to provide for mobile detachments to play a delaying role over on the north bank, and the battalion responsible for counter-attack against an enemy moving south by way of Mayong Estate. Like the Indian battalions around Kota Bahru then, Taylor had men placed to meet a threat from the north. But with three companies watching Endau and the road to the south, he deployed three times that number around what his Appreciation refers to as the 'Kuala Jemaluang–Mersing line'. And here his deployment proves more intricate, determined in part at least by Brooke-Popham's directives that the enemy was to be held and defeated on the beaches—a directive that implies first that, at its landing, the enemy force would be most vulnerable and, second, that it could be destroyed by the RAF. That is why Taylor placed two battalions at least on the beaches, the third with perimeter defence for units mutually supporting each other; the second brigade for counter-attack.

So, 2/20's Don Company held the cliffs above the beach south of Mersing; the four companies of 2/18 went into battle positions along the coast: Battalion HQ at 'Palm Grove', two companies

Brigadier H.B. Taylor, a captain in 19 Battalion in the First AIF, commanding 22nd Brigade of the 8th Division in the Second. AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL NEGATIVE NUMBER 005511

covering the road, two the shore, spaced out along the beach with 15 Battery 4/Anti-Tank and its 75s turned to beach defence. But at the very least if—as Brooke-Popham's orders implied—the troops on the beach were not to be shifted, that meant strong fortifications. For some years now, the east coast had been critical in defence thinking; and at Kota Bahru the troops had at least pill

boxes, and in the end double wiring. But to the south where the AIF was deployed, apart from the odd pill box at Mawai and one on the Kota Tinggi Road, nothing had been done. Near Mersing, for instance, 2/18 found almost nothing: only 'a few odd section posts', as Charles O'Brien was to say, 'most of which we did not like, and a single double-apron fence around the beach at high water mark'. A few weeks later, and that company had each platoon post surrounded by three double-apron and dannert fences; the very beaches were covered by defensive and tactical wiring, itself covered by a Vickers; the whole company area protected by at least 500 mines with even more in the ground between company and company. And to the north again, much the same, with Don Company 2/20 wiring the mouths of creeks, laying anti-personnel mines both there and along the cliff, siting caches of bombs and cases of grenades and ammunition near the track for what one platoon commander remembers Brigadier Taylor calling a 'do or die effort'. And if that would take care of close defence, field guns commanded the approaches both from sea and land: guns from 19 Battery and 20 Battery of 2/10 Field Regiment with their Observation Posts (OPs) on hills overlooking Mersing and the road north, and at night a searchlight, operating with wide sweeps out to sea. Formidable enough to explain why Colonel Koba might tell his Army HQ that if 'we had attacked that position from the sea, we couldn't possibly have captured it'.

Taylor's 2/19 had also to answer for the road south, from Mersing to a point just forward of the Crossroads. But the Crossroads itself, so Taylor argued, was not the responsibility of 22nd Brigade, nor Bukit Langkap up the Endau River, 'since it does not appear sound to begin the defence with a detachment from the forward brigade and finish it with a detachment of the reserve brigade'. Not that the 2/19's Lieutenant Colonel Anderson was too concerned about the road at any point. There was a chance, admittedly, that if the Japanese came in overwhelming force then they would move tanks and artillery down the road; but since they could land anywhere on the coast, Anderson—so his unit historian claims—was more concerned about lightly armed infantry coming in from the beaches or south down the jungle tracks. To cover the coast, or at least to give fair warning of any landing, he placed a standing patrol at Tenggorah lighthouse, halfway between Mersing and the mouth of the Sungei Sedili. For the defence of the Crossroads—his immediate task—he deployed only his most forward company astride the road, the others to east and to west

of it, all far enough from the road itself to cover the tracks running through rubber and jungle. They were all ordered to construct trench systems protected by extensive field works: systems with weapon pits and crawl trenches elaborate enough for the walls to be revetted, the roof supported by setts and boarding: 16 Platoon Don Company was to use twenty yards of wire triple coiled and a double dannert fence in its area; 17 Platoon described even its communication trenches as a 'complete job, triple coil, and double dannert apron fence'. The central battalion positions were protected further by minefields and tank obstacles; and just as 2/18 and 2/20 had two batteries of 2/10 Field Regiment in support, so 2/19 had its 60 Battery deployed with a battery from 4/Anti-Tank covering the road and any re-entrants from the tin mines to the west. To the south again, 27th Brigade—initially intended to release 22nd Brigade for the Middle East—had, even before that relief was cancelled, moved its battalions east: 2/29 to take over both Kahang and Kluang airfields, with a company to go forward to Bukit Langkap—part of what the Brigade was to call Force Y—'when the Coy at Endau is unable to hold the Japanese': their axis of advance, it was suggested, along the Sungei Endau–Sembrong River. And since any enemy coming that route would be bound for the airfields on the Kluang–Jemaluang Road, this placed that road and its approaches under a single command. The third battalion of 27th Brigade 2/26 went down to Sedili, taking over the defence of the Boom from C Company 2/19, which in turn had replaced C Company 2/18; and taking over too the armed tongkans that patrolled the river, protecting the Boom. Apart from here, though, the coastline was defended primarily by Taylor's 22nd Brigade; and this, at least by the time its Operation Instruction no. 1 was issued at 1200 hours on 7 December, Brigade was thinking of as three separate forces: Endau, Mersing, Jemaluang.

It goes without saying that few of the maps the battalions were initially working to proved much use: even to a mountain range—as 2/26 noted—placed 3000 yards west of its correct position. Consequently, all the battalions gave over a good deal of time to mapping the country around, superimposing on the ordnance maps a network of tracks and roads from Kahang to the coast. The battalions continually extended and refined this, cutting new tracks—like one 2/19 Pioneers marked out from the Tenggorah lighthouse to Jemaluang, or another which ran north from the Kluang Road to the back of Gibraltar and then northeast to

Nithsdale Estate; and exploring more thoroughly those they'd found. In late December 16 Platoon Don Company 2/26 came upon six long attap huts about a year old, as well as a concealed tunnel into the mountain with a massive double door.

Only Intelligence summaries will indicate how Brigade—or Division—was reading this kind of material; and though few of these survive, even those are perhaps enough to show how closely patrols were observing and working over the country. For instance, 20 Battery 2/10 Field Regiment reported on a recent reconnaissance of the track through the Johore North Estate, noting that carriers could move right along it and along the subsidiary tracks; that the rubber gave little cover from air observation; that the jungle at the end of the track was swampy and unsuitable for carriers.[8] A second track, placed 'west of Johore North and Anglo Johore Estates', a placing that brings it close to Bukit Sawah, could be used by carriers but not motor transport; large bodies of troops could ford the creek that crossed it. And, as another report indicates, all these patrols had a sharp eye for any activity in their areas: 2/20 for instance reports on 13 November that 'the Japanese stores at Endau—like the Japanese wharf—appear to have been deserted in the last two or three days': the shutters on those shops were still up two days later.

IV

This, of course, raises a more critical question still: how Intelligence was expecting the Japanese to move, and how the AIF—and Malaya Command—planned to meet it. As 22nd Brigade had moved into east Johore it was as 'shock troops' trained for a 'jungle campaign of camouflage, stealth, ambush and invisible guerillas'.[9] And if this is how Bennett saw it, then he was already thinking of his troops as highly mobile: though given the area they were coming into, they would—and indeed his phrase 'many Tobruks' implies as much—be working on the principle of perimeter defence. But if there seems no doubt about the strength and efficiency of its fortifications, it proves less easy to determine how far the AIF were the experts in jungle warfare that the early publicists made out. Not much of the Australian training programs survives either—not the finer details, still less any broadly argued scheme. And if the training manuals indicate something of the conventional techniques—for deploying a section say—the texts say very little about the general principles involved, nor how these might be

adapted to a different terrain. The 2/30 historian, writing almost immediately after the surrender, remarks—with a clear thrust at Malaya Command—that no definite scheme or system of training had been prepared for troops new to the country. If this is true—Brigadier Stewart of 2/Argylls was to write in this context that 'Higher Commanders and their Staffs had no clear idea on how a jungle battle should be fought'—then whatever the AIF worked out was largely its own doing, by men efficient enough, as exercises proved, to teach the Indian and the British battalions to their north, and quick enough to grasp any chance of learning more themselves. The elephant patrol into Jelebu in April, a patrol open to 30 men from 22nd Brigade, was probably unique. Still, if the 2/19 historian is right, then for this battalion at least it led to the kind of patrol where men moved out for five days with a rifle and 40 rounds, a pair of socks, pyjama pants and six pounds of food. And, given what those 30 men had learned in April about building shelters and crossing rivers, it is probably no accident that three months later AIF Intelligence patrols were formally working with the Sakai, learning to make a raft, to live in the jungle without betraying their position, to ambush enemy encampments without being seen. 'They have taken to conditions very well,' Brigadier Taylor was to write of his troops, but even towards the end of November he could see more to be done, in 'direction and rate of movement' particularly, to adapt to the 'special conditions here'.

If 2/19 is any indication, then for the AIF training had been exhaustive and extensive, with particular emphasis on close contact work, on speed: for that battalion, part apparently of a tightly reasoned program designed for the kind of fighting which demanded speed and initiative. And later, company by company, the battalion moved into all sorts of country, practising the techniques of attack and counter-attack, modifying what it had learned months before in the open Australian countryside; techniques no less important now that the troops were committed to defence, and indicating that, like Stewart, the AIF recognised that, in the jungle, static defence had no hope of success; not without a clear field of fire, without secure flanks, without secure communications.

Further, the exercises mounted in October and November indicate how that training was put into practice.[10] In the Kluang paratroop exercise at the end of October, for instance, Command dropped something like a battalion not so much on the landing field itself as around it, even as far west as Ayer Hitam. Lieutenant Colonel Galleghan, as CO the defending force, kept his 2/30

companies mobile, deploying them to catch the enemy in that vulnerable period between landing and assembling into a striking force. And similarily, in their tactical exercise a few days later, the scenario 22nd Brigade were presented with—a scenario very close to what General Dobbie had sketched out years earlier—had the enemy landing two divisions along the entire Brigade front: at Endau, north of Sandy Point near Mersing, and again south of the Jemaluang River; and at the Sedili Boom. And if the single narrative that survives is anything to go by, these troops were expected to move south in small groups. To counter this, 2/19 deployed one company with anti-tank guns forward at Hock Tack Estate, the other back towards Jemaluang. But without the syndicate reports there is nothing to show what new problems this exercise posed, or what solutions it pointed up, though as the 2/19 historian remembers, both the banks of the Mersing River and Gibraltar Hill were significant in such tactical planning. Other exercises ranged more widely still. One, for instance, was to posit a first Japanese landing in Thailand to secure airfields and simultaneously a second landing at Mersing from a base in Borneo: landings which developed into a two-pronged advance at once down the Jemaluang–Kota Tinggi Road and along the Kluang Road to Batu Pahat. Again, in mid-November, a 27th Brigade TEWTS had the Japanese invading from Thailand and then, with paratroops taking Kluang and Kahang, coming south to Kuala Lumpur. And in a Divisional exercise a few days after that, troops from all six battalions moved again to counter a coastal landing somewhere near Mersing. But until the balloon went up, both brigades were, as two 2/18 privates put it, with an ironic glance at the Rats of Tobruk:

> Tucked away in dugouts
> Somewhere on the map;
> Huddled up like rabbits,
> Waiting for the Jap ...
> Wiring miles of jungle,
> Laying mines galore
> Waiting for our tucker;
> This, my lads, is war.
> Watching planes zoom over,
> Gazing out to sea,
> Putting on the billy,
> Making cups of tea ...[11]

Such garrison work inevitably went very much against the grain: 'Menzies mannequins', *Truth* or the Melbourne *Sun* had called them months earlier; and neither that, nor the material that the *Australian Women's Weekly's* Adele Shelton Smith sent back in April and May, had shown much understanding of what the troops were about. 'We have had enough of travelling journalists,' one officer wrote home: and—more tartly—'they won't get any great reception from the men here, but I'm sure they will enjoy the trip'.[12] And if the 'glamour of fascinating Malaya' was what might one expect from the *Weekly*, it remains that the more staid papers—the *Sydney Morning Herald*, for instance—were writing in the same style: predictable text, predictable photographs, smiling men playing two-up in a rickshaw, or more warlike, with bren and rifle. But about September, as the AIF took over Johore there was something of a shift: 'the boys' gave way to 'experts in jungle warfare'. Whether this represented any real shift in the men themselves is something else again. If the unit papers are any indication, nothing much changed: the pages were still the same: images from the tourist, the exotic—oxen and monkeys and palms; the familiar—men running along a beach, or posing for the camera with a touching, almost Victorian, formality. Not unlike the photographs that came home, of course, spilling now out of old letters, pulled out of the back of a drawer: people in a landscape, people and places that had come to matter; hills and rivers and beaches, huts and children and coolies, men and women gathered for some festival, and always near the centre, those men in slouch hats; men smiling out at the camera, waving from rocks, from a boat; men digging trenches, poring over a map. Now and then a note on the back: 'unloading supplies at Sedili River', or '2/19 cricket team. Never beaten. That's me with pads on.' More often, nothing; the place and the faces anonymous now as rain. But usually the stress falls on the everyday: on the day's work—route marching, roll call, bullring, exercises in living and moving through swamp and jungle; on the food—'I've eaten so many tinned herrings my stomach's going in and out with the tide'; on the discomforts like heatrash and hives. And in later memoirs where such conventional antics as rickshaw racing or going 'troppo' are mentioned at all, it is to recognise these as ways of breaking the frustrations and monotonies of camp life.

As for the men themselves, if the 206 members of a single company are anything to go by—the men of A Company, 2/18—then the average age was 26; 30 per cent were married or at least listed

'wife' as next of kin; and 70 per cent had joined up immediately after the fall of France, Lieutenant Colonel Varley having been appointed to form and command the battalion on 20 June 1940.[13] Undoubtedly, such figures hide as much as they reveal. If the average age of 2/3 Reserve Motor Transport formed on a British war establishment was closer to 45, that of 2/10 Field Regiment was nearer 21, though at least five gunners had been born last century. And behind those figures, individuals: Peter Assheton from 2/19, perhaps 70 when the *Queen Mary* sailed; Chick Warden fourteen years and ten months when he enlisted, certainly the youngest in the battalion. Assheton, so the story goes, had fought in the Sudan with Kitchener. And if his experience stretches farthest back, at least two men from 2/3 RMT had been to the Boer War; and from 22nd Brigade alone any number to the First World War half a generation later. Sam Thompson fought at Gallipoli; so did Jack Bourke, and Bennett himself; and J.R. Broadbent his senior administrative officer, Alf Derham his ADMS and John Sherriff 2/4 CCS; Arthur Cameron 2/18 had served in the Camel Corps; and any number of men in France, like Cyril Butt, Joe O'Keefe, Bob Henrys, Rowley Oakes, Jock Gillespie, W. Harold Lawler, Paddy O'Shea, Wal Bracher with 19 Battalion like Jack Aldham's father and Charlie Marsh's and Brigadier Taylor himself. Charles Anderson served with the King's African Rifles, Leo Angel with the Greek forces, George Wilkins, a cook with 2/12 Field Company in this war, had been a Captain—and won a Military Cross—in the last; Jimmy Larkin had been a POW of the Bulgarians, and Paddy O'Shea of the Germans. And closer again, an intricate web of relationships: brothers, cousins, fathers, sons. Lieutenant Colonel Varley had one son with 2/19, another in the Middle East; both Sergeant Ambrose and his son fought with 2/30, Eric Rogers and his father with 2/19; the elder Terry was with the Pay Corps, the younger with 10 AGH; Ron Rudd joined 2/19, his father 2/3 RMT; Tom McInerney was with 2/29, his father with 2/30. The Nicols brothers joined 2/26, the Nippards 2/29, Roy, Bob and Laurie Davis 2/12 Field Company; four Watts brothers, the Tullys and a cousin 2/10 Field Regiment; 2/18 shows the wider pattern—Harrises, Holts, Wetherells, Easeys, Waterfords, Rushs, Jakinses, Colensos, Suttons, Thuells; Charlie Michell joined 2/18 while his brother Ray went to 2/30; G. St. Leon's brother Bill to 2/19, which had itself 29 sets of brothers. The Tugan lifesavers went to the gunners in a body, joining clerks, and lawyers, a fisherman, a kangaroo shooter, a windmill expert, a signwriter, a professional musician—

men, like most of the Regiment, from southeast Queensland. And for most units that regional basis holds good. If 2/19 drew from the Riverina, 2/18 deliberately, as Varley stressed at his own farewell, chose men from north and northwest New South Wales, 400 even before the battalion sailed. And men enlisted together from small towns, going from Grong-Grong, say, to 2/19—Wollard, Leitch, Ferguson, McNeil, McKenzie, O'Connor, Spencer; from Barraba to 2/18—Cutmore, Kelly, Irwin, O'Keefe, Saunders, McGregor, Brown, Freeman, Jackson, Myers, Maher, Robinson, White, Barton, Capel, Carter, Crowley: the local papers reported the functions.

Now and then in these last months one catches a glimpse of them. Towards the end of October an Australian journalist goes up to Mersing, right up to Palm Beach and 2/18 positions.[11] Not a great deal to what she writes back: a sentence or two on the horrors of the jungle, on apes and panthers and hooded cobras; a gesture towards the warning scribbled by those miles of barbed wire entanglements on the sand; a paragraph on the men themselves—stripped, grimly and determinedly digging their breastworks of fortifications, carving through the jungle to key positions hewn out by brute strength and doggedness. Still, she went out on an exercise with one of the platoons—not for long, only an hour or so, but there's something there, even in the off-hand prose: 'the leader hacking his way through virgin undergrowth', 'the small detachments dividing up and skirting around' towards the hill they had to capture, the rest following. And about the same time, an American journalist comes up from Singapore for a day or so. Somewhere on a jungle river, he comes upon a party of Australians, loading oranges and singing 'Sweet Adeline' very loudly and somewhat off-key. And this time it's all there in a phrase or two: the song breaking out over the silent water; the Chinese and Malays on the muddy bank; the 'brown, lean half-naked bodies' and the golden fruit against the dark green broadleaved jungle—as strange and as innocent as a Rousseau painting.

2

'She's on!'

I

Remember the rain? Sweeping in like darkness from the China Sea ... falling through leaves; falling into creeks and streams, breaking the still surface; water on water; moving out over the land, brown and dark, returning to the sea. Falling through tarpaulin and palm branch; through sheet iron and leaves: into dugout and trench, into the pits around the guns. Rain, beating down; beating down on back and bare legs, on shapeless hats and sodden boots. Rain on bodies grey with sweat; lugging coils of wire, around to the weapon pits, down to the flats where the creeks empty into the sea; felling trees; wrenching logs into place; laying mines. Out to sea nothing moves; nothing but wind and cloud and water. Along the beach casuarinas bend to the wind; the praus wait empty on the beach, fishermen wait too: in time the wind will change. Rain as you dig, tanktraps and trenches—'barely time to spit'; the air thick with it, and more streaming from the sodden sky. A pause: the air shifts, clears a little. Drops go on falling from the trees, running down the thin elegancies of the rubber and the more complex geometries of the jungle: heavy on those patrolling along the track, towards Gibraltar; as you push through the brown swamp towards the coast; as you slide towards the beach. October. November: the first week, the second ...

No need to rehearse again that complex of reasons why Japan might finally decide to extend its East Asian war to west and south; no need either to follow out again the twists and tangles of the diplomatic workings. By mid-November, barely a week after Sabura Kurusu had reached Washington, war seemed close, perhaps inevitable: *Time* magazine was offering ten to nine on, short odds in anyone's language.[1] True, observers had argued that already

more than once in the last year—in late July particularly, and again in August. And that whole context of doubtful certainty is perhaps enough to explain why in this November the Thai consul in Singapore could argue that Japan could not move until March; the American military mission in Chungking, a mission led by Brigadier General John Magruder, suggest April; the Chinese Foreign Minister believed that even though Japan was bound to do something, the Japanese themselves did not know what, not until the Russian front collapsed; and the United States naval observer in Singapore pointed out that if Japan were to go to war against Britain and the United States, then Russia could invade Manchuria, something Japan had feared for years.[2] Still, by the end of November in Washington at least, some of those ambiguities fell away. On 25 November in a memo to President Roosevelt and the inner cabinet, Colonel Bratton of the Army–Navy MAGIC group, a group that routinely intercepted and broke the Japanese diplomatic codes, predicted that Japan could be expected to act on or about 29 November: after that, as the translation phrased it, 'things are automatically going to happen'. That, with the report that afternoon from sources in Shanghai reporting 25 000 Japanese troops boarding transports in the Yangtze River, is why on 27 November the United States Chiefs of Staff moved to order all aircraft carriers and half the Army planes out of Pearl Harbor, sending them as reinforcements to Wake and Midway. More importantly still, Roosevelt authorised a war warning to all United States commanders in the Pacific. To the military, what was sent was just 'hostile action possible at any moment'; to the naval commanders something rather more direct: a statement that the organisation of Japanese task forces suggested an amphibious operation, aimed at the Philippines, at the Thai or Kra peninsula or possibly Borneo. Whether the MAGIC material could be interpreted as specifically as the Chief of Naval Operations had implied is another matter: MAGIC had suggested no more than, at the least, a break in diplomatic operations, and probably war. And the one question, the urgent question now, was precisely the one that MAGIC could not answer: where would Japan strike first?

To the north of the Japanese islands lay Russia and the Siberian Army; to the west China; to the south Singapore, the Philippines and the East Indies; to the east Hawaii and the United States Pacific Fleet: in the official view, 'an elaborate encirclement by hostile powers', an encirclement that General Tojo was arguing Japan had to break through. Given the neutrality pact that Yosuke

Matsuoka as Japanese Foreign Minister had negotiated with Stalin the previous April, the chances were on a strike south; but then, these were the days when the German Army was at the gates of Moscow. In London, Anthony Eden, the British Foreign Secretary, was arguing that an attack on Russia was most likely, then perhaps a move into Thailand or from Indo-China north towards the Burma Road; Malaya he believed to be quite safe. At the same time, Chiang Kai-Chek, so Churchill told his War Cabinet, held that Japan would attack the Yunnan, primarily to cut the Burma Road and close the last land supply route to China. A day or so later, the British Joint Intelligence Committee agreed with Chiang; and that is precisely what observers in China were thinking—what China feared most of all, one of them wrote, was that the United States might make some sort of deal with Kurusu, perhaps with British support. In Manila it was taken for granted that the Philippines would be attacked: the military expected it and most commentators agreed, arguing that Japan could hardly risk an attack on either the East Indies or Malaya without dealing with the threat posed by the strong American position on the left flank. Again, that Japan would move against Thailand had always seemed likely. As a touchstone for peace or war, it had come to have something like the role of an eastern Poland; and like Poland it was a corridor, another way for the Japanese to move against the Burma Road, to bring the China Incident to an end once and for all. Once in Thailand, Japan could easily threaten the British in Malaya; indeed, once across the Kra isthmus, Singapore became almost irrelevant—as did the Dutch in the East Indies, come to that. What the British would do then was another question, a question raised as persistently at the end of the month as at the beginning: to General Wavell on 4 November, and to Air Chief Marshal Brooke-Popham on 3 December. If Japan were to move west, whether the United States would stay out or come in was another question again: even on 7 December the Chiefs of Staff could not be certain that the United States would enter the war if the Japanese attacked Malaya or the East Indies.

Of course, if there were a hard body of evidence about Japanese troop movements, that might have settled the matter. And while the Japanese decision for war—a provisional decision, admittedly—was taken at a conference at Imperial Headquarters on 5 November, by the middle of that month they had already gone a long way with what Churchill, speaking to Congress just before Christmas, was to call their 'laborious and intricate' preparations. By the end

of October, the 5th Division intended for Malaya had been concentrated in Shanghai; it had received its secret orders and was training. By then the officers and staff of the 3rd Air Group had already reached Saigon. In the first weeks of November, naval air units of the 11th Air Fleet moved to Formosa where the 3rd Fleet and aircraft of the 5th Army Air Division were assembling for the Philippine invasion. On 14 November, most of the Pearl Harbor task force had gathered around Yamamoto's flagship in Saiki Bay to move in the next few days around to Tankan Bay in the Kuriles. On 15 November, General Yamashita was holding a conference in Saigon, discussing the plan of operations of 25th Army, the force intended for Malaya. Not much of this, of course, became public—not at the time. And to judge from contemporary press reports, all that observers could gather came from China or Indo-China to the south. If, as the *New York Times* reported, Japan had 60 000 troops in China and 30 000 in Manchuria; if they were in action near Icheng and had taken Chengteh, then the bulk of Japanese forces had to be still somewhere northeast of Chungking. A frontier clash in Manchukuo placed them just as firmly up near the Russian border; and few stories are much more circumstantial than that. Admittedly, as *Time* said in late November, troops were pouring into Saigon: at least 100 000 men 'were already' there. But that, as the context indeed suggests, might have something to do with a new attack on the Burma Road; for Japan had at the same time sent five formations to bomb supply depots and trucks along that route.[3]

To narrow down these options depended in part at least on what Intelligence sources were putting together. And MAGIC aside, the indications were—particularly from the *Despatches*—that this was very generalised, not much more than contemporary newspapers were publically releasing: the 5th Division concentrating in Shanghai, four times as many aircraft in Indo-China in November as there were a month before. Percival himself, when he came to write of his first indications of Japanese intentions, noted simply that Japanese aircraft in Indo-China had gone up from under 100 at the end of October to about 250 a month later; that four cruisers and some destroyers had joined the naval forces in the South China Sea; and that a number of landing craft had left the coasts of central China. But when so many official papers have been lost it proves impossible to trace such reports through the files: the HQ Malaya Command papers, for instance, were buried at Changi, protected by tar and asphalt four inches thick, but white ants got them all the same. So, to sift the doubtful probability from the

unsupported certainty is like trying to pick up mercury with a fork. And the real problem is rather to establish how Intelligence was reading the material it had.

Conventionally, this part of the narrative has Intelligence Officers talking of Japanese aircraft made out of bamboo and paper, of short-sighted pilots without any sense of balance, of rifles left over from the war of 1905 and soldiers afraid of the dark. Admittedly such notions enter the story very early, as correlatives almost for pride and complacence—that hubris that a story of a Fall properly demands. No need to take them literally, any more than a Japanese might his own stories of the 'hero-gods'; though other less extravagant ideas were, it is true, widely accepted, ideas summed up in the remark attributed to Major General Murray-Lyon, commanding 11th Indian Division, that the Japanese had not yet faced a first class enemy.[4] But even so, it is impossible to determine how far such statements reflect and carry forward national stereotyping, and how far, in a political situation where the British were instructed to avoid giving the Japanese even the slightest pretext for opening hostilities, they represented a way of holding the potential enemy off.

Something of what's at issue becomes clearer perhaps if one looks at the Commander in Chief Far East at a press interview on 3 December.[5] In an appreciation written some ten days before, Brooke-Popham's HQ had argued that Japan's next move would be from southern Indo-China against Thailand and after that a possible gambler's throw against Malaya, even Singapore itself. Five days later, GHQ had passed on to the AOC a report from Saigon that the Japanese intended to land troops in southern Thailand on 1 December. That, it would seem, is the warning that the War Office sent, on advice from the United States military authorities in the Philippines, a warning based on the intelligence report Washington had had from Shanghai. Brooke-Popham's *Despatch*, as it happens, mentions neither of these, as though this information proved of no account later. What he does indicate rather is simply what he had about Japanese fleet movements: four cruisers and several destroyers had been sent, as GHQ had learned, from the Japanese Combined Fleet to the South China Sea; and two squadrons of long-range Zeros had reached southern Indo-China. He was to expect an armed offensive against Thailand, or the East Indies or the Philippines. But in the press conference, none of this—at least not in either of the two reports that were published a short time later. In one, Brooke-Popham was arguing that Japan

did not know which way to turn; there were no signs that it was ready to attack anyone. Rather, it was assuming a defensive position, withdrawing troops from Indo-China. This argument, if the journalist O.D. Gallagher is right, Brooke-Popham supported by citing information he had about Japanese aircraft carriers exercising off the mandated islands: 'You do not send fighter aircraft into the middle of the Pacific if you intend launching an attack.' Against this, in his account, Cecil Brown the CBS correspondent, has Brooke-Popham arguing simultaneously that war might come, but probably would not; even though, as he admits, Japan had divisions in Indo-China training for landing operations, and with these a strong airforce which included long-distance bombers. But these, as Brown reports him, Brooke-Popham saw as purely defensive measures.

In the light of the reports he'd been reading, this seems a curious interpretation: though in talking with the press a man is not on oath. But the whole conference is shot through with the same kinds of ambivalence. On one hand Brooke-Popham insisted that one had to look at Japan through eastern eyes—to be prepared, as Brown records it, 'for Japan going off the rails and coming into the war though it is against the logic of facts'. So, he conceded that if extremists did get control, then Japan might easily go for north Malaya or the Philippines; might try to control Thailand by intimidation; might continue, in fact, with its familiar armed diplomacy. But if that kind of statement indicates a fairly sure grasp of the situation, it is balanced nonetheless by others made with the same energy exactly as Gallagher had noted them, where Brooke-Popham asserted that it was hard 'to see the logic of Japan going to war now'. On one hand this could easily represent what Intelligence sources were thinking: in his *Despatch*, Brooke-Popham was to write that, until 28 November when he heard from the War Office, 'up to this point, we had remained completely in the dark on this matter except for press reports'. Nor did an invasion of Thailand necessarily mean Great Britain's declaring war. And yet again, what Brooke-Popham was saying might be directed more immediately to the Japanese: another attempt, a final one almost, to save the peace, like lying down in front of the tiger.

II

On 29 November, GHQ issued the first alert, code named AWAKE. The orders went out in the rain and dark of that November

Saturday: all leave cancelled and all troops recalled to barracks; nothing, GHQ insisted, but a normal precautionary measure. Still, no accident surely that at this point both press and radio begin to release material about Japanese movements: one report about ships near the mandated islands; another about the fleet sailing south from British North Borneo. And since GHQ had for a long time now stressed the strategic importance of the east coast, no accident either that when, for the first time in weeks, the Services' Public Relations Office (SPRO) took journalists out of Singapore, it was to go up to the Australian positions, where conventionally the enemy was expected to come in. However widely this party moved—between the lines one recognises Mersing, Sedili, even Endau—the thrust of what each man wrote was, as the *Straits Times* put it, that 'an enemy invading this area has a poor chance of escaping complete ruin'.[6] To begin with, there's the strength of the fortifications: every report mentions how carefully the positions are defended—anti-tank guns on the beach, barbed wire, light and heavy machine guns, 'other surprises', 'enough to create a great wall of fire'; and inland, tank traps, trenches and observation posts along strategic roads, caches of food and arms, fully manned posts in the jungle—even to the river mouth 'surrounded by dense dark jungle and barbed wire'; every track and every path mapped, every square mile explored. That point one journalist makes neatly by suggesting how deeply patrols had penetrated into the more remote areas, remote enough for them to run into the Sakai, into an old Malay who had been in the Malayan Army in his youth.

In the local papers that is what the whole argument turned on. If the Australians were fully aware of the importance of their sector, it was because, as the *Straits Times* put it, they saw it as the back door to Singapore. And in a special story on the AIF, the *Singapore Free Press* pushed that conclusion further still: the AIF recognises now, it wrote, that a threat to Singapore is a threat to Australia. So too, in what was cabled home; though this material also had a certain jauntiness, a sense that the troops were at home, at ease with the place itself, 'their vast area of jungle', and with the people. On one hand the exotic, the foreign is tamed, domesticated: the beach could be in north Queensland except for those barbed wire entanglements; and the men in their camps among the coconut groves and 'oak tree forests' are preparing just as at home for Christmas: planning parties, receiving hampers, reading in the evening or playing cards. On one hand, the journalists work to blunt the edge of danger, beating swords into swagger sticks,

like the parangs which, in one camp, 'officers carry under the arm instead of the traditional canes'. And on the other, what is irreducibly Malayan—panthers, tigers—is turned into local colour. Not that the parang had become regimental issue exactly: the writer may simply have caught sight of Captain Carter at Endau in tin hat, identity tag and parang carried 'in a regimental manner': just as he is usually remembered at Bukit Langkap in the middle of January:

> *I remember him standing there stark naked—tin hat and nothing else—and he's saying, 'We'll wait until we see the whites of their eyes ...'*

or back at the Crossroads a week later

> *I can still see him hanging on to the side of this truck: with his parang, his binoculars, his mapcase ...*[7]

Nothing uncertain about the tiger either: at the centre of any number of stories, like the tiger the Sultan was to offer a reward for a week later, the tiger that had killed a plantation worker, or the one the gunners remember, huddled most of one night in the back of a Marmon, hearing those soft movements around them. Or Ringer Edward's tigers: but that's a story for another place.

After AWAKE, a second alert, SEA VIEW, on 2 December: a state of emergency, with all three services fully mobilised and the Volunteers called out. This was the first time, one observer wrote, that Singapore realised Japan could strike 'here'.[8] And the day, ironically, that HMS *Prince of Wales* and HMS *Repulse* arrived, completely without ceremony: no gun salute, no formal welcome, nothing but a small group of officers and newsmen standing on a platform on top of Far East Naval HQ. Air reconnaissance went on. About noon on 6 December, a Hudson from Kota Bahru dropping through the dark cloud came upon about twenty ships stretched out below: like a scorpion half-submerged, one of the crew wrote a few years ago, the troopships forming the body, the big warships the head and pincer. The Hudson was seen and recognised, probably fired on as well. But although the Japanese jammed the radio, on the way back to base the crew heard another Hudson flying a parallel search pattern confirm the sighting, and confirm that the ships were Japanese. And that is why, later that evening, an evening of dark and drifting rain, the code word RAFFLES went out: first degree of readiness, 'fullest readiness for any

eventuality'. The troops moved to battle stations: air reconnaissance continued, with Catalinas this time. The convoy was seen and shadowed, though two Catalinas that went out in the early evening of 6 December failed to return. Cloud came down and during the next afternoon all that came in to Air HQ were reports of one ship here, a merchant vessel and a cruiser there, or four ships off the coast of Thailand steaming south: 'landing parties against Thailand with the immediate objective of capturing Bangkok', one observer noted. If no other despatch is quite so explicit, the majority of commentators, military and civilian alike, still write as though—even if the Japanese were forcing the British to intervene simply by moving into Thailand—Japan would have to centre its attack on China. Japan, as a spokesman for the Chinese Government put it, did not have the resources to 'undertake new aggressions'. Even then in that blind night, all over the east Japanese troops were moving into position: on the borders of the New Territories; to the north again, in Shanghai; on the airfields of Indo-China; on the carriers of the Pearl Harbor Task Force far to the east, about to swing into the wind; in ships sailing northeast and south in the soft dark over the China Sea.

It's an old story now, the story of the Japanese landing at Kota Bahru, but worth remembering: the ships moving down in the rain, then at anchor under a clearing sky, and the moon rising.[9] In the dull light of that oval moon, Major General Takumi was to write, he could see the harbour light at Tumput and the lights burning in the town. Ships out to sea and, in the pill boxes behind a tangle of barbed wire, men of 3/17 Dogras: so quiet that, as a Japanese contemporary account has it, the beach seemed deserted—for a few moments, anyway, there's nothing but the sound of the waves on the shore. Then, after midnight, the landing craft move out: from the transport he could hear, Takumi remembered, the sound of the engines clear above the waves; then from the beach a single 18-pounder; now rifle fire as the barges crept towards the sand, and the slap of shrapnel balls on the water. As the Japanese were still coming ashore and tangled with the Dogras in the concrete and wire, the first Hudsons flew over: in to bomb and back to load again, in and back to shore, light a cigarette on take off, land still smoking it, so one man wrote. Coming in low, as low as possible, in masthead attacks on the ships: 'a crazy kamikaze procedure that meant we had to fly at full throttle about three feet above the waves and drop our bombs so that they would skip torpedo-like into the target.' Not many of the Dogras survived that morning,

and that says something about the ferocity of this first engagement. Not all the assault troops did either: Colonel Tsuji was to speak of their having to burrow into the sand, so heavy was the enemy fire; of their being so close to the enemy that they could throw hand grenades into the loopholes of the pill boxes; of the men detailed to cut the wire having to move over the corpses of their comrades. It's like the story that was around Singapore in mid-December—perhaps the first hint, the first suggestion of the kind of enemy they were up against: in each landing party, a lieutenant of the Dogras was saying, one soldier ran ahead of the others, throwing a mat across the barbed wire; he was always killed, but the others got over.

By first light the Japanese had established a beachhead, were moving inland towards the airfield. The Hudsons had gone back to refuel and rearm, their place taken by planes from Kuantan to the south: Hudsons, Blenheims, Vildebeestes. And by first light, there were Japanese planes in the air too: a few fighters, one at least shot down; and the bombers on their long flight back from Singapore. Some four hours before, they'd left Indo-China—about 50 planes in all, from Mihoro Air Corps and Genza Air Corps. For Genza particularly, it had been a rough flight; the aircraft tossing over the sky, rain smashing against the cockpit, lightning reflected from the propellors—so difficult, in fact, that the wing commander ordered a return to base. The other group, Mihoro, had slightly the better of it, and in the south the sky was clearing as the moon rose. A little after 0330 hours, one of the radar stations near Mersing picked up an unidentified aircraft approaching from the northeast; another 30 minutes and they were high over the naval base and moving across the Island. The Services and the AA defences had been warned: the lights of the Base were out—except, it seems, for those on the floating dock, moored in the Straits and lit up like a Christmas tree: 'I can't,' the head of the night crew is reported as saying, 'I can't find the bloody switch'. As for the raid itself, it proved a fairly small affair, at least in comparison with what was to come, though even the one bomb falling into the crowded Chinese quarter south of the river meant dozens of casualties.[10]

Singapore, for its part, responded with a kind of surprised indignation, 'that the Japanese would dare to twist the British lion's tail'—an indignation that persists even into the descriptions of the raid itself. Brief descriptions most of them, reduced to essentials, as though the mind could take in no more than that: the

unfamiliar droning in the warm quiet night, then the swish as a bomb lands in the roadway—a crater some 30 feet wide, buildings down, debris and splinters cast around; and twenty minutes later silence again, a silence broken now by the sound of the rescue workers and the cries of the wounded. If there is fear it seems well controlled, never explicit, emerging only in a voiced concern, an anxiety about the blackout: in the first plane out of Singapore, for instance, the passengers were horrified to find the lights still on in Darwin and along the Australian east coast—Sydney should be blacked out 'before it was too late'. And that's the less odd in the light of a story printed only a column away: a report from Berlin that the Japanese had attacked Port Albert on Wilson's Promontory. But apart from the indignation, apart from the fear, something else emerges through these contemporary memoirs, through the very matter-of-factness of the prose: the sense, half-realised perhaps, certainly never articulated, that the world was turning upside down. And that is precisely the point of the classic story of this first raid: where a woman woken by the noise rings the police station to be told that this is only the ARP practising; and her tart reply that 'They are using real bombs then, does anyone know?' because the house opposite has just gone up in smoke. And even if this is not historically true, it has nonetheless a very real truth of its own, a way of making sense of the conflicting elements at the very heart of this experience. And the very fact that the story was told, and told widely enough to take on a convincing local reference, makes it clear that it struck some essential chord. As for the garrison troops, no story quite like that from them, nothing that catches a response so immediately; enough, however, to point a direction. For the troops—even those on the Island—it was a stunt, just as it was to many civilians. That's true for the Navy too, though as a sailor from HMAS *Vampire* is said to have remarked, 'I've never seen a throw-off shoot at this time and at a ceiling of 20 000 feet'. And from HMAS *Burnie*, another watching the shells bursting in midair and the searchlights picking up the raiders: 'If this is a dummy run I'd hate to be an airman in something real.' Not so for the sailors from *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*—most of them apparently recognised the sirens and bombs for what they were; indeed, both ships were in action, firing their AA guns as the bombers flew over. And if you were asleep somewhere near the AA guns, waking to find them spitting into life, then it was clear, as you wrote home, 'She's on!'.[11]

III

By 0100 hours, Far East Command knew—as General Percival was to note—that the Japanese were ashore in the north. If he knew the enemy had already moved into Shanghai, he does not say, and neither do any of the official *Despatches*; not easy then to determine the kinds of decisions Command was having to make, the information that it had to go on. News of Hong Kong came in, as far as one can tell, much when it happened: mid-morning in Singapore. As for Pearl Harbor, which the enemy attacked about an hour after this first landing at Kota Bahru, and as for the Philippines, which he bombed about the same time, word of these must have reached Command some time before 0800 hours: the news was released publicly then. But the situation immediately to the north is something else again: even the Thai Consul General was to admit that he'd been so out of touch for the last two days that he had learned of his country's surrender only through the radio. A photo reconnaissance Beaufort, the only one in Malaya, went north at dawn towards Singora and Patani. When it landed again, about 0900 hours, then Command knew that the Japanese were ashore in Thailand: knew enough to send bombers to Patani, Buffaloes to Singora.[12]

Even so, there's nothing to suggest that Command realised that the enemy was landing further north again. And, indeed, even before much of this information could reach Percival, at least so his own account implies, Japanese bombers were attacking the airfields in the northwest of Malaya, at Alor Star and Sungei Patani. Whether he knew that the Imperial Guards were moving overland from the Indo-Chinese border is even less easy to make out: they were to enter Bangkok in the dark that evening, a correspondent was to write, a man who'd seen them, in Thai trucks, between lines of Japanese residents waving Rising Sun flags. Thailand formally capitulated about 2000 hours; the news release made it clear that, as part of the terms of surrender, it had agreed to allow enemy troops through the country. In Singapore that meant the Japanese were moving towards the Kra peninsula: most observers interpreted it that way immediately, the *Daily Telegraph*, for instance, writing that the main offensive was now through Thailand towards Burma and the Burma Road. To the end of this first day, though reconnaissance planes had sighted enemy tanks and troops on the Patani–Alor Star Road, and though early that afternoon Brooke-Popham had ordered the two battalions of Krohcol forward to the

Ledge—Matador he cancelled a little earlier still—Japanese troops had not crossed the border. Admittedly, at Kota Bahru, Brigadier Key's forces had been forced back from the beach and, admittedly too, enemy planes had repeatedly attacked the airfields in the north and, even more, the British planes sent against them. That, as the official communiqué argued the next day, seemed to suggest that the Japanese were 'prepared to engage considerable forces in the endeavour to obtain control of North Malaya'.

If Percival's task was to hold the enemy in the north or as far north as possible, it was not so much that he was committed to the defence of the whole peninsula, though that enters into it. Rather, it was the airfields he was to hold: in part to deny them to the enemy, in part to allow reinforcing formations and aircraft to reach Singapore. And the assumption on which that strategy turned was that the Japanese were concerned primarily with Singapore and the Base. If their forces were not sent in directly from the sea—and, for months at least, this had seemed unlikely—then as Intelligence believed, they would be consolidated in the north, and sent in simultaneously somewhere down the east coast. At the end of this first day, however Command was to interpret the Japanese moves against the United States, there was still nothing to show that these, like the invasion of Thailand, like the invasion of Malaya itself, were part of a single plan; and nothing at all to show how delicately balanced and how finely worked out the master strategy was to prove. And although neither Percival nor Brooke-Popham states it explicitly, it is fairly clear that Command was interpreting the enemy moves precisely in the terms that Intelligence had already laid down. After all, the Japanese were not to cross the frontier for another 24 hours, and around Kota Bahru they were not to follow up Brigadier Key immediately either, not for some 36 hours. Consequently, there was nothing to suggest that what Yamashita planned was to move right down the peninsula; nor that his major thrust would come down the west coast. Indeed, at this point, if Colonel Tsuji is right, Yamashita still intended to make at least one further assault on the east: Kota Bahru was just the beginning. And that, as he implies, Yamashita held to until his troops took Alor Star on 14 December, a victory which so changed the strategic balance that, rather than send in the Takumi detachment to take Kuantan from the sea, he now ordered it down, overland, instead. In other words, for the first days—even perhaps for the first week—it had to look as though Yamashita was mounting primarily what commentators called a 'large scale offensive against

Northern Malaya'. And the GOC might then expect an attack on Singapore immediately. That, his Intelligence held, was how it would start: after Kota Bahru then Kuantan perhaps, or Endau, or Mersing.

3

'What is the cause of the retreat?'

I

Around the Crossroads and along the Kluang Road the AIF was standing to: 22nd Brigade waiting for that 'seaborne attack on Mersing, which'—so its Operation Order no. 1 made clear—'we must be prepared to face'; and 27th Brigade ready to deal with paratroops on the Kluang and the Kahang airfields.[1] And that determined whatever tactical moves either brigade made in this first week. First, the communiqué of 11 December was to speak of another attempted Japanese landing in the north, 'another attempt to gain a hold on the Malayan coast', phrasing that suggests the enemy had tried to come ashore, but had failed. Two days before, Kuantan had been bombed for the first time, an indication usually that Japanese infantry were on the way: one source calls it 'continuous raids'; enough to send both Hudsons and Vildebeestes back to Singapore, followed—in some confusion—by the ground staff. That night the Garhwalis on the beach were expecting the enemy to land; their patrols were reporting small ships off the coast, reports convincing enough to relay to Singapore—to Percival, for instance, at about 2000 hours. And at different places along the coast, the Garhwalis were firing too, even those on the southern front trying to bluff the Japanese into thinking that there too the defence was organised: troops in the rubber half a mile from the airfield could hear the crack of machinegun fire from the beaches.

Most writers—now—argue that the Garhwalis were firing at nothing; if there were Japanese, the argument runs, it was just a feint. And any ships off the coast, such as the troops had reported, were probably just fishing trawlers, like the one USS *Edsall* brought back to Singapore with four small boats in tow. Certainly the

Walrus that *Repulse* catapulted off next morning found nothing; nor did *Express* when she went in to reconnoitre, nothing but sun and surf, a man waving and a single motor cyclist scampering along the road between the beach and the jungle: 'as quiet as a wet Sunday morning'. And the Hudson going over at dawn was to report 'not even a dogtrack on the beach'. Still, in the next few days, so one of Brigadier Painter's officers wrote, patrols found several boats riddled with bullet holes, Japanese equipment inside. Japanese prisoners, brought down from the north admitted, it's said, that their forces had been probing to find weak spots in the defence. And further south too, perhaps. Not long after the war broke out, an officer from 2/20 found several acetylene gas containers on a cliff edge, on a headland some miles north of Mersing, set as if they were to be lit. The next day, they'd gone; but *it was an eerie sort of business—a patrol boat or a submarine could easily have set a scouting party ashore.* And he holds now as he did then that *the Japanese actually came ashore and saw what we had done at Mersing.*[2]

More importantly, on the night of 10 December, the evidence suggests that, 22nd Brigade, like 9th Indian Division to its north the evening before, were expecting the Japanese. This was enough for Colonel Thyer, Bennett's GSO1, to come up to the Crossroads: 'We agreed,' he wrote later, 'that all that could be done was done'; enough for him to spend the night at Advanced Divisional HQ a mile west of the Crossroads, 'to get some sleep before the crunch comes'. 'Here we are, and here we fight,' a journalist had Brigadier Taylor saying. 'They will never get through these men.'[3] Nothing came of this—the official correspondent was to write of 'thousands of eyes staring out to sea', of men 'peering into the dark' before the moon rose; but five days later 22nd Brigade was alerted again. Reconnaissance planes reported a convoy as they had a week before: ships which had left Cam Ranh Bay on 13 December were now clearly heading south; on 14 December 225 miles northeast of Kuantan. Percival, so Gordon Bennett wrote, thought it might be making direct for Singapore; Bennett, on his part, for Mersing.[4]

If that information reached the two Australian brigades much as 2/30 Diarist records it, then there was a very strong chance of a seaborne assault on 15 December: 'six enemy cruisers,' the Diarist wrote, 'heading southwest which could reach Mersing at 0700 hours on 15 December'. And if, as the same source has it, there was also a report that 'four boatloads of enemy had landed 1000 yards north of Kuala Pahang at 0310', this might considerably shorten what were already fairly short odds. Earlier, Taylor

had made no change at all in the dispositions of his units. But this time he was to order some slight moves: sending C Company 2/19 forward a mile into Joo Lye Estate, to take up a position astride the road, and placing patrols around the river—presumably since, at high tide, an enemy could come right up to the road along the Sungei Jemaluang or one of its arms. And this, since 2/20 AFVs had been covering that stretch of road for four days already, is some indication of how seriously he was taking this alarm. Further, on 13 December, two companies from 2/30 were sent to the Crossroads from Kluang; their Don Company came down to join them. This concentrating of the reserve battalion of 27th Brigade is the more significant since at both Kluang and Kahang, precisely as the October exercise had presupposed, the AIF were also—like most of Malaya—expecting a paratroop assault as well.[5]

How 27th Brigade were handling this is rather more difficult to be precise about, in part at least because the earlier stories are at this distance hard to take seriously: stories about Japanese coming down in the orange robes of Buddhist monks, guns disguised as umbrellas. But in Holland and again in Crete, the German Army had shown how effectively airborne troops could be used, particularly in the kind of blitzkreig that Yamashita's advance was turning into; and Yamashita had in December 1940 headed a Japanese military mission to Germany, a mission that had travelled quite widely from Occupied France to the Baltic. According to one Japanese source he'd certainly considered it, but finding that the British had blocked all the obvious landing grounds, he'd changed his mind.[6] Nevertheless, the early Intelligence summaries list the sightings: at Singapore itself to begin with, at Kroh on 8 December, at Jitra, Alor Star, Penang where the troops were disguised as Chinese or Malays; even, so one early memoir has it, nearly on top of a Brigade HQ somewhere on the east coast, where they were almost wiped out. On 9 December, according to 2/30 sources, the Divisional Liaison officer brought word that an air attack on Kahang and Kluang was 'imminent and inevitable' that night. And though that came to nothing, the Battalion, right down to B echelon, stood to until dawn, and perhaps on the night after that. To the east, on 10 December, a Don R reported into 2/19 with a signal that paratroops had landed, somewhere it was thought in Nithsdale Estate. Both 2/18 and 2/19 sent out patrols, and 2/30 ten minutes after midnight sent its Don Company up from Kluang, to take up a position around Gibraltar Hill. The day after, Japanese paratroopers were expected at Kluang again; and perhaps more

than once after that, since as 2/30 notes, 'several reports received from Division of intended enemy attacks on the drome'. 'Before we left Johore,' Sister Cullen of 13th AGH was to say late in March, 'we were much more frightened of parachutists than bombs'.[7]

On one hand then, anticipation of invasion from the sea; on the other, from the sky. And through that time a peaceful countryside was turned into a battlefield stripped for action: lorries roaring up, so men wrote home, more ammunition, more supplies, engineers blasting, the air solid with noise; more digging and more wiring. And the AIF, unlike the Imperials in the north, were moving the civilians out, 'withdrawing according to a preconceived plan', first from Mersing, from Endau on 10 December, from Jemaluang a few days after that. And that news got home, in one letter at least, in something like a passion of pity: lorries and buses chockful, bits and pieces tied to top and sides; the less fortunate trudging along, 'plodding past us with that hopeless look on their faces'; the elderly, the children: 'a terrible sight'. Something of that pity, something of that passion one commentator must have caught to write 'the men are in an ugly mood': the more so, if they were given the job of finding the civilians, routing them out from kampongs and the smaller timber-cutting camps, the settlements around the tinmines. Perhaps 25 000 people came through the Crossroads, others from Endau by barge, to be remembered simply through a casual remark years later about one of the anti-tank gunners on the beach: *Old Tub didn't know whether to fire on those barges or what.*[8]

Even on the night of 10 December one of the smaller villages was already burning: red flames now against the green jungle. A week, ten days at the most, and the settlements were empty, ghost towns: nothing there but pigs and dogs.[9] What was left the troops scrounged: an iron roof from a fowlhouse, soap plugging the holes; tables and chairs, a whole kitchen suite; dozens of mirrors. And clocks everywhere: chiming clocks hanging from the trees, one engineer wrote; half a dozen more, all grandfather clocks in 2/18 positions—time running down, running out, fast, slow. And food of course: fowls, ducks, whatever the kampong had to leave, bananas, coffee, drink:

> some of the fellows made a pretty decent haul, and cached it away so deep that shellfire wouldn't hurt it, and then sat back to contemplate what a glorious war it was going to be. Eighth must have got a

whisper of it for the NSW and sundry helpers descended like wolves on the fold.[10]

Still it had made for lively writing, and something safe to write home about. That and the rain: diving in and out of a tent 'you have to lay heavy on the old cot for fear of it being washed away'; indeed, 'any old soldier could move into my particular possy and feel at home—ammo boxes for chairs, the dugout roof leaks, the mud is good and thick'. But 'no better mob to be with if things do get a bit sticky'. And by 17 December the journalists could not find much more than that to send back either. They were back up the east coast on 16 December: Tokyo Radio had claimed that the AIF had been 'annihilated'. But the AIF had seen no action yet: the press fell back on 'determination' and 'calm'. But the 'here we are and here we fight' of the first days had become the 'here we fight; here we stay': a shift that measures that ten-day distance very usefully indeed.[11]

During that time both Brigades had—perhaps twice—moved companies to answer immediate and pressing needs: the threat from the sea on one hand, from the air on the other.[12] And if very little of this reached official records, this in itself presumably indicates how quickly those occasions passed. Ironically, such moves as make it into a Diary prove not so much a response to new strategical imperatives as both Brigades playing out their planned—almost conventional—opening moves: as routine as the digging, the wiring and the blasting that the press made so much of. Those boats at Endau that 22nd Brigade Diary lists on 16 December: seven tugs, two motor launches *Penejar* and *Panchor* and HMS *Shunan*—these Taylor had concentrated on the river at RAFFLES ten days before. The planning, as earlier entries show, went back much further than that. Similarly when, on 8 December, 2/29 sent its A Company up to Bukit Langkap, an area the battalion had been responsible for since late November—part of its Force Y—this simply represented the working out of Operation Order no. 1, the order that brought Force Y into being. And perhaps so too, do the patrols that 2/29 sent out the same day along the Sembrong and Lenggor Rivers and to the junction of the Sembrong and Kahang. For if the Japanese did come into Endau—and Mersing was very strongly fortified—if they did go upriver to the mine, then they could just as easily move down these rivers towards the Jemaluang–Kluang Road; and it was precisely the task of Force Y to counter such an attack. The 2/29 A Company was

to return on 20 December; the attached troops from D Troop 2/15 Field Regiment three days later; and in mid-January two 75s from X Section 16 Battery 4/Anti-Tank which had replaced the two two-pounders on 11 December. However, Endau was reinforced in this first week as well (probably on Thyer's instructions while Bennett was overseas), the men escorted up by a troop of the newly formed armoured car detachment, the OC reinforcements himself riding up on a BSA 1925 which he'd bought, he remembers, for something like a bottle of beer.[13] And possibly some of those river patrols were Thyer's as well; particularly those withdrawn on 13 December, since Bennett was to countermand his GSO1's instructions as soon as he returned.

Nothing very dramatic, not in these early patrols, but often enough there's something that points to what is to come: rice in a hut perhaps—a section from Don Company 2/19 went out specifically once to destroy dumps of fresh rice north of the Kluang Road.[14] Occasionally there's a report of strange lights—a section from Don Company 2/18 along the coast went on alert for a day or two; occasionally a rumour of a wireless set like the one found once in a clearing about half a mile north of Endau—*nothing turned up though we set a watch for a day or so.* Apart from that, it's simply all that is covered by the phrase one of the Diaries routinely uses, 'active patrolling': a laborious business, however routine and however familiar, cutting through tracks, crossing streams, but too ordinary to reach into official records. True, 2/30 noted a patrol around Nithsdale on 13 December—but the company had just moved into a new position; 2/29 noted very precisely the positions of the standing patrols that it had out along the Sembrong and Lenggor in the first week—but these were new positions too, and very remote; so remote that a reconnaissance patrol that went out along the Sembrong on 10 December had to abandon its boat and push back through the swamp to Kahang. That was remembered and entered—not hard to see why. But even the more elaborate patrols early in January have left no official record: 48-hour patrols these, platoon strength, training, so the 2/19 historian remembers, for operations behind enemy lines, and working across country from the Crossroads towards the Sungei Endau.

And then, of course, there's the patrol everyone remembers, private soldier, Intelligence Officer, Major General: the patrol that caught the two Japanese airmen.[15] On 31 December 2/26 Diary notes that civilians around Paloi, in that part of Johore for which 2/26 were responsible, were talking about two enemy aircrew

somewhere in the area, probably from a plane shot down on its way back from Singapore on 29 December. If a 2/18 soldier has it right, even as far up the coast as Mersing, all hands—so he wrote home—had been asked to keep a look out for survivors. The 2/26 sent out a three- (or four-) man patrol; in a day or so all but one of the patrol had turned back—there's a suggestion in one memoir that this was to escort two British airmen they'd come across. Alone then, Private Edwards—Ringer, Ringer Edwards—'left his mates with the Poms and went on alone'; found the two airmen, but wanting to take them alive, returned for the rest of the patrol. Two tigers, he found, were following him along that jungle path; but so the story goes, he decided that unless he were to bother them, they would not bother him. Still, when he got back to the hut, the Japanese were gone. At this point Edwards had to hand over to 2/18: 50 miles in all he'd gone, 2/26 Diarist says with a kind of laconic pride, 50 miles through swamp and jungle. If 2/18 Diary is right, Edwards handed over on 2 January, the day that the Battalion heard either from 2/26 or 22nd Brigade that the Japanese were now at Tenggorah; and 2/18 in its turn sent out a section patrol from 15 Platoon C Company. In his own memoirs years later, the section Corporal Jack Scott remembered having to go some 15 miles from Battalion HQ to a village he knew; remembered smoke rising from a hut. A small matter to cross the river, and at daylight to find one of the Japanese coming outside, 'bareheaded, crewcut, without boots or weapons, but in flying jackets and trousers'. Another minute, and two Japanese and ten Australians collided in a heap at the door.

More than one man remembers the prisoners brought in, the first Japanese they'd seen: blindfolded, hands tied behind their backs. Young and small and dejected, one soldier remembered; a second recalled that one at least was crying like a child.[16] From Battalion to Brigade, where they caused endless trouble, so the IO wrote, by feigning madness; and in a mixture of Malay and Chinese protesting that they were not Japanese. He was to question them in every dialect he knew; nothing, until he spoke of Dai Nippon, Tenno Heiko, Kodo, and the sin of being captured. Then it was dramatic and emphatic: 'Nihon-jin da! Nihon-jin da! Koro-sei! Koro-sei!'—'I'm Japanese, I'm Japanese. Kill me. Kill me.' For 2/18 it becomes a family story, the Battalion itself central, 'the Battalion distinguished itself,' as one soldier put it. Yet even in this context, the emphasis shifts: from the captors to the captured, from the company section to the Japanese. The swords, the revolvers,

the flags—these are often mentioned: everything that makes the enemy seem powerful. But he turns out to be small, desolate: 'two of them crying and whingeing like a pair of schoolgirls.' In other versions, the stress falls on Ringer Edwards himself; or—as for a 2/30 private writing from hospital on 25 January—on the tigers that Edwards found stalking him. Hard not to see them as somehow symbolic, though that may be to place on the story more weight than it can bear; hard not to see their ferocity as somehow calling up that of the Japanese; hard not to see Edwards' outwitting them as somehow—hopefully—prophetic. He'll be remembered up the line too, Ringer Edwards, through that whole stretch from Nikki to the border and beyond. In the next three and half years, a good many men will be remembered—Kevin Fagan, Roy Mills, Reg Newton, Jim Chisholm. But there are other less public figures who have entered no less deeply into a number of private lives; have shaped no less profoundly a memory and an experience. At times it's no more than a man singing: a man who in a particular time and place comes to signify more than himself.[17] At times it's for a particular kind of courage:

> *they bashed him all night; in front of everybody. But he kept on his feet the whole time—I'll never forget that ...*[18]

Often it's for a particular kind of expertise, or enterprise or wit: something that kept life itself alive: Ringer Edwards is one of these.

II

Odd, come to think of it, that not more was made of this story at the time, either in the local press or back home; the more so since there were three journalists down at Brigade the day after the Japanese were bought in.[19] No doubt at all that the news got around—Ian Morrison was to use it before the year was out in his *Malayan Postscript*, to show—surely ironically—that not all Malays were on the side of the enemy: ironically, since his Japanese were in Malay dress, carrying their uniforms in a khaki bundle. Three weeks before in the first week of the war, as the Japanese were still fighting into the tangle of swamps and creeks west of Kota Bahru, there had been a chance that the invasion might be stopped right there. That was why *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* had sailed north late that day: the destroyers moving out ahead, *Vampire* then *Tenedos*, *Electra* and *Express* joining them outside the boom off Changi

Point; and the girls on shore waving as the ships cut down the Johore Straits into the evening.[20] Knowing that the Japanese transports were off the northern coast, Admiral Phillips had planned to move into the Gulf of Siam, either to meet the enemy directly 'shortly after sunrise tomorrow Wednesday' as his signal says; or—as another source implies—to use the very name of his ship and its reputation to turn the enemy transports back. And if that happened then Force Z could 'try its mettle against the old Japanese cruisers and destroyers which are reported in the Gulf'. But whatever luck Force Z might have, once the Japanese were ashore in Thailand—and by noon that first day military authorities had evidence of that—then clearly there was no point at all in Matador. Nevertheless, in the early afternoon, GHQ sent Colonel Moorhead across the Thai border to the Ledge, a position along the Kroh Road; and later that day, about dusk, two companies that had been ordered out on the Singora Road reached Sadao, nine miles into Thailand. Neither force, as it happened, stopped the enemy crossing the frontier. Japanese tanks smashed into Sadao that night to hesitate there, not crossing into Malaya until early on 10 December. And Moorhead's group—marching to Betong, then driven north by a section of the AIF's 2/3 RMT through what one of the Australian drivers was to remember as a 'dead world', not a light, not a glow, nothing moving and no-one either—Moorhead's group had finally to withdraw, though they had delayed the enemy for four days. On the afternoon of 12 December, they reached Betong again—36 trucks had taken them up; for the survivors, seven were enough. There's a moment early on 10 December then when the Japanese move south on one road and on another Moorhead's Punjabis north: a kind of pull-devil, pull-baker. And at sea that very day *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* go down about 1300 hours, about the same time as Moorhead reached the Ledge. From then on the movement is all south, Japanese and British alike; but the movements are intricate, far more intricate than a remark like that suggests.

If one were to list the towns lost—or won—in the first ten days, then this would indicate something of the speed and direction of the Japanese advance and—indirectly—something of its weight and menace: easy to see why General Percival might have argued he was facing three entire Divisions. Along the coast road for instance—10 December, 11 December, 14 December, 16 December ... Changlun, Jitra, Alor Star, Gurun, Sungei Patani—the arrow sweeps down the map. And inland, across the mountains, much

the same—12 December, 13 December, 15 December ... Betong, Kroh, Kupang; and along the road to the coast, 16 December ... Grik, where the rough track from Kroh joined a road running southwest to the trunk road not far from Kuala Kangsar. That meant, so observers argued at the time, a three-pronged attack: one arm moving from the east, another—a kind of short hook—through Grik, the third perhaps inland from Penang to the rich tin and rubber districts of western and central Malaya. If the enemy got to Kuala Kangsar, then he had reached a position of immense strategic importance. Six miles above the town a railway bridge crossed the Perak River; the road or pontoon bridge leading down to Ipoh was only a couple of miles south; a few miles east on the main road to Taiping the railway from the east ran through the Gapis Pass. If Kuala Kangsar were taken, then the pass was turned, the British force on the trunk road cut off; if the bridge and the road above the town were taken, then neither the force in the east nor that in the west could reach Ipoh. And once through the town, the Japanese could press straight to Ipoh; and at the same time move troops down the Perak River to take the British in the rear.

Some of this, at least in its wider implications, was clear even outside Malaya: the former British Resident in Perak wrote as much to the *Times*.[21] A week, ten days and—in private at least—some men of affairs, even the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, were wondering whether Malaya might fall. Commentators were beginning to use terms like 'ignorance', 'complacence', 'incompetence'; to speak of 'dull stubborn men, whose stupidity is being paid for in blood'. Not that the military authorities themselves were saying a great deal, their communiqués were heavy with phrases familiar from half a dozen earlier encounters: 'heavy and confused fighting', 'local patrol encounters in very enclosed country', and—inevitably—'no change'. Nothing about the way the airfields in the north had been destroyed; nothing to say that 48 hours after that first landing at Kota Bahru neither the RAF nor the RAAF had a single squadron north of Singapore, that no more than half of the aircraft Far East Command had flying before 8 December were still in the air. But *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* they had admitted the Japanese had sunk—that communiqué was released in Singapore that very evening—hours before the survivors reached the Base. And when European civilians were ordered out of Penang four days later—the military two days later again—the authorities could not conceal that either, if only because the Governor broadcast that evening pleading for billets. All the same, it came as

something of a shock, one observer writes, to find on 17 December that the enemy was now fourteen miles from Penang. This was the first time the authorities had acknowledged he was any distance at all south of the Thai border, and 75 miles south at that. What this implies is that there had been very little 'hard' news, and that little, unreliable. Indeed, on 21 December, the Far East War Council was to admit as much, promising 'more complete and more precise information' rather than communiqués like the earlier ones, 'marked chiefly by brevity and lack of information'. Penang was 'shameful', a moral defeat, the more so since Duff Cooper, since 10 December Resident Minister for Far Eastern Affairs with Cabinet rank, went to air to speak of the 'successful evacuation'. More importantly, it allowed the Japanese to move in the Straits of Malacca, to encircle Ipoh, the richest tin mining town in the world. And with the capital ships gone—Tokyo Radio joked about the 'decapitated' naval forces—their troops could land anywhere along the east coast, their ships move anywhere in the waters to the east of that.

Enough to explain why at the end of a week the first easy optimism had gone—not so much talk now of 'pushing the little fellow off'. In contemporary memoirs, men and women seem bewildered, harassed—'every day of that first week seemed a month'. There's an uneasy sense of being overwhelmed, duped, even betrayed. There were simply more Japanese, it seemed, and they kept on coming; they controlled the sea and sky; they could be anywhere. The stories that break into such narratives show only too clearly how little there was for hope to catch at: Japanese are parachuting down in the orange robes of Buddhist monks; a German pilot flying for the enemy was set upon when he crashed by furious Gurkas who cut him to pieces; as the Japanese rafted down the Perak our men fired until their rifles were red hot, and still they came.[22]

Rumours most of these, but widespread, persistent, persuasive, and coming at a time, about 13 December, when SPRO took the first party of correspondents towards the front—a 'tour of the battlefield' one of them called it, extending now for perhaps 100 miles and reaching as far north as Alor Star.[23] No way of telling, of course, what they actually wrote. Nothing probably about the refugees crowding down the road in a chaos of panic; nothing either about the convoy at Betong, the road packed with lorries facing south, soldiers lying asleep on top of one another in sheer exhaustion, bandages stained with bright blood. Even so, one observer implies

that what they submitted was cut to pieces—they were 'yelling around town like madmen, almost crazy with indignation'—which suggests that the censors had reworked the text even more radically than usual. What was published is to some extent, simply 'the human face'. So, the day the official communiqué spoke of British forces 'successfully disengaging' in the north, the day it mentioned fighting near Grik, the journalists saw what that meant to the battalions there, this 'breaking contact' at Jitra: Gurkas and Japanese stalking one another with knives and tommyguns; a platoon of British soldiers fighting a gun battle until they ran out of ammunition; to walk then twenty miles to HQ, arriving hollow-eyed, feet swollen, uniforms torn by thorns. In later weeks these are precisely the kinds of stories which become central, which determine the reading of the campaign: a reading which is to persist into a mass of exemplary stories. Some of these stories are almost diagrammatic, like the classic story of the three Argylls running into a small group of Japanese on a railway station: one, out of ammunition, uses his tin hat as a club, another kills three of the enemy with his fists and his tin hat. Other stories again are tied more particularly to a time and place: two officers and twelve men of the East Surreys cut off at Jitra, making their way down the coast through paddy field and village; three Dogras lost at Alor Star, rejoining their unit at Kuala Kangsar having covered 200 miles in seven days; two senior officers from another of the Gurka regiments finding their way from Kedah to Sumatra and back to Singapore a week before the Causeway is blown; four officers from another of the English regiments picked up by a naval vessel from a sampan six days out of Penang.

In a retreat such stories are inevitable, stories of courage and tenacity, images of determination that speak of better times to come. In the Malayan campaign, however, this becomes almost the substance of what's recorded, so much so that after Muar the news reports follow the official despatch immediately with an interview with the first three men, all from 2/29, to reach advanced HQ: as though even then the journalists recognise that their story—their survival, the very fact of their evading the enemy—is the real meaning of the event. And if such narratives become almost formulaic, nevertheless what's at the heart of such stories does catch, and catch very accurately, the essentials of that experience. Those Argylls, for instance, in the two weeks and more that the unit had been in action, had been continually on the move. They'd fought as ambush company at Batu Pekaka on 17 December; barely a day

later they'd been pushed north to get their C Company, or what was left of it, out of Grik. A day later again, and they were protecting the northern flanks at Dipang. And here for the first time they were to meet enemy tanks, and for the first time too—though not the last—to hear the frightened suppliant voices of their wounded rise into pleas for mercy as the enemy went in with rifle and bayonet.[24] Such exemplary stories move around, shifting from context to context; enough to suggest that they represent a mood as much as a specific event. The Argyll story, for instance, is variously placed—at Kuala Dipang, at Kota Bahru; and there are any number of 'Don't shoot, we are Indians' tales.[25]

Nor is the photographic material any more reliable—on the contrary. Perhaps SPRO took no photographers to the front in the first weeks; certainly nothing was published, not even in the *Straits Times*. But by the end of December admittedly, photographers were moving north: one finds Fox Newsreel's Norman Fisher, for instance, a man who'd been in Singapore since late October, around Kampar on Christmas Day, at Kuala Lumpur three days later; the Australian Film Unit was to arrive on 8 January to go straight to Bakri.[26] But apart from the Bakri material nothing can be surely placed: those Indian sappers preparing bridges for demolition, for instance, could be anywhere. And both in Malaya and abroad, the newpapers simply go on using earlier material, captions changed to suit the circumstances. So material taken by the Department of Information in May 1941—a shot of men moving through palm jungle, for instance, or that classic photo of men in file—training photographs all of them and posed at that, turn up variously placed: the one as 'Australian guerillas operating in a pandanus palm jungle' (this after the Trong raid); the other as 'Australians forcing a path through dense jungle to meet the advancing Japanese'; as 'Australians training in jungle warfare'; in February as 'AIF on the defensive'; as 'Australian troops advancing through thick jungle'; later again as 'Australian and New Zealand troops learning to operate and fight in swampy country'; years later again as 'AIF in retreat' or 'British troops retreating through jungle which had been thought impenetrable'.[27]

Not that the Japanese material proves any better, any less ambivalent.[28] Many of the photographs after all come from China; and those that show Japanese soldiers 'storming in'—to Kuala Lumpur, to Alor Star, to Johore Bahru—are less likely to come from Yamashita's film crew than from the propaganda films, from pictorial epics like *The Great Battle of Malai*, or any one of those

A photograph of 8 Section 9 Platoon 2/18 in training, taken—probably around Port Dickson—in May 1941. It was released simply with the caption 'AIF in Malaya. Diggers making their way through dense jungle'. And this, since it could be read in a variety of ways without bending the truth too much, made it useful later as an 'action photo', which is how it's most commonly understood today.
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re-enactments that the Japanese turned to, like *On to Singapore*, shot between October 1942 and January 1943 using POWs from Pudu to play 'the enemy in retreat'. And the commentary that

goes with it is in line with the kind of heightened language that, at least in translation, Japanese military sources commonly used. The trailer to *The Great Battle of Malai*, for instance, talks of men 'surging in' and 'rushing the Australians': language that suggests the speed and power of some natural force, like the waves of the sea: a metaphor so much in keeping that when the AIF moved forward finally, it was—even to the British—as 'a seawall against the victorious flood'. As for their own exemplary stories, stories that set up models of conduct, these usually turn on those who are absolute for death: men like the tank company at Bakri who refused all offers of help, 'No, we will go by ourselves'; or the unit commander at Menkibol who asked his troops to give him their lives, dying himself precisely as they did. And in a way this was no more than Japanese military regulations laid down: 'to be inexorable and courageous in pursuit, to attack always, even when on the defensive.' In this 'holy crusade', Colonel Tsuji himself had exhorted them, they were to act like 'an avenger come face to face with his father's murderer ... whose death will lighten your hearts of its burden of brooding anger'. But even as their opponents could admire this courage, the obstinate courage of 'the brave Japanese', their admiration was profoundly ambivalent: not more, but a good deal less than human; mad dogs rather than tigers; even ants at times, an image catching both that relentless tenacity and what looked like industrious mindlessness. And there's a suggestion of that in the story a Dogra officer was telling in Singapore just before Christmas—for just as it hints at a courageous endurance it indicates too the kind of rigidity that more than one Australian was to remember.[29]

It is this courageous endurance, of course, that marks the Japanese view of their own men in action; that and a kind of energetic confrontation—troops storm the lines as at Jitra, go into a frontal assault under a hail of shells. And this too is a long way from the first British descriptions of Japanese troops in action, descriptions that—like the exemplary stories—come from the journalists that SPRO had taken north in the first week of the war; descriptions which appear precisely as observers fumble towards reasons for the Japanese success: the country the British were fighting in was not suitable for defence, but once they reach the flat country around Kuala Kangsar ... once more planes arrive to stop the Japanese peeling off the aerodromes 'like skinning bananas' ... once they've lost any advantage from that first audacious and treacherous attack, then this blind rush will spend itself. How far

this context—a context of bewildered fear—determined what the correspondents saw is not easy to decide. But from what they wrote, the British were up against small groups of lightly armed men, thousands of more or less self-sustained independent armies as one of them said: men in the most casual of dress, shorts and singlet like Malay or Chinese plantation workers; men who could live off the land, moving forward with a bag of rice and ten grains of atebrin; men on foot, men on bicycles, probing for British positions. This still remains the popular view: Japanese stealth and trickery; Japanese creeping down the jungle, pressing steadily during the day, infiltrating by night; using any means to find their opponents out, shouting, letting off fire crackers; anything to startle their enemy into firing first, even to posing as allies—one reason perhaps for the popularity of the 'We are Indians' stories is that they show an Australian or British refusal to be taken in. On one hand, such material enters the story very early, and entering in goes a fair way to determine how the rest of the text is laid down: Japanese cunning and skill on one hand; British ignorance, complacence and incompetence on the other. And the narrative commonly reads as though these are synonyms for Jitra, say, or Alor Star, Gurun or Kuala Kangsar. Once it is taken for granted that this is what these early events mean, then the rest of the story is read as though that were the basic argument: as though Slim River or Muar has to say that too.[30]

There is certainly, enough material from the British in the north to support part of that reading: those East Surreys cut off at Jitra could confirm, for instance, how Japanese slipped through the gaps between the units; and Tsuji himself was to stress the way the Okada detachment detoured towards the rear of the British positions. But if those troops dressed as the Malays did, or the Chinese, then this was as much indifference as cunning; though at least one story has Japanese reaching for a tommygun under the sarong. Even these small groups are rarely moving through 'impassable' jungle; Yamashita was to bring his men forward as often on lorries as on bikes. And neither at Jitra nor anywhere else does the whole thrust come from these small groups that the journalists make much of. Nor was Yamashita using those small tanks of his simply to scatter his enemy, making—as the journalists thought—his guerilla tactics more effective. Rather, they were a way of thrusting deep into enemy territory, cutting off large bodies of Imperial troops.

Nevertheless, where these first writers saw only thousands of

irregulars moving south steadily, more acute observers recognised what Yamashita was about. The earlier encounters were fought from fixed positions, the troops presenting a front to the enemy. But, as Brigadier Paris saw, at least as early as mid-December, the one and only tactical feature that mattered was the road—and the battle fought 'for the road, from the road'. How far Paris articulated any of this is impossible to say; what became the classic formulation, is Brigadier Stewart's. What Stewart grasped was that, when the Japanese Battalion Commander sent in his men in a frontal assault, this was primarily to hold his opponent, to pin him in place; or, if he had a limited local objective, then to force his enemy to attack. At the same time, though, he sends his troops—usually down through the rubber—to place a block in the rear, perhaps to a depth of 1000 yards. Simultaneously he sends out his reserve in a wide encircling movement, anything up to five miles deep, to cut the road completely. But that reserve battalion in this deep encircling attack is quite out of touch, out of control: that attack, once launched, could not be stopped. And if the Japanese CO could be persuaded to launch this reserve, then one might step the defence back, so that it takes the blow on the shoulder, as it were, rather than letting the enemy in behind—a manoeuvre that demanded that one pace the Japanese advance with absolute precision. As this implies, Stewart was fighting his battalion in depth down the road, to about a mile he wrote once: to present any kind of front simply allowed the Japanese to use cover to get round or through. And the Argyll action at Titi Karangan on 17 December, for instance, might indicate how sure his grasp was. The first company he placed to fix and hold the enemy, a second he ordered to attack straight down the road; and behind this, he had patrols deployed to locate the enemy movement when it came, as it did: two Japanese companies perhaps, both held at ease, given neither time nor chance to develop their attack.[31]

It's probably fair enough to assume that Stewart was thinking in much these terms when Percival went north: Slim River is still three weeks away. But if the GOC recognised any of this argument—certainly he met with Stewart the day after—in the account he wrote the day after he gives more weight to that outflanking movement the Japanese commonly made, a movement designed to dislodge the enemy. This, Percival wrote, 'is a guerilla war, to be fought with guerilla tactics'. Perhaps initially, so did Bennett. At least in the letter he sent out on 17 December, a letter to be read to all ranks, he stresses that all the enemy does is to 'endeavour

Major General Gordon Bennett, GOC AIF Malaya, a photograph taken about September 1941. AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL NEGATIVE NUMBER 010116

to infiltrate between posts', or 'to move small parties to threaten the flank or rear of our positions'. Whether this was what Percival meant by infiltration is not wholly clear—certainly Bennett, unlike the GOC, suggests fighting patrols specifically to deal with the parties filtering down. But that technique proves very much the same as the one Percival is arguing for the main road: the same tactic, so Bennett said, as the old AIF had used in 1918. To counter any infiltration, he suggests outflanking the enemy in turn; 'and if the enemy infiltrates, then fighting patrols move forward from positions taken up, sending forward small parties to the flanks; when the enemy approaches the main party will open fire, while the party sent forward will come on the enemy from the rear'.[12]

In the light of what Stewart was thinking, this may not sound much. But when Bennett wrote, his men were committed—committed unwillingly, but committed all the same—to static defence: 'holes in the ground'. And one might argue further that he is

speaking tacitly but explicitly to that, with a very firm grasp on the here and now: these Japanese as the Australians will encounter them, rather than 'the Japanese', translating what's being read about on to the very ground on which he expects to fight. On 19 December, two days after he wrote this, Bennett sent Major Dawkins, his GSO2, north to find out, as he puts it, 'what is the cause of the retreat'. The essential point that Dawkins makes is that the force with the initiative has the advantage; and the Japanese, in what is excellent infantry country—every move screened from air and ground observation, artillery almost useless—have by outflanking their enemy found a way of advancing and simultaneously cutting their opponents into small, almost impotent groups. If, so Dawkins argues, the initial attack fails then—just as Stewart had observed—they rarely pressed it. And that, of course, lends more weight to the kind of observation that Bennett had already made; for it implies precisely the kind of tactics that he had suggested—have the main party attack the front, send outflanking parties towards the rear, towards the outflanking parties being sent towards them. Further, the intelligence summary issued a day or so later—one of the few that survives—goes some way to support that interpretation: the enemy moves in company columns, with patrols out ahead, to find the flanks and then move through. Even if the Japanese do not push the main attack, the forward patrols always press doggedly on, then go to ground to allow the attack to pass through: tactics calculated to defeat static and linear defence. And the answer lies, the report insists, on a system of posts which use all-round or perimeter defence and which act as a pivot of manoeuvre for aggressive reserves.

None of these appreciations, not Percival's nor Bennett's nor Dawkins' pretends to be comprehensive, much less definitive: the campaign, after all, was less than a fortnight old. And perhaps none should be taken as any kind of final statement, even though there is nothing hesitant or tentative about the way in which the material is marshalled or argued. Still, final or not, each is to be taken seriously—Bennett's particularly, since it comes at a time when he is preparing to send the AIF into action for the first time.

III

On 19 December, the day the Japanese were pressing the Argylls south of Grik and closing up to 5/2 Punjabis at Selama, the day he sent Dawkins north, Bennett sent Brigadier Maxwell, Brigadier

Callaghan his CRA and 'some of my staff' to reconnoitre a defence position somewhere near Gemas on the Johore border. Initially it looked as though he was thinking primarily of Yamashita's thrust from the north, right down the trunk road. But in the east Takumi was closing up on Key too, as he withdrew to the Kuala Krai; so closely that the railhead was bombed on 19 January, much as his forces reached it—one report mentions enemy soldiers that day in the town itself. And just as Gemas was one terminus for the rail line from Thailand running south from Padang Besar through Kuala Lumpur, so at Gemas too the east coast line from Kota Bahru through Kuala Lipis joins the central line. And a few miles to the south again, the one road that runs clean across the peninsula, from Jemaluang through Kluang to Batu Pahat, crosses the main trunk road at Ayer Hitam.

It is probable, then, that rather than concentrating entirely on the thrust down the trunk road, Bennett was thinking more precisely of what he was to call the Gemas–Muar front, particularly as he himself—again with the CRA—was to travel two days later to Muar. And it is perhaps an indication of what he expected that he ordered 10th AGH at Malacca to start moving its heavy equipment south to Singapore—something impossible to manage in a hurry—and 2/4 Convalescent Depot similarily to shift from Tanjong Bruis to Batu Pahat 'while time is not pressing'. He had, as he wrote on Christmas Eve, very little time: the enemy could 'possibly reach the Johore frontier by 3 January'. And the defence of Johore was the responsibility of the AIF.

Yamashita's moves down the centre of the peninsula were well marked, obvious. But he also had men moving south on the east coast as well.[35] Even on 22 December, a Garhwali patrol working north of the Kemanan River had run into Japanese troops moving south in trucks: perhaps, the patrol reported, as many as 300 men; and that, if it were true, meant that the enemy was a bare 30 miles north of Kuantan. From what the Garhwalis reported it sounds as though the Japanese were coming south in some strength and purposefully; some on inland tracks, others along the coast near Sungei Balok. At first Malaya Command saw these simply as scouting patrols sent out from Kota Bahru, 'patrol brushes' as the Command report calls it. By 27 December, however, Percival thought that 'a combined air and sea attack against Kuantan was very likely, and possibly against east Johore, even Singapore Island itself. Another day, even the communiqué had to acknowledge that 'the enemy is driving in strength along the roads between

Kemaman and Kuantan'. On one hand, that meant that the AIF's 22nd Brigade had to remain for the time on the coast. On the other, Bennett had, even as he ordered the reconnaissance around Gemas, begun to gather the scattered units of 27th Brigade together: a Tiger Moth dropped orders to the garrison at Bukit Langkap, A Company 2/29 to withdraw on 19 December; on 22 December C Company 2/30 came from Kluang to join the rest of the battalion at the Crossroads; a day after, and the gunners from 2/15 Field Regiment came down from Bukit Langkap too, leaving a small detachment to man the 75s. And if for the moment, Bennett was to leave B Troop 2/15 Field Regiment down at Sedili, this might suggest how seriously he viewed the enemy threat to the coast; seriously enough to have 2/26 move its B Company down to strengthen the defences at the Sedili Boom and to cover the approaches from the east via Sedili River, reinforcing these with a section of three-inch mortars, a section with medium machine guns and a 25-pounder. At a conference at Jemaluang on 23 December—a conference important enough to bring together all the battalion commanders, both brigadiers and the COs of the ancillary units—Bennett discussed, so his diary notes, 'the method that would be adopted for the defence of western Johore': a method which, if the exercises he ordered over the next two days are any indication, depended largely on counter-attack—B Company 2/30, for instance, drove 'the enemy' back from Palm Hill. And these were in addition to the routine, extensive patrolling. Further, he had the gunners working on practice shoots: 2/15 Field Regiment were troop by troop calibrating their new 25-pounders; and at least one troop of 4/Anti-Tank was working near Gibraltar Hill. Whether he had decided on the larger tactical scheme hardly matters now. That same day Percival ordered him quite specifically 'to make preliminary arrangements to deal with (a) an enemy advance down the main Kuala Lumpur–Singapore Road, and (b) landings by small enemy forces on the west coast of Malaya' while 'retaining his main forces for the defence of the east coast'.

Inevitably, of course, Percival's orders had to reflect his reading of the situation facing him: moving uneasily between the threat to the east coast and the thrust down the trunk road. And the Operation Order Bennett issued on Christmas Eve reflects this precisely, leaving as it does 22nd Brigade on the coast, making 27th Brigade—its main task up until now to counter paratroop landings in central Malaya—'responsible for holding delaying positions towards the Johore Malacca boundary'. But if his strategic

imperatives are clear, how he placed his forces was determined as much by geographical as by tactical considerations. South Malaya is flat, much flatter than the country to the north, with a wide coastal plain, marsh and mangrove to the coast, cut by streams and rivers. But even away from the mountains, the road from Kuala Lumpur curves all the same—from Tampin to Segamat to begin with, where it runs almost directly east–west; and though rail and road are forced into a bottleneck at Tampin they gradually separate, with as much as five miles between them before coming together at Gemas. After Gemas, both routes run together then for some 30 miles before the railway moves to the east, Labis–Kluang–Rengam–Kulai, and the road more immediately south, Labis–Yong Peng–Ayer Hitam. Between the road and the coast, the country is swampy, crossed by minor roads which join the trunk road to the road running down the coast, Tampin–Malacca–Muar–Batu Pahat. Further, the Sungei Muar, all 150 miles of it, runs close to the main road at Batu Anam; crossing from Batu Anam then through hill and swamp to the sea. Indeed, that whole coastal plain was a corridor cut by a network of rivers and streams. And the Japanese regiment that had landed at Patani was already using the Perak River to outflank successive defensive positions.

To guard as Percival had directed against enemy landings on the west coast, Bennett planned to send one company to Muar—a town a little south of Malacca, 30 miles north of Batu Pahat, at the mouth of a wide curving river, crossed only by ferry. From Muar, too, a road ran to the highway, perhaps 30 miles away, Muar–Bakri–Parit Sulong–Yong Peng, a road which had at least one defensive position of some strength, a small pass between two hills, Bukit Payong to one side, Bukit Pelandok to the other. Muar he'd had in mind since 19 December; and Gemas too, of course, where he thought to place his largest group, 2/30 Battalion and a company from 2/26; his reserve Battalion 2/29 he ordered to Ayer Hitam. Nevertheless, whatever Bennett said to Percival on 27 December, the day when he 'put my plan for the defence of Johore', by 29 December he had decided to use 2/30 to stage an ambush. That day, the day Kluang was bombed for the first time, with Arthur Olsen of 2/29 the single death, 2/30 was practising along the Kluang Road. As 2/30 remembers it, this ambush was to be a large, fairly complex affair; and the initial blow, given by the entire battalion lining the road, was to be followed up by other battalions coming through to strike the enemy before he could

regroup.[31] By New Year's Day the plan was more elaborate still, involving 22nd Brigade 'if it can be relieved'. In this version, 22nd Brigade was to hold the enemy near Gemas, 27th Brigade to counter-attack against the flank and rear first near Tampin, and after that possibly near Seremban as well.

Nothing more of the plan survives than that, a bare outline, but some of the thinking that informs it can at least be guessed at. For if a whole battalion is deployed along the road to a depth of a mile, then this forces the enemy to swing very wide indeed: either to encircle the troops opposing him or—as the Japanese drill invariably was—to block the rear. If he failed to swing wide enough, then he bumped part of the ambushing battalion; if he swung too wide, then he hit the battalions in front of him. Whether at this point Bennett's planning got much further than that is not clear. By the time he met the Japanese, if he had failed to get his 22nd Brigade transferred to his command, he had two brigades of 9th Indian Division: enough troops to fight a series of defensive actions on the main road from a position of concentrated strength. And precisely as Bennett made these preparations, ordered these dispositions, the situation was to change again. Part of the interest now is to see how Malaya Command (and Bennett particularly) reconcile what now appear as conflicting, even contrary, claims.

4

'Not in action yet'

I

Nothing dashing, one might think about General Tomoyuki Yamashita, not the stuff of legend, like Montgomery perhaps, or Rommel: the 'Tiger of Malaya' was to become 'old Potato Face' in the Philippines. Yet occasionally, even in the most pedestrian of biographies, one catches a glimpse of the man within: at the British surrender perhaps, or in Manila just before he came to trial, explaining—unsmiling—the point of *Go*. 'Very Japanese indeed', this game; and its point, Yamashita suggests, is to take as much territory from your opponent as you can, in the shortest possible time. And this in a way explains what he was about in the New Year, just as the very difference of *Go* from chess explains on one level why his opponents acted as they did. In chess you take out your opponent's pieces by taking the square they stand on; in *Go* you capture your enemy's counters by encircling them, enclosing the points of the grid with a boundary of your own stones. And this is very much the way Yamashita was using his troops. Even if one can no longer determine, even from Japanese sources, precisely what he had in mind in the New Year—still less how his opponents were reading him—what he did is clear, and how that forced Malaya Command to act is clearer still.[1]

To the east, Brigadier Key, commanding 8th Indian Brigade, had been withdrawing from Kota Bahru to the railhead at Kuala Lipis: dropping back, he called it; dropping back to the Kopchang Line, dropping back to Machang, to the Nai River. By 22 December, Key had moved back down the line leaving the Japanese in possession of Kelantan, their troops strung out between Kuala Krai and Kota Bahru and stretched out along the coast probably as far as Bachok. And that day the official communiqué admitted that

Lieutenant General Tomoyuki Yamashita, 'Tiger of Malaya', commanding the 25th Japanese Army in Malaya.
AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL NEGATIVE NUMBER 127911

the airfields in north Kelantan were lost, and British forces withdrawn from the area north of Kuala Krai. And precisely now, as though he recognised very clearly indeed what the communiqués meant, Yamashita changed his original plan, ordering Takumi's 56th Regiment to make its way down the coast rather than to take Kuantan from the sea. Not an arduous journey either: a metalled road runs from Kota Bahru to Kuala Trengganu; and even where that peters out in gravel and earth tracks, these are clearly defined, familiar enough to be marked on a very ordinary map—Dungun to Kemasik, Chukai to Kuantan.[2]

This, one might assume, the Japanese knew a good deal about, if only from the iron mine at Bukit Besi in the hills some twenty miles from Dungun, a mine run for twenty years, like the one at Bukit Langkap, by Ishihara Sanguo Company. By 28 December Takumi's troops were less than ten miles from Kuantan, Army 97s were attacking the outpost positions and, continuously, the town itself. And if the official narratives are right, Takumi had his men moving in two lines of advance down the Sungei Jabor valley: one far to the west upriver, perhaps to threaten the airfield; and the other, probably the stronger, advancing straight to Kuantan. And spare though this writing is, even through it one can see how the Japanese are working: first moving through and between the patrols sent out against them; then collecting in considerable numbers, enough to force the Imperials to withdraw; and in that withdrawal to lose touch with HQ or the units to their flanks. Thus Yamashita had this force closing in on Kuantan, a second possibly moving down the line from Kuala Lipis—there is one report of troops coming that way, hidden in the jungle along the side of the track; and on the trunk road his units were moving up to Kampar. It is as though he'd placed his line of counters along two grid lines, almost parallel, both claiming about half the board. But if his biographer is right, then what Yamashita wanted was not simply to disperse, but to crush, 'to annihilate' his enemy, particularly now when he was already 'breathing the air of the south'. That presumably is why, for the first time, he brought in the two regiments of the Imperial Guards, to make a third, if understrength, division in the field. For if the British had been forced out of one position after another, they had still not been decisively defeated. It says something for Heath that to this point he had been able, as his orders were, to disengage each time. Troops had been lost, whole units cut off, true: the morale so low that Command sent journalists to the front again on 30 December. Still, he was

holding Yamashita north, though the airfields—the very reason for being up the peninsula in the first place—had gone.

By 28 December, Heath had drawn back to Kampar: a position impossible to outflank, with jungle to the east and swamp to the west, the road and the railway both hugging the mountains and the hill which dominated the whole surrounding country blocking the main line of advance; a position to be held, Percival ordered, until 14 January when reinforcements might be expected to arrive. Yamashita decided against a paratroop landing—another way of achieving the same end—on 30 December: this at least the British had made impossible, covering every open space—like the padang at Kuala Lumpur—with a dizzy and uneven pattern of posts and ropes, sections of grandstand, heavy rollers, lawn mowers. By early January, paratroops and planes were given a par rating on the golf course. But if he was to bring in the Guards, this was not just to add weight to the frontal assault. On Christmas Day he ordered Lieutenant General Matsui to send a large detachment down the coast to cut in behind the enemy and block the line of retreat—a decision taken very much against the wishes of his staff, who argued that the thrust down the road would be far more effective. And the same day as he cancelled any paratroop operation, Yamashita ordered Colonel Wanatabe, his force over the last four days assembled at Lumut, to sail south. His battalion and a half of 11th Infantry Regiment—'inexperienced and untrained in landing operations,' Tsuji wrote tartly—were to come in at the mouth of the Sungei Perak, to send patrols inland from there to Telok Anson. And three days later, as the British withdrew from Kampar, he instructed 4 Imperial Guards to come in further south again, at Kuala Selangor, a move which was to pose a real threat to the British line of communication. This worked the first time, when his troops landed near the mouth of the Sungei Bernam, a river which reaches almost to the main road; and these, with a battalion of 4 Imperial Guards coming down the Perak, forced Heath late on 2 January to withdraw right down to Slim River—either that or risk III Indian Corps as a cohesive force. Still, only a day later and Japanese boats were forced to turn back from Kuala Selangor and go in a little further north. Not that it made much difference in the end—Yamashita moved east to the road just the same, but it was a small success. And it's worth remembering nonetheless, if only because for two days, from 4 January to 6 January, there was a small force of Australians among the troops guarding the bridge at Batu Berjuntai.

II

Japanese reports 'from the front' released about now put the AIF in action more than once around the New Year: in the Larut Hills, for instance; or at Perak, where the 8th Division 'was destroyed'; resisting bitterly at Kuantan; or fighting north of Slim River, where, so Tokyo Radio had it, Gordon Bennett was himself among the prisoners. That at least AIF Command could easily shrug off and, as for the other stories, Command stated simply that the AIF was 'not in action yet'. But there may be something in it all the same. On 28 December, a small force of AIF volunteers had gone into action at Trong, ambushing a convoy and escaping unharmed; and the enemy may be alluding to that in the first story. In the last report there's perhaps an indication, slight admittedly, that the Japanese were aware that some of these men were now at Batu Berjuntai. At the bridge the AIF had been under the command of Major Fearon of the Independent Company; at Trong earlier the force had gone in with an observer from Malaya Command, Major Angus Rose of 2/Argylls.[3]

It was Rose who on his own showing had been primarily responsible for raising the Rose Force on 22 December: three officers and 43 ORs—from the AIF since the Marines he preferred were not yet ready—two platoons, all volunteers, all single men, with David Lloyd from 2/30 as OC. That it was his own idea, this kind of hit-and-run operation, an idea he put directly to Percival may be true too. As he left for Ipoh on 17 December, for instance, Percival did leave instructions that special raiding parties be formed: 50 Australians, he writes, operating from the sea directly against the Japanese—'a backstop for the Independent Company'. But such an idea was already in the air. On 22 December, too, Colonel Warren, now attached to III Indian Corps, was at Kuala Lumpur to arrange for stay-behind parties like Spencer Chapman's; and at the same time John Dalley, from his house in Bellamy Road, was organising Dalco, the first of the two irregular battalions he was to raise from the young Chinese. With the Rose Force he had to go, Rose argued, simply as an observer, given the AIF conventions about going into action under their own commanders. The Force Diary is to put that more strongly still: Rose was 'an observer from Malayan Command [with] no say whatsoever in planning, discipline etc'. And as for the Force being named after him as he suggests—a suggestion that carries with it some implicit recognition of his commanding position, this the Australians at least were to reject: 'the name being chosen along the lines of Tulip Force

already formed from the AIF,' the Diary notes tersely, 'had no connection with Major Rose of Malaya Command.' As for the action at Trong, officially nothing was heard of it for a week or more, though the word got back somehow to 22nd Brigade at the Crossroads: 'at least one item of good news,' the 2/19 historian remembers. When the news was released on 6 January, it came in a rush of stories about guerillas and commandos and independent companies, as though this were simply one encounter among many: the terms, even, holding out some kind of promise of brisk and purposeful action.[4]

There is not a great deal that one can say about any of these units, not with any real certainty. For one thing, the reports are very guarded; and for another, there's a kind of secrecy that goes with irregular units like these, as much a part of them as stripes of the tiger. Units like the Independent Company, or those 'real guerillas' a journalist talked with, are lost now in a thicket of files, taking shape only perhaps in the figure of one of their leaders, a tall man with a growth of black beard, revolver on one hip, kris on the other, clothes stained with jungle mud. But the Rose Force one can trace through memoirs, official reports, the Diary itself; solidly documented, particularly on the action at Trong.

Not that everything at Trong went quite the way those first reports suggest, nor perhaps as Rose himself in his own account implies. The aim was simple: to strike the enemy line of communication, on both the coast road and the road from Kuala Kangsar; Spencer Chapman had urged he be sent three days ahead to reconnoitre. Early on Boxing Day, both platoons left Port Swettenham, reaching the mouth of the Sungei Trong before dawn the next morning. But one of the smaller boats they were to go upriver in proved out of order, leaving 2 Platoon, a platoon drawn from 2/19, 2/20, 2/30 and commanded by Lieutenant Sanderson—and Rose, as observer—to go forward alone; Sanderson as OC deciding to attempt the task set for 1 Platoon. Twenty-four hours later, he'd moved into position on the right of the trunk road between two corners: two sections close together at the head of the ambush position, one some 180 yards back. An ambulance convoy he let go—like two huge furniture vans, one of the planter-guides was to write—then single trucks, single cars, cars in convoy: Quislings, Rose described them as, and Sanderson as Fifth Column; more likely frightened ordinary villagers, forced to obey. If the War Diary is right, then the plan was for Sanderson in the middle section to fire first; Rose was to write that there were neither orders nor a

tactical plan, as neat an indication as any of the divisons already within the force. And this perhaps was why on seeing a car with a blue pennant, possibly part of Wanatabe's 11th Regiment—'Brigadier, we must have him'—Rose fired first: too early, one of the Force argues now. But the Brigadier was dead and staff officers, two lorries went over the embankment—*there wasn't much action when we left.*[3] But that very firing had meant that the trucks following up were alerted, stopped; the troops fanning out into the jungle to surround the ambushing party. Rather than take on the two or three more tasks that Rose wanted, Sanderson chose to return to Port Swettenham, the party picking up on the way two Argylls, a Leicester and three East Surreys who'd been cut off earlier. That evening Captain Lloyd as OC reported to Bennett at Johore Bahru, a clear distance again from Rose's 'not too bad, not too good'; and from his 'frank report' to Heath the day after. And although there were plans for further actions—Lloyd had from Bennett himself 'special instructions about further operations'—as a naval officer attached to the Force was to write, 'Major Rose had said he would certainly not go with the Australians; they for their part said they would not go again with him'.[4]

Rose went to join a party of Marines—he'd wanted to work with them in the first place; the AIF to plan a raid on Taiping aerodrome. The boats it was to use were bombed and sunk, and so too the rest of the Perak flotilla. And as Yamashita turned the left flank in the New Year, any offensive operation, the very *raison d'être* of the Rose Force, was now impossible. In the next week Heath was to use the two AIF platoons, now 'taking instructions and advice from Brigadier Fawcett', Heath's Brigadier General Staff (BGS), much as he might any independent company, where he needed them the most. First, he sent them into action some ten miles up the beach, where the enemy was reported coming down in some strength, but the Japanese 'made off', and broke contact. Two days later the Force was up at Asam Jawa and, from there, 'with the entire force ready for action', the Australians were ordered up the coast road towards Bukit Berjuntai, coming then under the command of Major Fearon of the Independent Company, to meet enemy troops who'd landed north of Kuala Selangor. If the enemy broke through here, then he was only twelve miles from Rawang on the main road, and a good 70 miles south of 11th Indian Division, now at Slim River. That is why Heath was to send his 6/15 Brigade to Bukit Berjuntai; and that too is why—finally—Brigadier Painter's 22nd Indian Brigade over at Kuantan, having been told

even on New Year's Day to hold the airfield for another five days, was ordered to withdraw down the road through Maran and Rengam on 3–4 January, a road which joined the trunk road twenty miles north of Rawang.

At the bridge itself, even as they came up in the new light of 4 January, the Rose Force could hear, one was to write, firing ahead; and the peculiar humming or whining sound of bullets passing overhead. Fearon sent the Australians straight into position near the bridge, the Independent Company passing back through them from the other side of the river. Between the lines of the Diary entry, then, one can see the shape of the ambush Fearon was planning. The Independent Company was to cross the river again, make contact and then withdraw: straight through the Rose Force deployed along the road on the south side of the bridge. If the enemy followed up—as he did—then he would be caught between the two forces, to be 'completely routed'. On the other side of the river, a small hill commanded a view of the entire river and the bridge. This the Rose Force was sent to take, to hold as a bridgehead 'at all costs': 'one of those desperate isolated actions' that units such as this were sent out to. But 6/15th Indian Brigade had reached the coast by now; both the Rose Force and the Independent Company were relieved about 0930 hours on 6 January—the Australians by East Surreys. The Force was to go straight to Kuala Lumpur; and next morning, 'soon after breakfast in case Major Rose tried to recover any of the equipment he had given us before the Trong Raid', into Johore.[7]

In the Rose Force Japanese troops for the first time met with Australian infantry.[8] And if one puts 2/3 RMT aside—and men like Laurie Luke who'd picked up a rifle and gone in with the Argylls—it was the first time the AIF had gone into action in this campaign: 'a modern version of romantic tales of adventure and foolhardiness,' the *Straits Times* was to write, a line which suggests as well as any how the independent companies were reported. Nothing much, it has been argued, came out of these, neither from the 'commando' units nor from groups like the Independent Company. And to some extent that is certainly true—a few trucks destroyed, an ambush, some extensive patrolling, an airstrip put out of action at Labis, a bridge or two, stores and dumps, perhaps a powerstation—nothing that made any difference, nothing that changed the course of the campaign.

At the same time, as those first news reports suggest, particularly those about 'that small commando of Imperial troops', as the

Rose Force is described, the very existence of such groups came to mean a great deal. More than anything else, as Sir Henry Pownell recognised when he came to take over, his troops needed some success, however small—'small local counter-attacks; some good patrol encounters'—and that was what these independent groups seemed to promise. Admittedly there was nothing much in the techniques, in the methods they adopted, that was new, nothing much that was unexpected: in essence it was an idea that was bound to be taken up sooner or later. Percival himself had argued on 23 December that this was a guerilla war, to be fought with guerilla tactics. But no sooner had that notion been taken up, as the Rose Force demonstrated, than it worked. Even the most sceptical commentator broadcasting the night the news was released was prepared to admit that the British were 'learning to fight the kind of guerrilla warfare that the Japanese had found successful'.[9]

And that explains—perhaps—some of the euphoria about Gemas. A day or two before, a 'British trader from the Malay East Coast' in command of 'Commandos' is reported as saying that guerilla units are springing up everywhere in Johore, and in the coastal areas further north. Whether this is true or not is another matter—certainly a number of the stay-behind parties had by then gone into hiding. But it is within this context that observers see the 2/30 action on 14 January. And it's also a very real measure of what these independent companies meant and what their success promised that they shaped—even if they did not determine—how observers came to interpret later events. After Gemas, for instance, where the Japanese were checked, and apparently checked decisively—the first reports talk of 800 dead—the commentators speak as though this were essentially a guerilla action: a patrol moving through the jungle 'suddenly' sights a Japanese column, infantry and tanks ahead of them. And when the stress falls as it does on the secrecy and silence, on the Australians 'fading back into the jungle', the action is moving in very much the same world as the Rose Force. The Australians, the inference is, are beating the enemy at his own game.

III

On New Year's Day, Percival went north again—Lloyd was to talk with him at Klang about 'future operations'. By 2 January he was already thinking of bringing the AIF in, more apparently to rest III Indian Corps than anything else. But putting Australians into

the front was one thing, putting the exhausted Corps troops into garrison eastern Johore was another, especially while a Japanese landing there remained on the cards 'at any time'. Further, Bennett was pointing out that a landing on the west coast, somewhere near Malacca, was a possibility; enough to suggest that he send a battalion—presumably 2/30 again—with a battery of artillery and anti-tank guns to Tampin. Nothing came of it, not immediately; even so, if Bennett is right, Malaya Command had that small force on two hours' notice that same day. And that could only make any decision to send the AIF north more unlikely, particularly since to use Australian troops, especially if it meant splitting formations or sending them in under commanders other than their own, always involved matters of high policy.[19]

On the highest level the command had already changed, with Pownell replacing Brooke-Popham just before Christmas. Now Pownell himself was to go, to become General Wavell's Chief of Staff, with Wavell taking up the newly created position of Supreme Commander of all Allied land, sea and air forces in the South West Pacific. If Brooke-Popham's departure made any difference, there's little evidence of it. As for Pownell, his diary at least indicates that he had any number of ideas. At the end of the year, for instance, he is noting that the policy as approved by COS in London was for both forces—air and land—to conserve their strength and hold on until reinforcements arrived. For the airforce, Pownell wrote, this was almost impossible: it meant 'holding very hard' since the convoys had to be shepherded in. That meant hardly any aircraft over the forward troops at all: a matter for a small bitter joke—'Look there goes our Air Force.' 'My word yes. Both of them.' And as for the army, the same policy meant delaying tactics; meant, as Pownell saw it, giving no ground unnecessarily, nor becoming so engaged it was impossible to break with the enemy: a matter for another joke, turning on the phrase one of the communiqués actually uses, about 'successfully disengaging the enemy'. But Pownell, as it turned out, was hardly there long enough to make any effective decisions; nor, unlike Brooke-Popham, had he been given operational control. Wavell's appointment was publicly released on 4 January, though he did not reach Singapore until 7 January on his way to Java. And then the whole question of the AIF and who was to assume operational control was to be posed in the sharpest possible manner.

If Yamashita had that boldness which only a year or two earlier Wavell had noted as the mark of a really great commander, he had

also another characteristic which Wavell had noted: a very strong sense of the possible—a sense not only of how his troops could handle the country he was asking them to fight over, but how hard he could drive them if his enemy were to be kept off balance, not given for a moment a chance to recover. Pursuit is not, as it might seem, a simple matter. Part of Allenby's genius—so Wavell wrote—was that he managed to keep his men right on the heels of a retreating enemy.[11] And that, of course, had meant the complete destruction of the armies facing him. This is part of Yamashita's skill too, obvious in the way he forces Heath, particularly in the first week of the New Year, continually to shift, to adjust his positions: a flurry of movements informed also by Percival's instructions that the enemy is to be kept from the aerodromes at Kuala Lumpur and Port Swettenham as long as possible. If Angus Rose is right, then by 3 January Heath had already accepted that the Japanese would carry out a series of encircling movements by sea, directed successively at Kuala Selangor, Port Swettenham, Muar and further south. And that primarily is why he'd pulled back from Kampar. But if Yamashita was forcing Heath back in the north, this is at a point where he is pressing closely in; where his troops are being ordered to keep in contact. It is equally a measure of his skill that he could force a shift in the Australian area much to the south. To Bennett it was clear that the Imperial forces would reach the state border before long, though Percival himself still thought he had at least a fortnight: 'I did not contemplate giving up Kuala Lumpur until the middle of the month at the earliest.'

But if III Indian Corps fell back, then rather than have Bennett in command of the forces as they moved into Johore, as he himself had suggested, Percival had on 4 January decided that the Corps was to take up positions in the west of Johore, with Heath responsible for the trunk road and the country to the west of it. And for the AIF, as he wrote later, he reserved 'the defence of the east coast'—a phrase that, whatever Percival meant by it, Bennett read as 'eastern Johore'. The line as the GOC defined it ran Endau–Segamat–Muar, with the trunk road as a kind of meridian: an arrangement that Percival was to confirm in conference at Segamat on 5 January. On 4 January, even the day after, such dispositions were on paper only, and to Heath remote—even on that 4 January, to judge from the orders he issued to his own commanders, he was assuming that his troops would not reach back to Tampin before 24 January. Even so, Percival gave him 45th Indian Brigade which had arrived two days before; and this he sent

to Malacca, presumably to counter any Japanese landings. It goes without saying, perhaps, that whatever Malaya Command had been planning and whatever Bennett had been proposing, very little of that complex of argument reaches into the official records. And as for the units around Mersing, nothing—not a hint of it—breaks through the staid surface of the Diarists' prose. The entries are brief; briefer still as December moves into January; concerned with routine matters, like putting up tactical and defensive wiring, strengthening field works, thickening the minefields. And this tends to conceal how quickly and decisively Brigadier Taylor moved, hard on the heels of Painter's withdrawal from Kuantan on 3 January.[12]

So, when they reach 4 January the unit Diarists write as though the kinds of changes they describe are purely at battalion level: 2/19 talks of a reorganisation of the main defence areas around the Crossroads, a reorganisation demanded by the exigencies of a counter-attack role; and 2/20, even more cumbrously, notes 'consideration being given to the redistribution of the battalion positions'. Only the Brigade Diary states explicitly what none of the others as much as glance at: that these orders come directly from Taylor. And Taylor, far from simply moving his troops around on the same ground as it were, had made a radical shift, ordering them in fact to leave their fixed positions, positions they'd held since last August: the threat, he argued, now came from the north and northwest rather than from the sea. Some units he left as they were: 2/18 stayed on the coast, Don Company 2/20 as well. Others he shifted to face directly north. That in itself meant constructing new defences: A Company 2/20 along the bank of the Sungei Mersing, for instance, was building machinegun positions in the bank, putting down timber footways in the swamps to reach fire positions hidden in the mangroves, laying dannert wire above and below the water right along the bank on the south side.

But if that were all that the Diarists meant by 'reorganising' or 'redistributing' battalion positions, the phrases only conceal how radically the role of these units from 22nd Brigade had changed as well: now as the very exercises indicate, mobile rather than garrison troops. On 5 January, for instance, and four days later, 2/18 rehearsed formations for jungle warfare in the jungle west of the Mersing Road; at the same time, 2/20 practised deployment, jungle fighting, hardening and seasoning to mobile roles. Patrols from both brigades had—at least from 2 January—been moving into the rivers and swamps to the west: like the 48-hour patrol that 2/19

sent out on 2 January from the Crossroads towards the Sungei Endau 'for training behind enemy lines' on a bearing north-north-west that would take them through the broken desolate country of the Mersing Forest reserve; and 2/18 on 8 January sent out at least one patrol, with the IO significantly enough in the same direction, to investigate a track running northwest from Gibraltar Hill, to Lenggor, then south to the Kluang–Jemaluang Road. And so many entries in the official records are given over to this kind of intelligence—the track running down from Kuantan to Bahau, for instance, or the way the Rompin River reaches from the east coast almost to Segamat—that one can see clearly enough how Taylor—Maxwell too probably—was thinking. Some of the patrols that the different Diarists mention now, patrols moving up into the Sungei Endau area, were possibly reconnaissance patrols; one at least was 'to estimate the strength of Japanese infiltration from Kuantan'.

On 6 January, Taylor had held a conference to define what 2/18 Diary, the only Diary to mention it directly, calls the 'new areas of brigade responsibility'; this, one might argue, depended ultimately on Percival's decision the day before, giving the AIF responsibility for eastern Johore. And that, if it affected 22nd Brigade, bore on 27th Brigade as well. After 6 January, as its own History says, the area 2/30 was responsible for was surely very large indeed, bounded on the east by the Sungei Lenggor, on the west by the Sungei Kahangar as far as Sembrong, on the north by the Sungei Endau, on the south by the Kluang Road. More importantly, if 2/18 sources are right, then this conference has a direct bearing on the formation of Endau Force. Two days before, admittedly, Lieutenant Colonel Assheton, CO 2/20, had gone up to Endau on reconnaissance; on 8 January Lieutenant Colonel Varley from 2/18 was to go, with his company commanders, his adjutant and his IO, crossing to the north bank of the river.[15]

To send up Don Company 2/19 as Taylor was to do on 7 January is to do more than expand the unit—C Company 2/20—which had been there since August: the force is now a separate formation within the Brigade, and its responsibility different. In the original plan drawn up the August before, the company at Endau—as the official Appreciation explicitly states—was there in part to protect the minefield at the mouth of the river, in part to guard the entrance itself: C Company, for instance, had been deployed to cover the mouth of the river and the southern coast. For this new Force no such Appreciation survives, but the dispositions say something. To begin with, as soon as he arrived, Major

Robertson, the Force OC, moved C Company: not far, just far enough to concentrate two platoons around Wireless Point and the area to the south, leaving the third platoon around Endau village. As for the three 2/19 Platoons he was given, except for Varley's 17 Platoon, none is as much as mentioned in the Force Diary: as far as that record is concerned, the Force is primarily—or still—2/20, so much so that all other entries are taken up with 2/20 matters. And if Varley is remembered, then this may be because his platoon actually engaged the enemy. However, Robertson sent one platoon, Dick Austin's 18 Platoon, to the headland on the north bank of the river, almost opposite Wireless Point; and Varley he sent further north again, along the coast: his three sections, one of his men remembers, deployed about two miles apart up the beach, almost as far as Rompin:

> *wet most of the time, if you went out you got soaked, if you sat in the tent, you were all crowded together; couldn't light a fire to cook with—very difficult anyway. Wasn't the happiest of times waiting there ...*[14]

If these positions were isolated, at least Varley himself drove up from time to time, along a beach as hard as iron. But Travers' section, a section of Dal Wilson's 16 Platoon, placed on the coast south of the river, were hours away from their nearest post, *and not a mob we knew.*

> *Our job—if we'd seen the Japs—was to light this big bonfire. The last thing we'd ever have done. If they'd have landed, not one of us would have got away; by the time we'd got this fire alight ...*[15]

Most of those who were there remember Endau as a kind of forward observation post, the Force intended perhaps to fight a delaying action, but then to disengage, withdrawing upriver towards Bukit Langkap, partly to get out itself, partly to deny that route to the enemy. But more and more one senses that Brigade was preoccupied with the whole question of Japanese infiltration down from Kuantan through the rivers of Pahang. And this, it would seem, is why about 13 January Major Robertson, the Force OC, ordered the two sections of Dal Wilson's platoon to move upstream from Endau, where they'd been based up until now, near the Chicle king *round the bend and a little further up.* As Taylor himself had argued last August, if the Japanese came through Endau at all, it would be Endau–Bukit Langkap–Kluang Road, and Bukit

Langkap for this reason formed part of the area Force Y was responsible for, the force defending Kluang. But once 2/29 had moved out, then Bukit Langkap fell to Endau Force. And this has to be why Wilson's two sections were sent up, their function not simply to patrol the river, but—precisely as Force Y was to do—to prevent any Japanese attempts to take over Bukit Langkap as an infiltration point on to the Kluang Road and the airstrip at Kahang. In a way too, sending Wilson upriver is perhaps a measure of Taylor's anxiety, or at the very least an indication of the direction of his thinking. Endau Force is now scattered quite widely, from Pontian down to coast to Point Kempit, from the river mouth to the mine five hours away. And this is the more significant since, after 10 January, until 2/17 Dogras arrived from Singapore Fortress, he had no reserve on the east coast—none at all.

As Wilson went first up and then down the river again, other patrols, not all from Endau Force, were moving north and west over the same country. And if some were simply routine, leaving no trace—not even in the Diary—others seem more ambitious. Ten days before, at least once the Australians had turned to the Sakai, much as the AIF had set out to do openly months before: much as III Indian Corps had tried around Kampar. And if that is the point of AIF patrols now and in the days to come, something remembered almost casually, as though it were on the very edge of memory:

> *we were to meet some Sakai-Malays ...*
> *we hired a launch and went up the river to where the Sakai were ...*[16]

once at least it is officially remembered, as when 2/30 sent out that patrol with orders 'to contact the Sakai, to arrange native patrols and to estimate the strength of Japanese infiltration from Kuantan'.[17] For the most part, Malaya Command had used men familiar with the country, planters and the like, as guides. In the east, as in the west, names recur: Spencer Chapman and Van Rennan in the west, in the east Robin Henman, C.J. Windsor—men that stories cluster around.[18] Windsor had lived in Pahang before the war: important enough for almost anyone coming into Kuantan to be told something about him—'a millionaire', the Australian Equipment Officer at the RAF station there wrote later, 'who'd made a fortune supplying chicle gum to the American factories'. Lieutenant Colonel Varley noted he was German born, naturalised; another, that he'd been a U-Boat commander in the

First World War. And 25 years later he was back in Pahang, living somewhere south of Kuantan, near Pekan: 'his knowledge of the south Pahang swamps unique.' With T.M. Cope he arrived at Endau on New Year's Day, 'from Kuantan via Pekan', so the records say: Windsor in HMS *Kelana*, Cope in his customs launch *Sri Pekan*—both to come under 22nd Brigade command. On 9 January, Cope with two men from 2/20, Merv Alchin and Ken Donaldson, was ordered up along the beach 'on reconnaissance', official sources say, to Rompin and Nanasik. The day before, Bill Clayton's patrol had come up from the Crossroads to be sent out on the river probably with Windsor, *a white naval character* anyway, *who spoke Malay*. Nothing out of the ordinary in this patrol, perhaps: but it's one of those seemingly casual incidents where various parts of a story come together, touch for a moment, then slide away. For the first night, for instance, they camped in the jungle to find the next day that the *orang asli* that Windsor spoke with had heard nothing of any Japanese in the area. But they'd reached rapids, Clayton remembers, and they turned back to stay the next night *at some outpost with gunners*. Nothing in Bukit Langkap, admittedly, is ever quite what it seems, though, God knows, the place itself is solid enough, sharply remembered and as surely realised in a dozen conversations: the grey-green river, the jetty, the great mullock heaps stretching back, 100 feet perhaps, from the bank. But Bukit Langkap it is, this outpost, the night before X section of 16 Battery was withdrawn; the section David Hinder was to come on the next day, he going up the river, the gunners going down:

> *looking as though they were on a Sunday school picnic—skylarking, waving and shouting, and towed along behind them was the gun, covered with a few palm leaves ...*[19]

and Clayton's party sailing down too. The 2/30 party were to return to their unit at 0330 hours on 11 January. As for Windsor, he was at Brigade a day later, where Colonel Varley spoke to him. He was asked to 'organise and pay the Sakais for information from an area NTH and WEST of Endau, from Pontian to the Sungei Kembar'.

On 7 January, these were the kinds of arrangements Taylor was putting into place; arrangements that assume the AIF is deployed in the east of the peninsula. But events are now moving so fast that even these are less than sure. Even as Taylor is moving Don Company of his reserve battalion up to Endau, Percival was

planning apparently to move 27th Brigade to the west of the state—using it probably as a mobile force to counter-attack and to disrupt Japanese preparations—to come under Heath's command for offensive operations, replacing it in the east by one battalion from Singapore Island and another from III Indian Corps when that force got back into Johore. Whether this notion reached Bennett is not clear, though the 2/30 unit history indicates that, on 7 January, that battalion—though not the other two—was on one and a half hour's notice to move. And the IO, though in Johore Bahru that day looking for maps of the Segamat–Labis–Malacca area, was also, his Battalion Diary states, looking for anything on Endau–Mersing–Jemaluang. And in the event, nothing came of that either. What happened at the Slim River that day changed everything. That, and Wavell, who on the evening of 8 January was to take over, effectively, operational control.

IV

It's one thing to say that when the Japanese broke through, the 11th Indian Division was destroyed: the figures alone bear that out, five officers and twenty Gurka ORs mustering the next day from 2/1 Gurka Rifles, 400 men from 2/2 Gurkas, from 2/9 Gurkas, just 300. But precisely what that means can be grasped most easily through particular instances, the experience of particular men: men like the CO of 36 Indian Field Ambulance. About 0700 hours on 7 January he left his main dressing station half a mile south of Slim to visit his Advanced Dressing Station at Trolok. Running into thirteen Japanese tanks on a narrow winding road, he moved through the rubber, picked up an ambulance at Brigade HQ, went on to his ADS, and brought the six men there back to HQ 2/2 Gurka Rifles. From there, swimming the river, he returned to his Main Dressing Station (MDS) to find it shot to pieces; returning to Brigade he arrived just as the tanks shot up its transport, which made evacuating casualties impossible. Back again at his MDS he organised stretcher parties; these coming under fire had to separate, leaving the wounded by the road and taking to a jungle to get past a road block on the Slim River Bridge Road. Not many got through: one party reached the coast at Kuala Selangor only to be betrayed to the Japanese; the second in command and his party were picked up in April 1942 some 250 miles south of the Slim River, to be sentenced to a long term in Outram Road.[20]

Something of this chaos of confusion General Wavell heard of

immediately: 7 January, his first day in Singapore, he spent at GHQ Far East; at dawn he flew to Kuala Lumpur to talk with Heath, driving north to the battalions that had taken the brunt of the attack. And back in Singapore that evening he called Percival in—so the story goes—and handed him a new plan. This the GOC was to issue at a conference at Segamat on the morning of 9 January, and to confirm again a day after. Briefly, what Wavell proposed was that III Indian Corps should delay the enemy as long as possible in front of Kuala Lumpur—though that, he thought, was unlikely to be much past 11 January—that it should then disengage completely, abandoning central Malaya entirely, withdrawing into Johore, leaving only sufficient mobile rear guards to cover demolitions. Where Percival had four days before hoped to pull back III Indian Corps to Segamat–Muar, perhaps replacing it in part with the AIF, Wavell recognised that the Corps troops were spent completely, 'no longer able to withstand attack', as he signalled the Chiefs of Staff that evening. 'I have never seen two men look so tired,' his ADC wrote after talking with Brigadier Stewart and Brigadier Selby. And since Bennett 'had studied the theatre and trained his division in appropriate tactics', as he put it 24 hours later, he proposed to put Bennett in command in northwest Johore. He was to take up a new defensive position, and be prepared to fight a decisive battle on the general line 'Segamat–Mt Ophir–Muar, the main line of resistance'. The AIF's 27th Brigade was to be moved immediately west—and with 9th Indian Division and 45th Indian Brigade, then at Malacca—to be formed into what a day later was to be called Westforce. The 22nd Brigade was to be sent across to Bennett as soon as it could be relieved—a move that depended very much on the next convoy of reinforcements, due on 13 January. And III Indian Corps, passing first through Westforce to regroup and reorganise in south Johore, was to take over the responsibility for both east and west coasts, south of a line to be determined: Wavell himself was to suggest Mersing–Kluang–Batu Pahat. That Percival emended the next day to Endau–Kluang–Batu Pahat: it was the only obvious change he made: that, and changing the line Bennett had been asked to defend—Wavell's 'main line of resistance'—from Segamat–Mt Ophir–Muar to Batu Anam–Muar, so bringing it eight miles north, clear of the Sungei Muar which at Segamat reaches almost to the road.

Apart from that, the orders Percival issued at the Segamat conference follow Wavell's directive closely; as too do the instructions

Heath gave at a similar conference the day after, a conference called apparently to arrange details of the relief: the precise positions that the Australians would take up, the positions the Corps troops would retire to. One of Wavell's proposals, however, Percival left out altogether. Neither on 9 January nor the day after did he say anything about moving 22nd Brigade; neither then nor when the reinforcement convoy arrived on 13 January. And at this point it is worth asking whether Bennett, who after all had Wavell's assurance that this brigade would join him—he telegraphed Sturdee on 10 January saying as much—had passed this on to Taylor. If he had, then from about 10 January Taylor was, it would seem, fairly awkwardly placed. Strung out over 50 miles of coast, he had to hold the enemy—if he appeared—to his north and northwest; and, at the same time, to be prepared to move west, if the reinforcement convoy arrived on time, soon after 13 January. Further, though Wavell for one might have been prepared to risk a Japanese landing, there were even at this time some indications—too slight perhaps always to be officially recorded—that Yamashita was still considering it. Just the day before, for instance, 2/19 had noted flares and machinegun fire from Bukit Besar, about three miles north-northeast of the Crossroads. And though patrols reporting back in the evening had found nothing, a day after that the standing patrol at Tenggorah came upon lifeboats and Japanese stick grenades on the coast; another day a party of nine Japanese 'dressed as Malays' were to come ashore at Bukit Churang, one of the two radar stations operational on the east coast. And that, if it means anything at all, is enough to suggest why even as Taylor prepares to hold the enemy on his north and northwest, he is not giving up his watch on coast and estuary. In the next fortnight the battalion is to build four more of those beach beacons that 2/18 had along the shore—wooden tripods about 1500 yards out to sea, each holding a four-gallon tin of petrol: three on 9 January between Schwenke's Stones and the Three Sisters, another on 11 January at the very entrance to Kuala Jemaluang, which the Tongkan River patrol was to light when the enemy came to within 200 yards of shore to help the beach gun, the 75s from 4/Anti-Tank, and the section of machineguns on Brigadier's Point.[21]

As for 27th Brigade and the attached troops, these were to move immediately.[22] To move 3000 men immediately is not easy—2/15 Field Regiment for instance had to call in its detachments at Mawai and Kluang, and the last of the transport units promised to

them arrived only a little before midnight on 9 January: the final convoy meant 24 guns, 130 vehicles, stores, petrol, signal cable rations and tons of ammunition. Still, the Regiment moved as ordered 'at dawn', part of the brigade group that was to concentrate in the Segamat area. Even so, 2/30—admittedly on standby since the day before that again—had their C Company, Bill Clayton's company, moving off late afternoon, the rest of the battalion just after midnight: from the Crossroads along the Kluang Road, through Kluang the 50 miles to Ayer Hitam, to reach Batu Anam after sunrise. But if 2/30 moved on 9 January, 2/26 were not to be relieved until 10 January, the time it would take for the relieving battalion—2/17 Dogras—to reach Kota Tinggi from the Island. And 2/29, which was to be Brigade reserve, was ordered to leave for the moment two companies at Kahang and Kluang—a measure, surely, of how important the few airfields left were—to rejoin the Brigade group only when 11th Division came through them in the next few days: 6/15 Indian Brigade, the British Battalion with combined 2/16 and 3/16 Punjabis, and combined 2/9 Jats and 1/8 Punjabis.

As 27th Brigade was driving west, then north up the trunk road, the last of the civilian administration was moving south, part of that long column of refugees stretching further north still: to Ipoh, to Betong and beyond. Seven hours it could take to do the 50 miles from Kuala Lumpur to Tampin; and behind them, to left and right, columns of smoke as the rubber stocks burned—the correspondents, watching this the next day, were to turn it into one of the great set pieces of writing about the campaign. Even as the AIF were moving towards Batu Anam, the units were having to make their way against the traffic coming down. Now on 11–12 January, the Corps troops were disengaging, to reach—as the plan laid down—Tampin–Alor Gajah–Malacca on the night of 12 January; to move then on three parallel lines, down the coast road, through a maze of inland roads, down the trunk road, all merging at Segamat, to pass on the night of 13–14 January through the AIF in Johore. For the AIF, as it came north, that meant moving through columns of military lorries, double-banked, jammed together; moving so slowly that it took Rose, for instance, coming in from Malacca, twelve hours to reach Segamat. And just as the columns of refugees coming south had been a great story, so too the correspondents were to make something of this, the Australians moving into the front line. Monday and Tuesday had been dull, overcast; on Wednesday rain, heavier than it had been for weeks—

'rubber groves became quagmires, and opencut tin mines giant puddles'. And hidden in that rain—'like the mists at Dunkirk or the gales that wrecked the Armada'—the long convoys went north: lines of trucks and Bren carriers on the road, on the rail line trains from Kluang, men leaning from the doors as they pulled in: the tin hat not yet made that could disguise those Australian faces. No wild hilarity Bennett said: nearly all were serious but 'cheerful, like men at the breaking of a drought'. Everywhere the thumbs-up sign: even the truck drivers lifting a hand off the wheel. And perhaps this confidence that Bennett was to touch on: the intelligence, the determination and the courage of men who as their GOC stated, 'had been training in guerrilla warfare for some time'.

To the right of the road as it fell back, 9th Indian Division had sent one brigade, reduced to a battalion, into position west of Batu Anam; another battalion a little further back covered bridges on the Sungei Muar near the trunk road; its other brigade Bennett had made responsible for the Segamat–Jementah Road about ten miles forward of Segamat. And as an indication, perhaps, of his feel for the ground, Bennett was to bring up the two platoons of the Rose Force, under his command this time, to Segamat late on 13 January. A day or so before Galleghan had sent his Don Company up to the 61-mile peg forward of Gemas. The rest of the battalion he deployed the next day: A Company to each side of the road, B Company first in reserve, then moving four miles forward near a wooden bridge crossing the Sungei Gemencheh with 30 Battery 2/15 Field Regiment, two anti-tank guns covering the road between A and C Companies. And sometime on 14 January a party of journalists went right up, after the British troops withdrew through, to see this 'northernmost British position'. It was as they saw it, a defence in depth, with roadblocks and shrewdly camouflaged artillery arranged to deal with Japanese penetration tactics: 'the gunners will give you a line to walk on defying you to know when you have reached their positions, until you almost bump into the gun'. To the east of 2/30, Brigadier Maxwell had 2/26 deployed in Paya Laba Estate a little in advance of 9th Indian Division, guarding the flanks between Batu Anam and Gemas. And 2/29 went to Buloh Kasap as brigade reserve. The last of 11th Indian Division came through later than expected: not until then could the codeword Switch go out; and not until 2000 hours was Heath responsible for south Johore. By midday, Percival was to write, the dispositions of Westforce were complete.

As for Yamashita, according to one source he had in fact

expected no major resistance at Kuala Lumpur, arguing that Malaya Command would plan to block his drive rather at Malacca–Muar–Gemas, or Batu Pahat–Kluang. Nevertheless, as his troops entered the capital on 11 January, he seems to have taken the chance to rethink what he might do. On the east coast, for instance, he had both the battalions from 18th Division, 56th Regiment and 55th Regiment at Kuantan for close on a fortnight; 114th Regiment and Divisional HQ meanwhile were still at Singora. But instead of a 'landing in the face of the enemy' that Southern Army was still insisting on, a landing that for weeks Yamashita seemed increasingly unwilling to take on, on 11 January he had ordered 56th Regiment to make its way west to Kuala Lumpur. And 55th Regiment, it seems, he'd already ordered a few days earlier still to make its way south. Admittedly, Tokyo Radio does not place troops on the Pahang border, a mere day's march away, until 14 January; but other sources are probably close to it when they have 55th Regiment crossing the Pekan on 11 January, the Nenasiku a day later, at Merchong the day after that. And Merv Alchin for one would probably argue that there were some Japanese between Pahang and Endau as early as 9 January, when he recognised on the sand the characteristic mark of the tabi, the split-toe boot that Japanese infantry wore. And all in all, the Regiment probably was moving in small formations, more or less independently, much as some Japanese forces were doing to the west. This would explain why small parties were seen in the bush miles from the coast—like those who fired on an Australian patrol about seven miles up the Anak Endau on 15 January; like those that a Malay spoke to an AIF officer about, in the bush, off the beach near Rompin a day or two earlier than that.[23]

Nevertheless, even while 55th Regiment is going overland, Yamashita was—if Tsuji is right—still planning to bring in the rest of 18th Division as Lieutenant General Mutaguchi, the Divisional Commander, was certainly urging when 55th Regiment had secured the coast. Admittedly, if this meant a landing at Mersing, he'd have to reckon with the AIF defences there; and there is almost no doubt that he knew something of their strength—after all, if he'd not sent scouts ashore as one AIF officer argues, then he had a formidable fifth column in the east, including some time in this January, Tani Yukata himself. But if Yamashita was coming to reconsider an east coast landing, Taylor—and Malaya Command—were reading the evidence very differently. The convoy at Singora that British planes reported on 12 January, the flagship at

Kuantan where Glen Martins had bombed transports only three days before, the lifeboats down near Tenggorah, the Japanese near Bukit Churang—these meant, as one of the Diaries puts it, a 'major invasion'. And all that, whether Yamashita intended it or not, meant that Percival kept his forces in the east, though the more immediate danger lay to the west. Yamashita had already directed his Guards Division down the west coast. His II/4 Regiment, for instance, was at Kajang on the evening of 10 January, a few hours too late to cut the lines of the British retreating south from Kuala Lumpur. And both Guards regiments Yamashita sent on, apparently without any pauses to regroup: the 5th Regiment—the Iwaguro Pursuit Regiment—a little away from the coast and, less the one battalion which the Divisional Commander planned to send further south again to Batu Pahat, the 4th Regiment—the Kunishi Pursuit Regiment—along the coast. And, as far as one can tell, since the Allied squadrons were concentrating either on the airfields to the north and to the east or on the convoys approaching Singapore, neither Regiment was seen, though there was a rumour as early as 11 January that the enemy were at Port Dickson. From what Bennett writes, it would seem that he was expecting trouble on the coast: at Malacca the same day, just 30 miles south of Port Dickson, he talked with Brigadier Duncan, CO 45th Indian Brigade. But whatever Bennett expected on the coast, the trunk road remained most important. And Yamashita had the Mukaide detachment pressing down it, the 1st Tank Regiment and a battalion of artillery, engineers and infantry—coming up, as Wavell said on 13 January, more quickly than he had expected. Fourteen hours, Tokyo Radio was to say, to cross Negri Sembilan. At 2000 hours on 13 January, enemy patrols were sighted west of Gemas.

5

'A corporal's war of small detachments'

I

Fifty years later, one of his men was to remember Lieutenant Colonel Galleghan meeting his troops for the first time; remembered how he stood there harsh and unyielding in the heat of a Tamworth summer, his very body an ideogram of all that civilian distrusts in the military. Any number of the early stories take this up, turning on Galleghan's severity and rigour, with himself of course no less than others: a man men were to be afraid of, a man who would see to it that his troops behaved exactly as he wished, who saw discipline as absolute obedience, even in such small matters as the angle at which a man might wear his hat, who regarded any breach of discipline as a personal affront. If notions like these sit oddly now, Galleghan was nevertheless very much of his own time, much like Bull Burrows of 2/13 say, or Vivian England the 'Black Panther' of 2/3: men equally remote, and patriarchal, and men too who, like Galleghan, were to turn a group of five-bob-a-day volunteers into soldiers, those soldiers into a cohesive unit—second to none all of them, elite. In time Galleghan was to prove rather more ambivalent than a first impression had suggested—even vulnerable. And the discipline that began as obedience was to become something more than that, something closer probably to mutual trust, a trust holding steady through uncertainty and fear. Not that Galleghan ever failed, apparently, to act as though 2/30 was 'his', 'the Australian Blackjacks' in an Indian jemedar's phrase, a phrase that Galleghan clearly approved of: he was to tell the story himself less than a fortnight later. But something of what that meant, something of the balance of forces that held this battalion together, it takes a later story to make clear: a story coming out of Changi in December 1943, and Galleghan

waiting for the first of his troops coming out of Thailand. On the open ground men stumbling from trucks, men swollen with beri beri, swaying on suppurating feet, men staggering into a regimental line. And Black Jack silent, like everyone there, staring: *We felt guilty, guilty that we were alive at all*; moving slowly among his men, patting a shoulder here, an arm there; tears in his eyes and open on his cheeks. And Galleghan angry too, that quick anger that someone else remembers: Galleghan shouting at his officers, 'Look at my men! What have you done to them?'[1]

To read Gemas is, of course, to close with a whole body of texts like that, all of them partial as this one is—partial in every sense of that term; most of them parallel to rather than congruent with the action, that series of events which, as texts, they somehow embody. It was undoubtedly Bennett's idea to have 2/30 ambush the Japanese at this point, using them to take the first shock of the enemy attack: this final plan was just as certainly Galleghan's. The problem he was faced with was comparatively simple. To begin with, he had to work with the policy that Malaya Command had laid down ten days before, to hold the Japanese as far north as possible, giving time and space for reinforcements to come in and the troops to go on to the offensive again—sometime in February, Wavell was hoping. For COs with units in contact with the enemy, this meant finding a way to disengage, to withdraw without being decisively defeated; and this Galleghan solved by determining that his battalion would hold for 24 hours before falling back. Further, whatever he devised had still to fall within the parameters of the directive Percival issued a few days earlier. Since the crossings over the Sungei Muar and the Sungei Segamat, 'vital to the defence', had to be strongly defended against all forms of ground and air attack, Bennett had placed the 27th Brigade, which he had moving up in the Segamat area, east to west across the trunk road. Given that defended localities were to be held as focal points, then he deployed one unit of 9th Indian Division covering the road east and west of Batu Anam, another along the Batu Anam–Jementah Road, a third at the junction of the Batu Anam–Jementah–Segamat Road. As for the ambush that the directive speaks of, 'the ambush to be located west of Gemas': this Bennett wanted well forward, where '2/30 ... [could] act as a bumper-bar to take the first shock of the enemy attack'.[2]

Galleghan himself, almost a fortnight before, had chosen a position along the road west, close to a bridge across the Sungei Gemencheh: and this Bennett approved—Percival thought it too

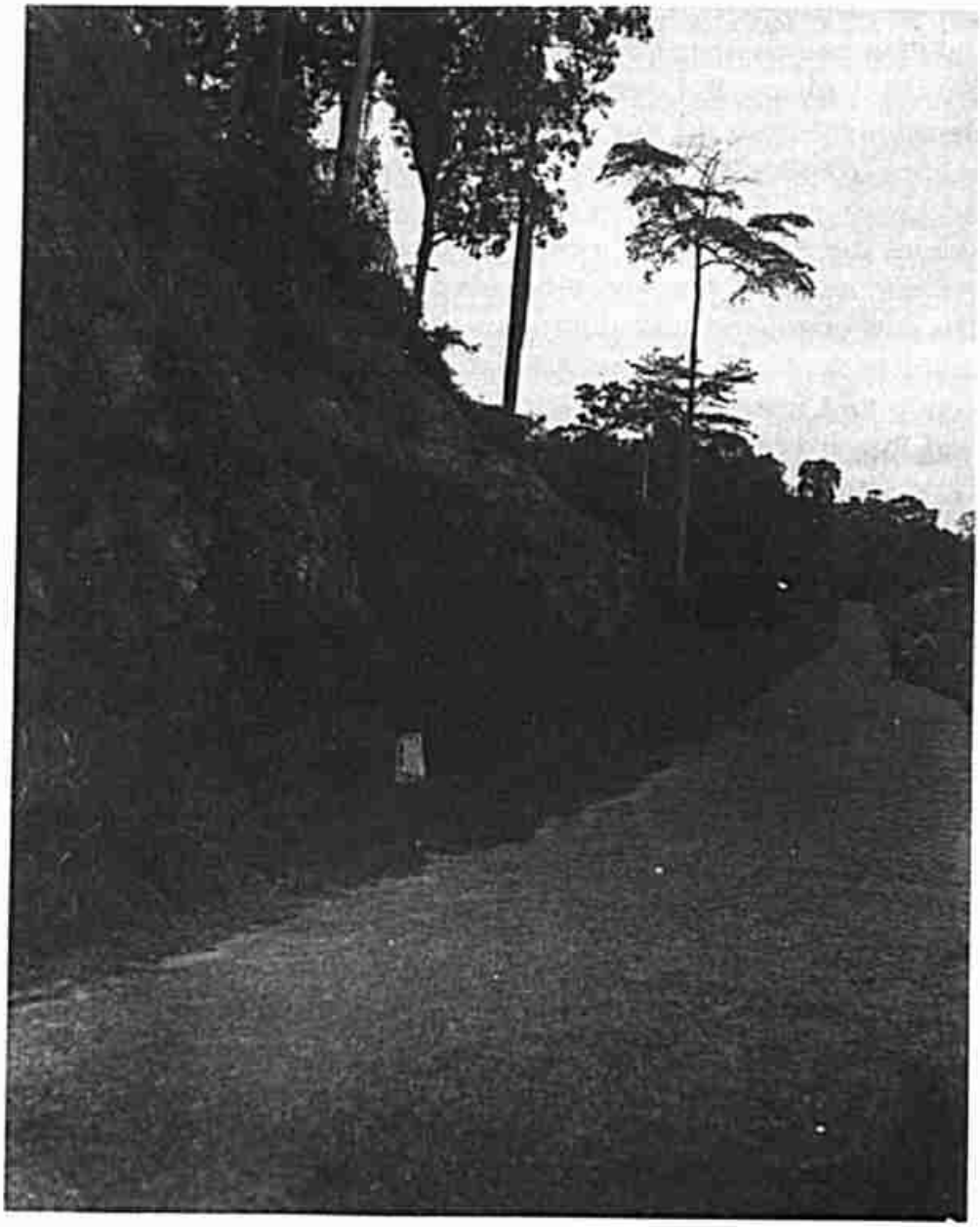
far forward—even though, as Galleghan noted, there was room only for one company, not the whole battalion as he had hoped. On 13 January, B Company went forward; with them a small detachment from the gunners, and from 2/12 Field Company, the sappers responsible for the actual demolition of the bridge—the explosives were already in place[3]—to go into position along the side of the road on the Gemas side of the bridge: *We walked up in the rain, and the C Company blokes yelled out 'Give 'em one for me mate'.*[4] His own command post Galleghan sited beside a creek some four miles back; his Don Company lay left forward, his A Company centre and forward on the left of the road, his C Company right and forward on the right; the four 25-pounders of C Troop 2/15 Field Regiment placed to cover the bridge and the road beyond it came well forward too, deployed between the road itself and rail line a little to the south. And 'in support' on either side of the road, facing a cutting some 200 yards ahead, the troop commander from 4/Anti-Tank Regiment placed two anti-tank guns from 16 Battery; a third gun Galleghan himself sent back holding—so one story goes—that the Japanese would not use tanks.

To this point Yamashita had always followed up quickly, and on this Galleghan's plan depended. If, as he insisted, III Indian Corps left the bridges standing behind them and the roads uncratered, if the Japanese saw nothing ahead but an empty road, then the forward troops might move up without taking much care: and indeed as Bruce Holland remembers, watching from B Company for the enemy, *the only man to look at the bridge was a Jap motor cyclist that stopped at the bridge just before it went up.* Once the advance party had crossed the river, had gone perhaps the whole 600 yards to the end of this ambush area, then it was to find the bridge blown behind it. And as the guns of the Regiment fired on any reinforcements coming up, Galleghan's ambush company was to deal with the Japanese on the road, then to withdraw down Quarry Road, a track guarded by a small holding force.

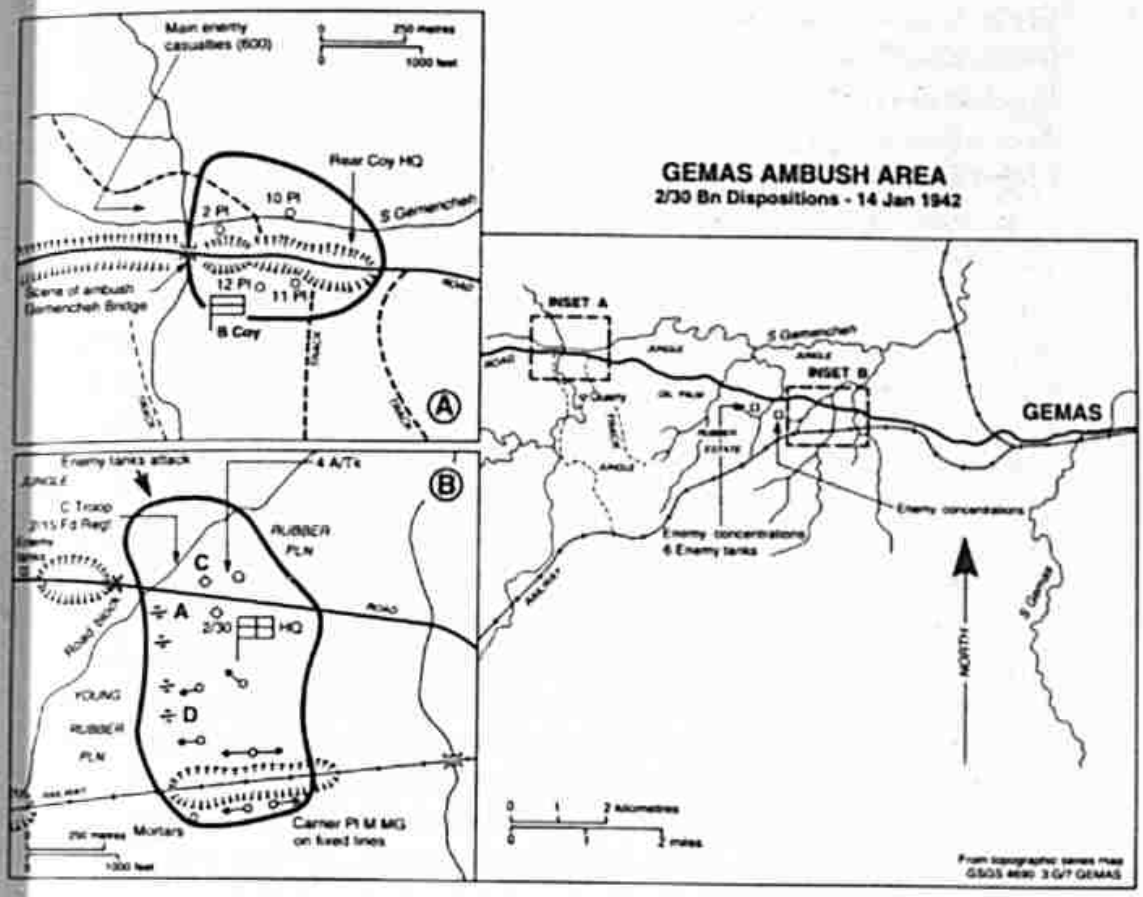
Sometime during the late morning of 14 January, Galleghan went up to B Company, his final inspection; then back to his command post; then nothing until 1600 hours when Captain Duffy, ordering his own men to stand to, rang through to report enemy approaching and the line went dead.

On the side of the road:

> *I said to Joe, 'There's three boongs on bikes, Joe', and he got up to look: 'They got rifles!'*



A postwar photograph of the cutting at Gemas, with the bridge over the river in the distance. This photograph usefully indicates the essentials of the ambush plan: the advancing Japanese, trapped in a narrow space as the bridge went up behind them, were to be attacked by the platoon lining the cutting, by those echeloned down the road. AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL NEGATIVE NUMBER 117481



Gemas

At first just this handful:

> *The next moment 20 come round the bend, and then a little while later about 200 ... all on push bikes, hands on each other's shoulders—'no hands', and the rest of it; laughing like crazy; mostly in shorts and singlets, most of them had their rifles strapped on the bikes ...*

With no sign at all of the trucks he had been expecting, Duffy let at least two parties pass, two solid columns of cyclists, perhaps 300 Japanese, riding at ease, unconcerned: these were for the Battalion behind him to deal with. More cyclists, a sound of engines, three motorcyclists, bicycle troops again. And at this point, with some 700 Japanese moving up the road, with the very head of the column close to his rearmost platoon about 500 yards east of the bridge, Duffy gave the signal; the sapper threw a switch; and as the bridge went up—with perhaps 100 Japanese on it the sapper wrote home—B Company fired into the crowd on the road, into

those Japanese who'd doubled back. In 30 minutes at the outside, Duffy called the action off—the road on both sides of the river as he described it later 'thickly covered with dead and dying'. The Australians had a number wounded, none killed. And though none of his platoons found it easy to break contact, by 1700 hours the Company, without a single man missing, gathered at the rendezvous along Quarry Road.

With the ambush itself, as with the experiences of Duffy's men as they made their way back, there's no real difficulty: all the evidence, official and unofficial, is unambiguous, direct and, except perhaps in the number of the enemy killed and in how many Duffy had let through, no one account differs much from another. As an ambush, Duffy's action had worked perfectly: speed, surprise, concentration—all these were his—and for that half-hour complete tactical control. But if there are no questions about Galleghan's B Company, one has still to establish—through the gaps in the texts as it were—what Galleghan himself might be making of the situation in front of him: his ambush company out of contact, all his forward lines out. From his command post he had, it's clear, heard nothing: not the bridge going up, not the machineguns, not the yelling. But within ten minutes of his knowing the lines were cut, he had a patrol from his A Company moving up. And within the hour that patrol could report that he had Japanese to his left—Japanese who, if they were prepared to mount an ambush as these were, had clearly moved on to the offensive.

Just how Galleghan read this encounter there's no longer any way of telling. It was a small action after all, this A Company one, though one Australian was killed; and his own men, their first time under fire, had come back as Stan Arneil remembered, 'in perfect formation'. Galleghan could now place one group of Japanese well outside the ambush area; his signallers, ordered out to find the breaks in the line, placed more: so accurately that he knew even before dark that he had some of the enemy forward in the rubber on his left, holding the plantation buildings about a mile and a half away; and at least one other group up to the right of the road, where two of his own signallers and one from the artillery had been wounded earlier in the afternoon. And even if he still knew nothing of his B Company, this was enough to indicate that the Japanese had crossed the Gemencheh, if not at the bridge, then at other points along its course.

Whether Galleghan was at all prepared for small parties moving wide of the main road is not easy to say; nor whether he'd given

any thought at all to the chance of their coming from forces other than those that the RAF had reported on the trunk road. Bennett, it is true, may have expected it, both to his right down the east coast railway as to his left: enough to order a detachment up to the Londah Halt the day before; enough, as he wrote later, to plan some kind of ambush in the country west of the trunk road—somewhere, it seems, near Jementah. The detachment for Londah moved up right enough. But the 'specially trained guerrilla band of forty-five Australians' that he'd remembered arranging for as early as 13 January—the Australians from the Rose Force—talked with Bennett about 'this proposed trip and attempted ambush' only about 1800 hours on 14 January, two hours after Brigadier Maxwell had reported Galleghan's company in contact with the enemy. And that suggests that Bennett may have remembered wrongly: the book does not always square with the unpublished diary. And his sending for the Rose Force may have been rather an immediate response on 14 January itself to intelligence coming that evening from Galleghan. All the same, just a little before this, Bennett had moved one unit up on his left ordering 2/Loyals that morning to move through 22nd Indian Brigade troops who, Brigadier Painter had indicated, would 'crumple up' before a Japanese attack. Nevertheless, this covered only the country to the immediate left and right.[5]

All this leaves open the question of how far Bennett and his commanders were aware of Japanese movements into Johore, particularly along the coast and in the broken country between the coast and the trunk road. And to determine that, to establish at any one point just what Command Intelligence knew is much like trying to get sunbeams out of cucumbers. On one hand, 4th Imperial Guards had reached the border of the state of Malacca by noon on this 14 January. And although Yamashita had bombed Malacca itself during the morning, his forces entered the town sometime during the afternoon: an ex-police inspector, it's said, taking down the Union Jack from St Paul's Hill to hoist the Rising Sun, another public figure escorting the Japanese into town. And to the east, if Tsuji is right, a second Japanese force, 5th Imperial Guards this time, had already passed through Salang and Machang the day before—perhaps the enemy force that the Rose Force was to hear of in Tangkah the evening after. Admittedly Brigadier Duncan's 45th Brigade, a brigade under command of Westforce, had two companies of 7/6 Rajput Rifles north of the river near Muar, but if either these or the companies of 4/9 Jats to their east

bumped into Japanese that evening—even the evening after—there's no news of it. Westforce, in short, acted as though none of this had reached it. Consequently, as far as he could know, on the trunk road Galleghan had only those forces in front of him to deal with. And to establish more clearly where his B Company was, to find out how many Japanese were in the area, he sent Sergeant Hall forward again about 2315 hours with a section patrol from A Company, looking—Arneil remembered some ten years later—'like pirates, without webbing and loose equipment, carrying rifles and machineguns, pockets filled with grenades'. Within an hour in the dark of that moonless night, that patrol ran into a Japanese detachment: Arneil was to remember the silence, and the regular beat of those Japanese boots on the metal as the enemy platoon came straight down the road. That encounter 2/30 heard clearly. When Arneil and Hall reported in, Galleghan ordered forward a small group in another attempt to find B Company—four men led by Lance Corporal Heckendorf 'who'd more or less been volunteered' for the job. Then, to deal with the Japanese troops in front of him, he sent out another A Company section patrol, 7 Section this time under Lieutenant Booth, instructing them to attack.

But whatever Galleghan knew, however he was planning to deploy, it is clear that the Japanese had the initiative. By 0800 hours they had machineguns in place, attacking across the open space in front of A Company. Arneil remembers the stretcherbearers: Nicholls, his tin hat bouncing on his head, grinning at those on the ground; Mac, calm and gentle, as if the fire were not there and he saw no-one but the wounded; Brad, who 'just couldn't work up enough hatred for the Japs to want to kill them, son'. And after the machineguns, tanks, nosing around the bend in the cutting.

Although the Japanese had used tanks in Malaya before—at Sadao, Asun, Dipang, most notably at Slim River—it was usually as protection or close support for the infantry. Only at Slim, where the commander of one of the tank companies had pleaded for permission to break through at night, were they used as offensive weapons as the Germans might have done: not so much to exploit a breakthrough as the 'cavalry' doctrine laid down, as to bypass strong points, to disengage quickly, taking every advantage of speed and surprise, with a motorised infantry in close support to hold and widen flanks. Now at Gemas the Japanese at least knew there was no question of surprising the enemy, not after the bridge went up. But even though Air Command had aircraft strafing the trucks coming up to the river—60 transports, one pilot reported,

motorised infantry probably, to reinforce those already across—Galleghan might not have known how quickly the Japanese were moving in. *Gemas no good*, a Japanese engineer was to say, *number 10. All night bangbang, fix the bridge: no mishi until we fix.*[6] By dawn anyway, the infantry were across the river: Lance Corporal Heckendorf could hear transports moving along the road. And by daylight too, the tanks were across as well: Lieutenant Booth saw six of them, the unit history indicates, on the main road near dawn, although Galleghan could not know this until Booth reached HQ again at 1030 hours on 15 January. But the tank CO here came on with nothing of the dash of Kampar, still less of Slim River. Ken Harrison on the rear anti-tank gun describes the first tank edging 'slowly' around the bend in the cutting, to stop with just turret and cannon showing above the slight rise in the centre, as though aware of the anti-tank obstacles some yards ahead: concrete cylinders and scattered bricks out openly on the road for any small reconnaissance party to report on. On the front gun, Joe Bull—'too toey', he is remembered as saying—fired a little early, as did the rear gun. The tank reversed quickly, a pause, then a little later, two more, coming cautiously into the cutting too, this time almost to reach the roadblock before either gun fired. The Official History, using 2/30 sources as its authority, talks as though in the next hour the Japanese sent forward eight tanks in all; Anti-Tank unit sources speak of six tanks and a carrier, moving them forward in quite a different order as well: a single tank, then two more, one light, the other medium, then a carrier, then a single tank, then two more. There's no doubt however, about the Australian guns—the gunners mere amateurs as one of them wrote later—especially when they switched from armour-piercing shell to high explosive. In the next hour, firing through smoke and flame, so thick that the Australians were aiming often at the flash of the Japanese guns, the anti-tank gunners accounted for perhaps five tanks—at a cost though, two men on the forward gun were hit, Sam Hibbert dying later of wounds.

If the Japanese lost six tanks in all—and this is variously argued and as early as the communiqué released the next day—then 2/30 mortars probably accounted for one, perhaps two: the *Argus* was to give four to the anti-tank guns, two to the infantry—in Bennett's words—'by other means'. In the first official account, released two days later, it reads as though Galleghan's B Company had deliberately let the tanks over the bridge and through: as though the correspondent had read everything that happened through the

idea of 'ambush'. And even though military authorities were talking of this as a series of actions—B Company's part in this series had been 'a soldier's dream', 'classic' Bennett said—the anti-tank engagement is lost somewhere between Duffy's action and the infantry action which takes up most of 15 January.

In one sense, of course, it is part of that: C Company for instance, from the top of the cutting, were firing even as the anti-tank guns were into the Japanese, both the tank crews and infantry, with machineguns, rifle and mortar. And that raises questions about what Japanese were now in the area in the morning of 15 January, and what Galleghan—who after all, was commanding the forward unit in Johore—might be expected to know of them. Some eighteen hours earlier, barely 40 minutes after hearing from Duffy for the last time, his A Company could tell him of enemy in the rubber on his left; Les Hall of more Japanese in the plantation buildings; and to his right where three signallers had been wounded, he knew about midnight that he had Japanese in ambush just forward of B Company's old position. If those first columns that Duffy had let pass contained about 300 men, if some of these were killed moving back to support those of their fellows immediately below B Company on the road, this would still leave at least 100 Japanese soldiers in the area before dusk that Galleghan could account for. What other patrols he sent out before dawn on 15 January and in the early hours the War Diary does not say: a routine matter probably, not important enough to remember. From Don Company that morning, one certainly went out: to hear, as one man was to write home, 'numerous Japanese voices as if they were laughing at some joke': an indication surely, of some confidence, some authority. And his C Company, even as the anti-tank guns were firing, could report Japanese moving up beyond the cutting, massing in front of A Company as though ready for attack.

How this affected Galleghan's reading is not, of course, certain. He could know nothing about those transports that Heckendorf had heard on the road—Heckendorf was not to return until 16 January. Nor for a short time yet, until Lieutenant Head and Lieutenant Jones led their men in, perhaps 100 of them, could he have learned about the trucks they'd heard on the road either, about 2100 hours the night before: their very presence a sure indication that the Japanese had mended the bridge. Booth would come in within the hour too, to report Japanese well dug in just forward of the original ambush position on three small hills. Intelligence

such as this indicated that he had large, formed bodies in the area, ready and willing to engage. However, it is precisely as his C Company sight the enemy moving into the cutting that Galleghan orders the four guns of C Troop 2/15 Field Regiment to fire: the only guns he has now since the Regiment withdrew D Troop the day before to a position west of Gemas. And reasoning apparently that wherever his B Company might be, it was certainly not forward on the road, Galleghan had the artillery fire to the Japanese rear as the original fire plan had laid down—on to the bridge and the road to the west of it—as if he were concerned not with the enemy immediately in front of him, but rather more with the reinforcements that the Japanese might be bringing up over the bridges that he had insisted III Indian Corps leave. As Heckendorf was to report—he'd reached the ambush position just as the shells came down—the Australian guns caught a great press of Japanese vehicles, a crowd of enemy troops.

If the Regimental War Diary is right, then the four guns fired some 150 rounds. Yet, if at first they fired four miles forward, almost immediately they were firing over open sights. For if Galleghan could not know just what forces the Japanese might be bringing up, his men could see Japanese in front of them. And from their own high ground C Company were firing into the tank crews trying to get away, into the infantry coming over the hill, into those trying to outflank A Company's position. Even Tsuji admits that Mukaide had been halted, so decisively that Yamashita was to send the reinforcements he'd asked for, an advance guard of the 5th Division second landing force, a regiment of infantry under Major General Sugiara. And the Mukaide detachment, in the evening of 15 January under the command of General Kawamura's 9 Brigade, was ordered to press forward on the main arterial road. It's said that Kawamura took some 24 hours to bring his two regiments forward, that he was not ready to attack until 17 January.[7] But if the Japanese that Heckendorf saw on the road precisely as the artillery opened up were in fact four battalions as he thought, then it looks as though, by 17 January, the Japanese had a good many troops ready to come into action, an action supported by army divebombers circling around now: searching for machineguns, for the command post, or for the guns.

To this point, apart from the anti-tank guns and the guns of the Regiment, it's been patrol action mainly; though Galleghan's C Company forward of other companies and to the right of the road had been firing into the Japanese around the tanks. Still,

except for the tanks, there's been nothing massed, nothing pressed home. Not long after 1000 hours, some of B Company came in through Don Company; within the hour, Booth too was back. How the ambush story was shaped at that time is impossible to tell now: less complete perhaps than it would be, since what Galleghan heard now came primarily from 11 and 12 Platoons. But the main lines one might reasonably assume Lieutenant Jones and Lieutenant Head could lay down, and the chances are that it is much like the battalion's official narrative: how the company had caught about 600 Japanese in the cutting; how they killed almost all of these with machinegun and grenade; how both 10 and 11 Platoons had immediately engaged, engagements involving hand-to-hand fighting. One of the stories that was to go around was Ray Brown's, probably because it caught something of the essence of this first encounter: remembered from the hospital—'he is in the next bed to me'; by the CO of 2/4 Casualty Clearing Station where he was first brought in; by himself fifteen years later again in battalion writings: losing his rifle in a fall—either a bomb bursting under the bank, or as he himself thought 'tripping over me mate, or one of the fallen bikes'; stabbed fourteen times; lashing out with his fists, he punched and ducked so that they could not get a finishing stab on him; grabbing a dagger from one Japanese, killing two, wounding two more; ending with wounds to the scalp, as the hospital remembered, along with other gashes to neck and chest, a fracture of the skull.*

Set out flat on the page like this, any encounter is bound to look rather more coherent than it is, even more two-dimensional: like the line on the graph which represents a mass of experimental data. For one thing, so much that happens is purely physical—nothing perhaps could be more so: 'the heart stepping into high', as the arty signaller at the Gemencheh bridge wrote to his father; Arneil's shout as he tossed his rifle into the air, body shaking as he remembered, with excitement. And except in a rare, almost accidental phrase—Len Perry's 'barbed wire fence ringing backwards and forwards from the bullets'—most of this slides through the gap between word and object: a gap neatly measured by the very banality of most writing, especially perhaps from those close to the action who are likely to speak of 'a hell of fire' or 'evading a hail of bullets', or 'escaping the blazing fury'. Further, to order events chronologically implies at the very least that there is in the event a particular kind of logic; as though the battle were in part a dialogue, each thrust carrying within it a counter-thrust,

just as in conversation question and answer are categorically linked. At times this is useful, not least for searching out how events come to be as they are; at times—as at Alamein—it truly represents the pattern. But at Gemas the sequence seems largely a sequence of contingencies, and a chronological ordering conceals that fact.

If the ambush comes first in the narrative ordering, then Galleghan's decisions that evening and the next day are bound to be read in the light of what was immediately an acknowledged success: the 'heavy casualties' of the first report were to become two days later 600 to 800 Japanese dead. And it is only in such a context that the Japanese advance, the tanks and the parties moving forward in what looked like company strength, looks in any way tentative. Until Lieutenant Jones and Lieutenant Head reached Battalion at mid-morning, Galleghan's response to the enemy he knew, the enemy that he could see in front of him, had been primarily to patrol, to test out the Japanese positions and their strength; significantly, it is after that part of the ambush company returns that he decides on a company attack; or—if the Official Historian is right—that he judged the time right for an attack he had planned. If this is true, then it looks very much as though Galleghan is reading the situation in front of him as it may have been some ten hours earlier, as though the Japanese were still off balance after meeting B Company: this, the destruction of the tanks that morning, and the success of 2/30 mortars may have confirmed. But even then, what he finally decided was perhaps shaped in part by Brigade. As he gave first orders for this attack just before noon—Don Company was to advance on the left flank—orders came with the Brigade Major that 2/30 was to withdraw that evening behind the Gemencheh River, giving Galleghan only six hours to act. And that order of Brigade had itself to be influenced by events in two other places: an influence which was indirect perhaps, but certainly pervasive.

II

To the east where Endau Force had the three sections of 17 Platoon Don Company 2/19 strung out along the beach north of Endau, Japanese had been seen the day before. And the platoon, first withdrawn—as though Major Vincent had ordered it not to engage—had been sent back up the beach, about midnight on 14–15 January. This time the platoon went out as a fighting patrol—Vincent's instructions were to delay the Japanese and then fall

back: or at the very least slow them down. And it looks as though he was to send out at least one reconnaissance patrol as well later that day, this time into the country to the north and west of the river: a patrol led by Harry Orme, himself back just the day before from 'four days through swamp and jungle right up towards the Japs'. For over a week now, of course, Endau Force had Dal Wilson's platoon patrolling up and down the river. And the patrol led by Harry Orme was to use the river too, the Anak Endau this time, sailing out as Jack Carroll remembers on an old fishing boat brought up from Endau:

> *We were to go down to this point here* [this is Kampong Blading on the Anak Endau] *where we were to meet some Sakai. Harry and his team were to stay there and using their light canoes go up and down and keep an eye on things. And we were to come back each day and give him supplies and take his reports back to Endau.*[9]

Coming down from Kuantan the Japanese had been having a hard time of it, their sources suggest: nothing to eat but roots, swamp and mangrove to wade through. Not much sign of that, however, in the group that Alan Oag's section sighted about eight miles north of Endau, eight miles south of where they'd been seen the day before.[10] Mid-morning and the Japanese were moving very casually, *about 60 or 80 we reckoned,*[11] singing, walking, talking, on bikes. The beach was wide here, sloping 100 yards to the sea; and where a tree fell out across the sand Oag placed his Bren, deploying the rest of his section around this, sending Sam Langham, who'd twisted his ankle, back with the news to the next section. If it was to be too small an action to reach the official records, this action of Oag's section—Endau Force War Diary was to note simply 'delaying action along the coast north of Endau'—the firing was nevertheless intense enough to be heard at platoon HQ as John Varley remembers, even at the section further south again. Certainly some of the enemy fired—George Robbins was grazed on the ankle—before the Japanese moved quickly into the jungle, leaving on the sand nothing but a tangle of bikes: another Australian, already a prisoner, moving south with 55th Regiment HQ, was to stumble over them sometime after. For some reason—perhaps the Japanese plane swooping up and down—Oag moved his section into the jungle too: single file, eight men and a Bren, Oag with his parang in the lead. And to the south, two miles back the next section waited for Oag to fall back on them according to plan. In

the bush, a rustle: movement: someone called 'Yoohoo, Oagie': not Oag, however, that movement, but the Japanese. In its turn then, the second section moved back on to the third, the third closer to the river: moving like racehorses, one observer remembered, watching them from the headland, into a perimeter 1000 yards north of Endau about 1520 that evening.[12]

Much of this Brigadier Taylor would not have heard of until some time later, at 1900, so 2/18 Diary notes; and Heath, responsible for east Johore since 2000 hours the previous day, later again. Still, Endau Force had Divisional signallers as well as battalion, and if the line communication diagram is right, then Mersing was linked directly with III Indian Corps at Johore Bahru, and indirectly either through III Indian Corps or through the signal centre at Kluang with Westforce HQ at Labis where, so Bennett wrote, he had word of it sometime in the evening of 15 January. And for a small action, it had been quite sharp: 2/18 Diarist noted about twenty Japanese casualties. But its meaning was wider than that. Though the situation might not be urgent, the Japanese, so Bennett thought, were clearly about to move directly on to Endau, and perhaps on Mersing to the south. And that, even if there were nothing at the moment to suggest an immediate landing along the coast as Malaya Command had expected five days earlier, could mean a move on Singapore.

To the west sometime before dawn—17 Platoon would be still coming into position along the coast—troops of the 4th Guards Regiment overran both B and D Companies of 7/6 Rajputna Rifles patrolling north of the Sungei Muar.[13] And although one source suggests that the Rajputs at least had got word to Battalion HQ that the enemy had been seen on the road down from Malacca, nothing more—not a word about engagement reached either Battalion HQ or Brigadier Duncan before Japanese appeared about 1100 hours on the waterfront opposite Muar town. Nevertheless, the guns of 2/15 Regiment must have had some warning, though how much their War Diary does not say. Lieutenant Shearer, in his observation post five miles north of the river, must have seen something: and even when he was cut off—in mid-sentence it's said, as the passing enemy cut the wire—that sudden silence in itself would be loud enough. Certainly the first move the enemy made the guns repulsed, as they did an attempt to cross at the river mouth: though, as the Indian Official History admits, the Japanese got a toehold on the south bank all the same, neatly placed between the Advanced HQ and the Rear HQ of 45th Indian Brigade. But once

Duncan had brought platoons from the two companies of Rajputs on his side of the river close to town, the situation that day seemed 'well in hand'—so the Indian Official History records.

What form this was reported to Westforce in, the 8th Division Diary fails to note; nor does it give any indication when signals from the west coast first reached Bennett. Still, by early afternoon, when Galleghan decided for his counter-attack, moving his Don Company forward on his left about 1245 hours, Bennett knew that he had Japanese moving on his left flank as well as down the trunk road. By evening, as his War Diary suggests, he knew that the AIF were in action to the east. He cancelled the ambush he'd planned for the Rose Force patrols, sending one patrol down the road towards Jementah, the other around Mt Ophir. The Jementah patrol was to report 'a large force of enemy on bicycles' around Tangkah, sixteen miles from Muar but moving west towards the trunk road; and with that message, 2/19's Sergeant Donaldson rode the nine miles back to 2/Loyals. And the Mt Ophir patrol had reports of enemy forces around Asahan, northwest of Mt Ophir, a little closer still than Tangkar to the main road. Further, there are some indications, slight perhaps—and too slight to reach into official records—that there were Japanese to the east of the trunk road as well, like the small reconnaissance patrol that bumped into a detachment of 2/12 Field Company stationed upstream from Gemas near one of the bridges—they were killed, their bodies dumped into the river as the engineers blew the bridge and got out. Something of this Bennett perhaps knew or guessed at, even before reports could have reached him. For, even if the situation at Muar were 'well in hand', sometime during 15 January 11th Indian Division was placed on four hours' notice to move to Yong Peng area in support of 45 Indian Brigade.

At this point, the real difficulty is to know what objectives Bennett—or more importantly, Percival—had. Everything suggests that, even now, Westforce was to fight a delaying action, a policy imposed on Percival from the beginning, and one Heath had actively objected to right from the first days, arguing even in December for a withdrawal right to the Johore border. In December this had been to allow for the reinforcements, now coming in: 45th Indian Brigade on 3 January, 53rd Brigade and 54th Brigade of 18th Division on 13 January and the first of the Hurricanes too. But as far as one can tell, this appears to have been the end of it, as well as the beginning: there's no sign of any objective other than that, no hint of how the campaign was to be developed if the

enemy were delayed, still less if he were pushed back. In part at least this might explain why Galleghan's counter-attack when it came proved so curiously inconclusive. If the unit historian has it right—and he is writing only a short time later—then Duffy's orders had been 'to inflict several hundred casualties on the enemy' and 'to severely shake his morale'. And if this is true, then Galleghan can hardly have been expecting, even on 13 January, that the Japanese would be completely stopped. In rehearsal a fortnight earlier, he'd gone no further apparently than finding out whether men could be hidden in the edge of the jungle, whether such a group could bring a convoy to a halt; and that gives no indication at all how he intended to follow that up. If this was the counter-attack he'd planned, then he'd been thinking of sending his Don Company into what amounts to a direct assault on the enemy positions. And even if this had come immediately after Duffy's action it would have been difficult enough: so difficult that one can see why Bennett could write that the plan required 'good judgement', and—one might add—a particularly acute sense of timing.

A counter-attack, Charles Anderson said once, has to be immediate, within the hour, before the enemy feels at home, that this is his patch. The Japanese had been in front of 2/30 for close to eighteen hours, mounting one successful ambush about midnight, nearly cutting off the parties from B Company coming through. All the same, 2/30 Don Company, advancing in open formation over the clearing on the battalion's left flank, did push the Japanese back. Admittedly, that needed 8 Platoon of A Company to create a diversion, moving across the front, and two sections of 7 Platoon moving to the right of the road about 100 yards forward of the anti-tank guns, their fire traversing the ridge the Japanese were on. And then the enemy moved in tanks, three of them, coming through the rubber from A Company's right. A Company had to withdraw, covered by fire from C Company and the battalion mortars; and so too, D Company. And although A Company were perhaps not surprised, Don Company were: 'we could not understand it,' Les Perry was to write, 'George Parfrey had his blood properly up and rushed right forward, and it took a good while to persuade him that everyone was retreating'. An hour or so, and the tanks appeared again, this time in C Company's area; and the Australians, not able to deal with armour simply with rifles, just closed in behind them, waiting for the infantry who commonly followed behind. Perhaps that and the bombing prompted

Galleghan to issue orders for 2/30 to withdraw, just after 1400 hours. And perhaps again, since Galleghan knew that he had to be behind the Gemencheh River by dark, then he could not afford not to be able to disengage. If things were as an anti-tanker remembered, then the Japanese had edged in very close, tanks outflanking the anti-tank guns. The 4/Anti-Tank were to lose two two-pounders this afternoon, 2/15 three of their guns because, as the gunners said, Galleghan had ordered back Marmons which could have pulled them out. In less than an hour he had his men at the first rendezvous, waiting there himself until he knew all his troops were on the way further down the road; and the engineers:

> *as soon as Black Jack walked over, with his swagger cane and his walking stick, away we went: we had an earth auger, about a nine inch auger—used to bore holes 10 or 12 feet; we put in a case of gelignite and then all our fuses ... in condoms. And when we blew, it blew all this back here ... so the Japs when they came to build had no firm foundations on which to construct ... hardly constructive, but you got some good results ...*[14]

This time the rail bridge first—so completely that:

> *some of the steel of that was landing 400 yards up the road—fragments of steel—I was scared that it might go that way and send that up. Then we blew the road bridge. Then we came on here: to the Fort Rose Estate.*

III

If Malaya Command ever had any doubt about Yamashita's determination to push straight ahead, then the Japanese airforce commonly resolved that. From the first days in Malaya, infantry and air arms had worked closely together: 'an ideal cooperation' Tsuji was to call it. And where Air Command did not have its planes attacking the airfields, Penang, Ipoh, Kuala Lumpur, it was using both bombers and fighters over the convoys on the roads, whether civilian or military, over troop positions where they could find them, over everything that moved. On 10 January, Segamat had been bombed, Muar and Gemas; on 11 January, Malacca, Muar again and Tampin at least twice with an ammunition train caught on the rail line, though as the *Age* was to report the enemy made only occasional flights over troop convoys going north; and, on the day after, Segamat again and Labis. That day to the east the Japanese had, as 2/18 Diarist wrote, 'considerable aircraft' over

Mersing; another day again, and there were three planes over Bukit Langkap, and others attacking the coast south of Kuala Jemaluang. And although the Diarist notes only four bombs dropped 'harmlessly' into the sea—'about dinner time in the rain' an anti-tanker wrote—it's not accidental surely that this is where a beacon had been built two days before, and that the attack came precisely the day before Brigade warned its battalions to expect an attack from the sea. Some argue that the large raids, raids like those on Singapore, are more terrifying, terrifying because so impersonal: high above, in perfect formation, indifferent to defensive fire, the bombers glide on. But on the roads, at Mersing, Endau, Gemas, the Japanese are diving in from about 1500 feet; and that is fear of a more immediate kind, the plane low enough to see the pilot turn his head; and it's not simply a machine now, it's a man and he is trying to kill you. The mind insists it's a thousand-to-one chance, but the body knows better. And it coils and clenches, hearing in a silence stretching between the beat of the engine and the metallic hammering of the machineguns, a sound becoming sharper and straighter and faster; breath tense in the throat; pulse beating in the temples; a new rhythm slower than the engine and richer and more intricate than the guns. Nothing for it now as the bomb drops: a sound like a flight of doves, like a bird trapped in a little space: a sound stripping rank from shoulders, changing the shape of the world. Nowhere to go. Nothing to do but watch the quiet, stretched faces around you. A moment or two, and he moves away—up the river, perhaps; towards the coast; down the road. Another moment, and he is gone; you are easing up, listening to the shadow of a sigh as the breath rasps out of dry throats. A voice mutters something about shortsighted bastards. Someone laughs. And you turn back to the job.

In any one of a dozen narratives, it comes out like that; more matter of fact usually, reduced to a phrase or two, often just a wry aside. And the tone is commonly detached, occasionally self-mocking; this, it seems to insist, is hardly the stuff of serious anecdote. Then, as the speaker moves into his story, it becomes more intense, yielding more to the pressure of remembered feeling. Any experience that emerges with this kind of casual, almost offhand directness has to be immediately present: at the centre rather than on the edge of memory. And the body remembered too, for a long time after. There are any number of stories told with the same lack of emphasis, about hearing a sound like that years later and dropping straight to the ground. To be bombed,

to be strafed, these anecdotes suggest, was the common experience, neither more nor less than everyone endured—almost routine—as much a part of everyday life as the weather, as the rain itself. Like the rain you could complain about it—and you did—but it would make no difference; and you knew that too.

And it was purposeful this Japanese attack; more so than the official sources indicate. To begin with, on 13 January the enemy had attacked along the coast, south of Kuala Jemaluang. And there were more attacks along the shore: there were, for instance, a few bombs dropped on Schwenke's Stones, a rocky outcrop about a mile north of the mouth of the Kuala Jemaluang on 21 January; and that may not have been a mistake either since on 8 January 2/18 had built three beacons between the Stones and the Three Sisters a little further up the coast. And further, two of the men killed by Japanese planes the day before had been on Beach Road; and that lies near the coast between two 2/18 Platoon positions, very close to the anti-tank guns positioned for beach defence. From 13 January, too, the planes were over Mersing, divebombing and machinegunning, and—so one source says—every day after that. On 16 January they attacked 2/18 positions and 2/10 Field Regiment HQ, and the same entry appears in 2/18 War Diary until 22 January when it becomes a laconic 'our area bombed again today', very close to the 2/20 more generalised 'severe or intense bombing and machinegunning'. When 2/18 battalion HQ moved, into Nithsdale Estate, so too did the planes; and to rear Battalion HQ the day after that; and one could—just—plot the movements of battalions simply by watching the planes.

'No sport being shot at from the air,' as one of Endau Force wrote home.[15] And even less so perhaps had he recognised that, far from being accidental, the airmen acting simply as they saw men moving on the roads, this had become something like standard procedure: two or three planes at a time bombing the railway or targets on the road, then circling around looking for targets to machinegun. And they were very accurate. Harry Blackford remembers walking back along the river that day, a day when the Force Diary noted 'consistent enemy air activity', when suddenly a plane came over at right angles; he ran to the gun position,

> *in plain straight sand, no camouflage and no cover: 'Have a go at him'. You could see where his bullets were going through the attap. If I'd been six feet tall, he'd probably have got me.*

To the west, Malaya Command had been able to place at least a few Bofors at strategic points—one of the Rose Force counted six around Segamat when he came up. But then, in the middle of January, Segamat was holding III Indian Corps as well as Westforce HQ: most AA guns seem to have stayed on the Island. There had been a battery at Ipoh, though Penang had none; at Slim River one battery had been destroyed turning its guns against Japanese tanks; one came up to Muar about 13 January; there was the odd Bofors one journalist noted at Ayer Hitam some weeks before. And from this handful, Command had none to spare yet for the east coast. The best Brigade could do, after the experience at Endau on 15 January, was to send up what's commonly referred to as 'the composite AA Platoon': a few Vickers gunners from 2/18 AA Platoon, others probably from 2/20 HQ Company.

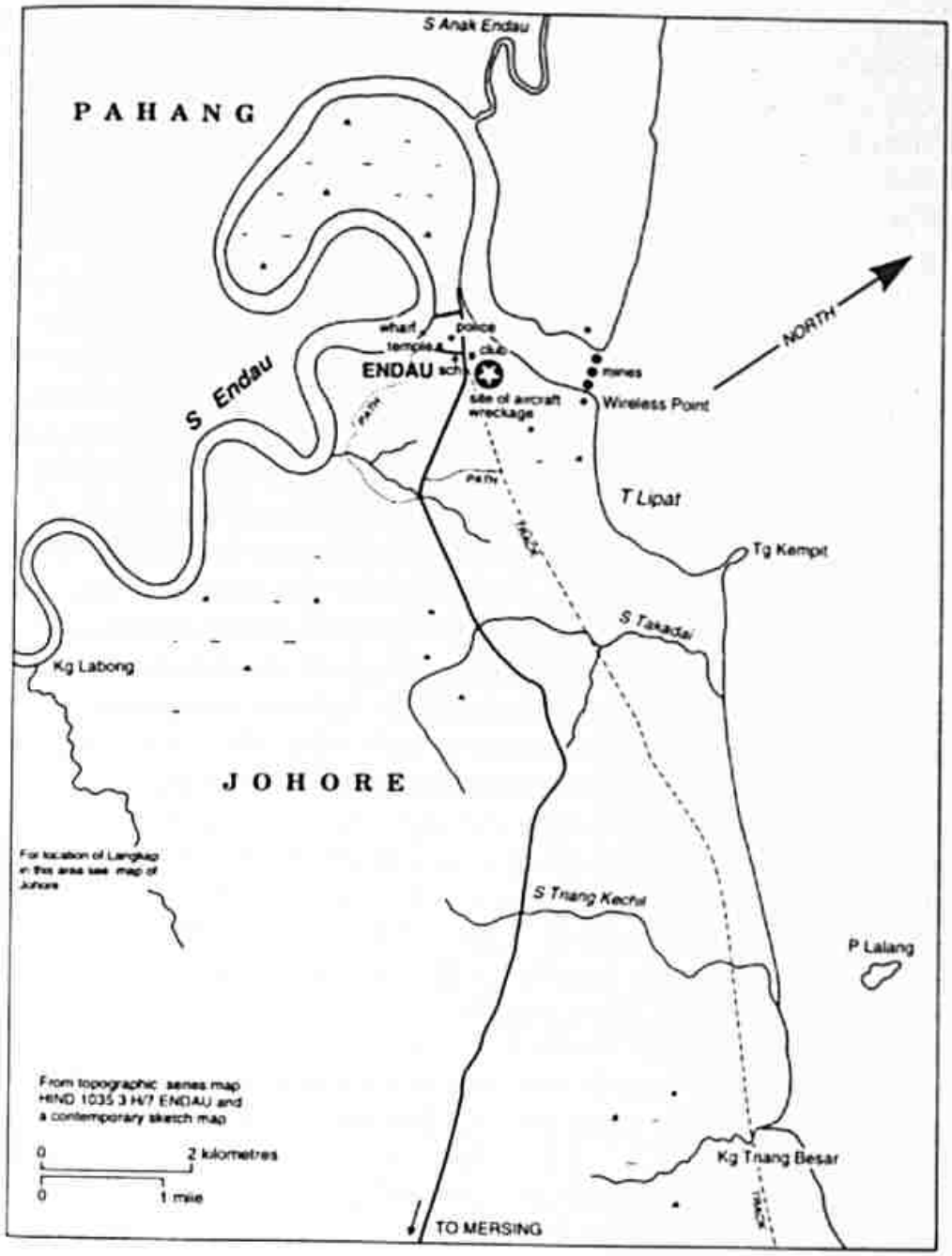
For Australian troops, one of the hardest things was so rarely to see a plane of their own: *'It's one of ours.' It wasn't.* And as even the *Straits Times* was to say, reporting British planes over Gemas on 16 January, 'What a yell went up when the planes were identified as ours'. From early in the New Year, Air Command had its Hudsons shepherding the convoys in, its two squadrons sending out at least six sorties a day. All it could manage apart from this were a handful of bombing raids on Gong Kedah, say, or later on other dromes like Kuantan in the north. And even on 15 January, Command could spare only two fighters for strafing that convoy along the Tampin–Gemas Road. To the east, from 12 January, 'convinced of the possibility of a landing in this vital area', it had detailed six Hudsons to fly daily reconnaissance along the coast watching for enemy ships. But the troops could not see the Hudsons: they were too far out. And where they did recognise a friendly plane, then it was something like the lone Wirraway spotter, shot down on 14 January, or the twenty Buffaloes flying north in the early afternoon of 12 January, chasing three times their number back from Singapore—the first British planes some men had seen; or those two Buffaloes flying across Gemas early on 16 January. And that was about all—except for the Moth, from the Malayan Volunteer Air Force. 'Limping Lily' they called her, one soldier wrote home, or 'the little old lady', half derisive, half affectionate: or in a different image, 'Does your mother know you're out?' as one corporal called up to it. The Buffalo might have been slow—outpaced, one pilot wrote with disgust, by bombers—but the Moth was unarmed, too, apart from a revolver jammed inside the fuselage. The pilot's only defence—flying squirrel to the Japanese hawk—was to use this

very lack of speed, banking sharply when a Navy O or an Army 97 came speeding in, hoping that the enemy at four times his speed, would flash past too fast to do any damage.[16]

And often, one hears, such tactics worked. One pilot sent to drop medical supplies over near Senggarang flew all the way just 100 feet above the ground, so low that no Japanese fighter dared to dive on him. But it was a bit like arming the Home Guard with pikes: the Moth sent over Endau on 16 January, the Japanese just forced down, so casually that from the beach it seemed that the enemy was simply playing with him: *he didn't shoot him down, just crashed him into the jungle*; from the village, one man remembers him *come spluttering in and this Japanese plane after him, to come down in the top of a tree.* It's there in two stories that day, the Moth. A day of stories 16 January, just as it was a day of incidents: stories that tangle, veer away from one another, cross at quite unexpected places, until the lines of narrative become intricately knotted. As for the incidents themselves, the War Diary lists them as they might have come to Force HQ: one platoon landed at the junction of Sungei Endau and Anak Endau to deliver a flank attack on the enemy; a report of enemy landing at Wireless Point 'subsequently proved incorrect'; 14 Platoon forced to withdraw owing to intense bombing and strafing; *Kelana*, heavily attacked by air and by fire from troops north of the river, fought a gallant action, but was subsequently severely damaged and beached. As a record of a single day, this text is curiously angular, fragmentary, the incidents listed as though each one were generated by the one before: the enemy dead suggests the Australian dead, all except one killed by air attack; that in turn gives rise to the flat statement that Japanese air activity was resumed; that in turn again to one result of that activity, and then to another, the beaching of *Kelana*. And the text, however read, raises more problems than it solves.[17]

It would be a good deal simpler if any one version proved more authentic, more authoritative than any other; but this, no less than what those who were there remember, is partial, selective. And at this point particularly, for the first time and not the last, it is the men themselves, each speaking out of his own truth, a truth commonly far too complex and various to be reduced to a formula or summed up in a proposition, who make sense of the day.

The beginning is straightforward. Even late on 15 January, Japanese troops had reached the north bank of the Sungei Endau: *about a company, you could see the flag*, and Keith Rathmell remembers shooting back at them even as 17 Platoon crossed over. Even



Endau

as the platoon had been withdrawn it had been decided—if Lieutenant Colonel Varley is right—that it 'will make contact again on the morning of 16 January'. The day before the troops had been asked simply to delay the enemy. The plan now—Tom Vincent's essentially, Rowley Oakes was to write—was a good deal more ambitious: a surprise attack, involving not only that platoon, but one

of the gunboats on the river, and—perhaps—part of the 2/20 Endau Force as well. For the platoon itself, as one of them remembers, it began comparatively simply when, about midnight, the men crossed the Sungei Endau again, paddling with their hands in silence for the last mile. At dawn they were to be at North Point, with its small village bounded by river and sea. But the barge landed them too far to the west; it took longer than they expected—some four hours—to force a way through the maze of trees and shrubs and thorns and creepers. Then, finally, the huts were in front of them, with—so Keith Rathmell remembers—*heaps of Japs: all having breakfast I'd say, they were all sitting around in heaps.* He asked whether to fire; the order was no, presumably to avoid warning the Japanese. A Tamil came out of a hut, right down the path in one version of the story, to the platoon; someone fired—or as one source carefully puts it, 'a rifle cracked'; the Tamil dropped; the Japanese came 'racing out of the huts'.

With 150 of the enemy, 17 Platoon could hardly attack; nothing for it but to withdraw. And *cutting in around a swamp* as Rathmell puts it, the men lay doggo in behind the Japanese all day, waiting, as one account argues, until dusk 'when a good plan could be formulated for a dawn attack'. And that, if it is true, means that neither *Kelana* nor any of 2/20 at Endau can have had much part in what Tom Vincent had planned the day before. In one version, *Kelana* was to attack just when Varley's platoon did, catching the Japanese between the two fires; *the barge was supposed to open up, and we were supposed to mop them up.* And, indeed, in the late afternoon—and quite suddenly, some say—*Kelana* did come steaming out towards North Point, to shell the enemy for a few moments and then steam away. But as early as 0730 hours, the first of the Army 97s had come over. Its first stick of bombs missed; the second landed right in a Chinese cafe in the village. Blackford looked up to find *the sky obliterated: sheets of flying iron, barrels, bolts—all floating through the air.* And the AA platoon that Brigade had sent up, not quite so nonchalant now—*nothing to it,* Blackford remembers their saying twelve hours earlier—are digging bags of charcoal out of the ruins to build a barricade: *not worth a spit against bombs or shell splinters.* For the rest of the day, the Japanese had planes in the air, three of them, bombing and machinegunning. Perhaps these attacks did no great damage. Officially, only one man was wounded and one man killed at Endau in these two days—Felix Brault, caught with a ration truck in the open. At Mersing, where the same kinds of attacks were for a week 'uninterrupted

and unrestrained', the casualties were not so heavy either: three men killed on 20 January. But they were intense and relentless enough for all that, enough as one man remembers to blow *Shunan* clear of the water; so purposeful that, even on the beach away from the village as another remembers, if they moved—Keith Travers's section, just five men—*the planes would be on to us straightaway.* This perhaps is why, sometime in the afternoon, the platoon on Wireless Point withdrew, ordering—so one story goes—the section at Point Kempit to withdraw too.

It is precisely at this point that the lines of narrative tangle and knot: so much so that unless one is to dispose of the evidence rather than to work on it, it becomes impossible to 'plot' the events of the day into anything approaching linear form. At the time, some certainly read this move back from Wireless Point and from Point Kempit as proof of a Japanese landing. This is how it reached Brigade for instance, where—as another story has it—signallers reported that they'd been fired on, that they'd actually seen enemy soldiers. And that, if it is true, may have given the story some weight; certainly enough for Brigadier Taylor to have the engineers immediately blow the bridge just south of Endau at the 104-mile peg. And as the news reached Brigade, so it got to the battalions too: 'rumours everywhere' an anti-tanker wrote, and the implications very clear. Alex Priest remembered Lieutenant Colonel Varley himself saying—part of his AA Platoon had gone up to Endau that 24 hours earlier—*You won't see them again.* And at Endau itself, in one version this is why *Kelana* went out, a moment that Harry Blackford down with the Vickers by the river catches in a beautifully judged anecdote:

> *So Craig takes Kelana out, steaming up that stretch, flat to the boards; and as he's coming he's firing his 12 pounders or 6 pounders or whatever; and he seemed to be getting a good deal of strafing from the other side—the planes were trying to have a go at him. So I said to the fellows, 'As he comes down lead him with the Vickers'—you know—'and you'—the other gun—'you get behind him.' And they started to do this. And everyone opens up on us. 'Right. Give it away. Cease fire'—though I used some stronger word—'You look after yourself' ... And in the meantime he sends a message that he'd like a boat to take the wounded off ... Got a few off too. We didn't have to worry about Japanese bombing at this stage, because the Japanese were concentrating on the boat. And eventually, they caught it. I didn't see it hit, heard the clonk though; he wheeled it around, and bought*

it in and hit the bank just below platoon HQ. Japanese didn't bother any more ...

Some of *Kelana*'s shells may have landed on Wireless Point, in one version driving 14 Platoon off the Point, the event that gave rise to the story of a landing in the first place: *You'll hear a lot about shooting against our own blokes, and about a gunboat on the river.*[18] And as some shells landed south of the river, so too some seem to have landed on the Pahang side. Almost at the very moment when 17 Platoon heard the fire and the gunboat on the river, the Japanese stumbled on to them, opening up with mortars. The Australians were in a space not much bigger than a room; one of the mortars—or even one of *Kelana*'s shells—dropped near Bill Ferguson, who was carrying a Tommygun. He apparently had the safety catch off, pulling the trigger as he fell; the gun fired into his thigh:

There was a lot of discussion as to whether we could carry him. But at this stage, the tide was coming in—it was muddy sort of stuff. So we made him comfortable there; and said 'after dark we'll come back and get you'—no way we could carry him at that time. We hadn't gone a hundred yards, and Ferguson called out—something to the effect ...'the bastards have got me.' Sheather and Smith and myself, we went racing back. By this time there must have been a few Japs there. I had Ferguson's own tommygun; and I virtually cut the Jap in half that was pulling his sword out of Ferguson's throat. And Sheather and Smith both got another couple of Japs. They were up trees by now, so they must have come in pretty quick ...[19]

By then it was almost dark. And with Varley hoping to get opposite Force HQ, the men moved further east again, down as close to the river as they could get. About midnight, Keith Rathmell again:

Lennie McLeer and myself ... we reckoned that next morning when the tide went out we couldn't stay there, we'd be sitting ducks. And Lennie said to me, 'I know a bit of Morse,' and we had a bit of a yarn about it. Someone had a torch; and we got right out, as far as we could get, and pointed down towards the company ...

Somewhere on the other side Tom Vincent had come down to the water too; he and Carter and Harry Blackford waiting all that evening: a tall figure, bent a little, pacing around on those long

legs of his near this immense waste of water. A small detail this, dropped almost casually into a conversation:

> *We sat there* [Blackford now] *worrying about their chances or what had happened to them; you could see aeroplanes around all day, skimming the trees ...*

And nothing perhaps drives home so clearly how precarious the whole position was: the day before Oag's section had disappeared into the jungle, Orme was not back either and Varley's platoon were somewhere out there too. Whether Vincent saw the light flashing from the other side Blackford does not remember, though he remembers it himself, those points of light spelling out SOS. And on the other side, after about an hour, the platoon saw the flash coming back *which Lennie says, spelling it out, means help is on the way.* Another hour, and a tonkan with two men in it noses into the mangroves: Bluey from Temora; and Lieutenant John Varley, cut off earlier by the Japanese, who'd swum the river in the dark with, he remembers, boats still going up and down.

IV

However one amasses the details, Endau usually seems remote, a long way from the main concerns, those tanks on the trunk road, the men trudging slowly back; with nothing of the urgency that presses even after 50 years when these things are talked about. So little remains: the documentary evidence is very thin, just the bare annotations of the Endau Force War Diary. And what the men remember, like Ferguson's death—intensely felt though it is—illumines a small circle rather than the whole. On one hand, of course, this points immediately to the fragmentary and chaotic nature of most men's experience of war; just as it indicates that the real meaning of this, like any other experience, lies less in the sequence of events as such than in the effect on the participants. This may be why, apart from the events of 15 January and the day after, it seems static too, Endau. Even though one hears of patrols going out, just the outlines survive, in a conversation with Bill Clayton, in a letter of Harry Orme's, in a conversation with Jack Carroll. And their evidence goes to make up the very pieces one is working with, rather than to sharpen the outline of a pattern already established or recognised.

With Westforce on the other side of the mountains, one is

conscious all the time of movement, as military authorities from Malaya Command to company commanders adjust positions, look for information, try to stop gaps. On 16 January, for instance, 2/Loyals on the left flank of the trunk road were laying anti-tank mines, the Johore Volunteer Engineers placing concrete road-blocks in culverts along the Yong Peng–Batu Pahat Road. Later that afternoon, 2/29 had one company patrolling along the Jementah Road, a second five miles southwest of the battalion positions, a third south of the Sungei Muar, where air reconnaissance had showed Japanese moving over the river near Lenga. And both platoons of the Rose Force patrolling towards Muar spent most of that day in ambush, one at Sagil waiting for Japanese who had been reported near Tangkar, the other at Asahan, north of Mt Ophir, 'expecting the enemy at any time'.[20]

If Gemas settles into this account like some kind of monument, if Muar does, this is perhaps because each is a kind of set piece, conforming to the idea of battle, of what is worth recording, what can be recorded. But the war in Malaya was for the most part more like what was happening at Endau, a 'corporal's war of small detachments', as a 2/30 staff sergeant had written home perhaps three months earlier; and those small detachments were almost always in contact with the enemy.[21] For instance, on this 16 January 12 Platoon B Company 2/26 forward of 2/30 near Gemas Road was sent in against Japanese now moving around the area. A minor engagement, one might argue, involving simply three sections, some 30 men. But it was mounted against heavy enemy fire—the battalion account mentions heavy machineguns, light machine-guns, grenades; and against an enemy who could call in, as he did, divebombers at will: an enemy gathering in such great numbers that the platoon lieutenant ordered his sections to break contact and withdraw, a withdrawal controlled by Private Weekes—he was not called 'the Colonel' for nothing—with Delacour and his Bren on the right flank. And that kind of patrolling continued all that day: a day that ended with Delacour dead, and six other Australians too.[22]

That in itself suggests that Mukaide had already sent reinforcements around the flank, though officially that's placed on 17 January: a party of 2/29 were sniped at late on 16 January on their way back to the Fort Rose Estate. But more importantly still, well before dawn on the morning of 16 January, 5th Guards—perhaps those that the Rose Force had word of near Tangkar—moving through the two companies of Jats upstream from Muar had

blocked the road from Muar to Bakri just before Sipang Jeram at the 105-mile peg. A troop of 2/15 Field Regiment, sent to support 5/Royal Garhwali Rifles, had three men killed, lost one gun; another section of E Troop heard fire from the Garhwali position and, looking back to see the road blocked from the other side, had to return by the coast road. As far as one can tell, even at this point Brigadier Duncan thought he 'had the matter in hand'. At least those were the terms he reported to Westforce in—leaving Bennett to assume he could deal with the situation just with the troops he had, even though the CO of the Garhwalis had already been killed and the counter-attack to reopen the road beaten back. However, early that afternoon Bennett heard from Duncan again, this time making it clear that the Japanese were across the river, having pushed back his forces—presumably 7/6 Rajputs—some miles already. 'Alarming', Bennett was to describe this as; more alarming still had he known that the Rajput CO, the second in command and all company commanders were to be killed before dark. And by 2000 hours Duncan had ordered the Brigade to withdraw to Bakri, moving by the inner of the two coast roads through Parit Jawa.[23]

Just how this reached Westforce HQ the Diary does not say unfortunately; unfortunately because that would explain the orders Bennett was to give: the context after all, is a large part of any meaning. If, as Bennett wrote later, a liaison officer from 45th Indian Brigade suggested sending 'a company of Australians to stabilise the position', then it would seem that to Westforce the situation was not desperate. And if he did indeed decide later that night to send 2/29, then those orders did not reach Lieutenant Colonel Robertson much before 0530 next day: at 1630 on this 16 January Lieutenant Colonel Robertson and his company commanders were still reconnoitring positions as though the relief of 2/30 planned for the next day was to go ahead. And, indeed, even that morning talking with Robertson, Bennett was to number the enemy force at no more than 200: two companies perhaps, no great threat. But then again, if, as one of 2/29 company commanders suggests, he indicated too that Robertson was to get fuller information when he came under command, then he might equally have suspected that his intelligence was far from complete.

Sometime during that same afternoon, Malaya Command learned that the Japanese were ashore—and in hiding—further south again at Batu Pahat, and perhaps somewhere on the coast between Muar and Batu Pahat as well. Bennett writes of the patrol

from 45th Indian Brigade meeting a party of Japanese sometime on that 16 January along the coast road. And that meant another set of adjustments. About 1655 hours Percival, fortunately up at 11th Indian Division HQ, extended the responsibilities of III Indian Corps to take in Ayer Hitam, Yong Peng and Batu Pahat on the Westforce line of communication, bringing 53rd Brigade forward from Singapore as well to come under Heath's command—2/Cambridgeshires to Batu Pahat, 6/Norfolks immediately to the Defile on the Muar–Yong Peng Road, 5/Norfolks into reserve at Ayer Hitam. But that, if it strengthened the critical line through which any Malaya Command forces would have to withdraw, also meant a shift in the dispositions of Westforce. Two days before, Percival had directed 53rd Brigade to the east coast, to relieve Brigadier Taylor's 22nd Brigade to Bennett's command, as Wavell had ordered on 13 January. Whether 2/Cambridgeshires or 5/Norfolks had begun even to prepare for this move, there is no way of telling now: the troops after all were soft after three months at sea, and all this may have taken more time than Command had allowed for. But 6/Norfolks at least had sent an advance party to take over from 2/19, the first of Taylor's battalions to move west; just as 2/19 for their part had already sent a party to scout out a position somewhere between Gemas and Segamat, a party that had returned when it heard of the landing at Endau. Anderson himself had 'several times' that very day asked Taylor to return his detached units, the half section down at Tenggorah and the company at Endau; and Bennett was expecting his 2/19 'tomorrow'. As Percival remembers it, the British units were to reach Ayer Hitam the following evening, 17 January; another source suggests that 6/Norfolks and a battery of 135 Field Regiment were to join 11th Indian Division 'today', the rest of the brigade 'tomorrow'; a third account has some at least of 6/Norfolks at the Defile not long after dawn on 17 January.

For 6/Norfolks then, if not for the two other battalions of 53rd Brigade, this new directive meant a real change—the Defile instead of the Crossroads, the defences of the Batu Pahat area instead of Mersing. But for the AIF it implied a far more profound dislocation. For one thing, Bennett was relying on 2/19 to relieve 2/29, with 2/29 itself to take over from 2/30. And this was the more important now that he had it in mind to send his 2/29 to the west coast. And once 2/29 had gone—as it did early on 17 January—then he had no reserve at all on the Segamat front; 'at a time,' he was to write, 'when further strong attacks are expected'. If the

situation were as Bennett puts it there, bleakly, then one can see why he would not find it easy to accept Percival's decision without seeking out some alternative. But if, as the suggestion is, he managed to get 'one battalion 11th Indian Division ... prepared to relieve 2/19 Bn at Jemaluang', nothing came of it. And if 3/16 Punjabis were indeed ordered to reconnoitre Jemaluang, part of a move for 15th Indian Brigade, then nothing came of that either. But it may explain why, even when 2/29 received definite orders to move, at 0530 hours on 17 January, 2/19 remained on four hours' notice. And it may also explain why, as soon as they'd crossed the Sungei Endau, Tom Vincent sent John Varley's platoon down to the Crossroads, a move the more urgent perhaps if even on 16 January, Bennett himself had no idea 2/19 had a company up at Endau at all.

At 0200 hours, then, Vincent has sent John Varley's platoon back down to the Crossroads, following quite soon himself. Dal Wilson's section on the river, he apparently ordered to stay—orders which he seems to have given directly. Dal Wilson, though up at Bukit Langkap on 16 January—my birthday, Keith Tunney remembers—had come down, probably during the night, perhaps because whatever signals he was receiving were coming in code: *I have no key* David Hinder remembers him being forced to send. Certainly he was down at Endau early enough to hear of Ferguson's death: *they just carved him up*, as Allen Page remembers it:

> *Dal Wilson told us, not on the river; we'd come in. 'We've had our first casualty.' I don't remember that he described the manner then—it doesn't seem that he hit us with a sledge hammer ... I remember thinking at first that those planes must have got him.*

At this point it will not do to assume that Endau Force is finished, to read Vincent's sending Varley back as the first stage of the formal withdrawal. Nevertheless, once Vincent with his two platoons had gone, the Force was reduced to half, little more than a company. Withdrawal then, as a contemporary saw it, was only a matter of time: once 2/19 were out, 2/20 could not hold the position alone; nor even withdraw to the mine as planned, as another 2/18 source implies, if the enemy aircraft destroyed any more of their boats. And the Force War Diary in the very economy of its phrasing, one phrase lying beside the other as though equivalent, implies much the same: D Company were ordered to return to their own unit, C Company were to prepare for withdrawal to Bukit

Langkap. Around Endau itself, it looks as though men spent most of the day preparing to pull out, even those in the more remote positions: Travers, for instance, who'd gone up the beach to try to make contact with this other mob camped up there—*not a mob we knew*—found they were making ready to get out, very much aware too of the chances of the Japanese surprising them: *the sergeant said, 'We had our guns trained on you for hours walking up that beach'.* That very afternoon, of course, the situation to the west had changed again, and Percival had released 2/19 to Bennett: after lunch, according to Bennett, but the battalion reported his orders reaching Battalion HQ at 1200 hours; at 1600 hours the advance party of the relieving battalion—5/Norfolks this time—was to arrive. And that makes the radical difference. As Percival wrote years later, once 2/19 had left the Crossroads, there had to be 'some adjustments of the defences around Jemaluang', enough to force Robertson's command either to pull back down to the Crossroads or back upriver. Even if Brigadier Taylor had recognised much earlier that morning that at Endau the enemy was in far too great a strength for his two companies—the way 2/19 unit history explains Varley's move back—it is only at this point that Taylor issues a formal order: Major Robertson, his OC Endau Force, whom he'd called back to brigade, returned with it to Endau on the 'night of 17 January'. And that places the Force withdrawal in quite a different context. Not that Vincent would have acted without orders either: not the officer, the man whom Anderson remembers so affectionately, remembers what he said almost exactly a week later when Anderson himself, out of contact with both Bennett and Heath, decided to break off the engagement. *'But we were told to hold the road.'* Anderson remembers him objecting; and when his CO argued that the road had been held long enough, that his men had done their job, that they had the right to be saved, then—*'I think you're quite right, but that's brave all the same.'*

It's a small problem perhaps, this matter of the Force withdrawal—perhaps unimportant too. But it serves usefully to indicate how, with so much missing, the silences in the texts—the gaps—speak very loudly. And it raises too—and raises quite sharply—some larger problems which are useful to focus enquiry: questions about the relationship between units, between 2/19 and 2/20 at Endau—*the 2/20, were they there?;* between smaller forces like Endau Force and the wider command; between Taylor's Brigade and Heath's III Indian Corps. And raises them at a point

like 17 January when, right across the peninsula, events—and units—were to move very fast indeed.

Perhaps even to list these moves might indicate something of what's in question here. First, somewhere around 0200 hours, Vincent sent Varley's platoon down to Mersing; by the time he reached the Crossroads, Lieutenant Colonel Robertson had his orders to move 2/29 across to Muar; at 0745 Robertson left for Bennett's HQ at Labis; by 1130 hours his battalion was through Segamat, and to the south 2/Cambridgeshires and 6/Norfolks were some 30 minutes out of Ayer Hitam. Half an hour again and Bennett ordered Lieutenant Colonel Anderson and his 2/19 to prepare to move west before dawn next day; and as the other two units of its Brigade moved from Ayer Hitam to the Defile and to Batu Pahat, 5/Norfolks were moving to the Crossroads to relieve 2/19, arriving about 1600 hours. Another hour again, two perhaps, and C Company at Endau was beginning its move upriver towards the mine. Sketching these out on a map, one has something of a cat's cradle already; and that in itself makes it difficult to speak as though Percival were moving pieces in a board game, an image which enters even into the official accounts. Of course, if one could devise an appropriate annotation—the equivalent of Kt to K4—which would indicate something of the weight of these moves, then the chess analogy might hold; particularly if one remembers that the *Go* Yamashita was playing was a wholly different game. Yet the moves themselves that these units were making—indeed the actual fact of movement—are as important as the positions that the units took up. And so true is this that it might be better to map them as vectors; plotting them in as lines that imply displacement, mass, speed and direction.

Much of 17 January, then, was taken up with this series of movements. But that is not to say, of course, that nothing else was happening. In the air, the Japanese: at Endau where 2/20 found it not easy at all to load guns and ammunition and stores on the tugs; at Segamat where 2/29 on their way to the west were caught in a raid—the AIF used to joke about Japanese pilots keeping union hours; along the Yong Peng Road where the Johore Volunteer Engineers found Norfolk dead that morning. And these lateral moves of Percival's crossed Japanese longitudinal ones, as Yamashita pushed for as much space as possible. If most attention was on the west coast, the trunk road was not quiet either: only patrol action perhaps, but 2/30 and 2/26 were patrolling to keep contact with the enemy—one fights after all as much for

information as anything else; and this too was the kind of patrolling that Roy Mills was so proud of. Nothing remarkable; except that the Japanese moving down the railway—persistent and successful—were now a few miles south of Gemas: a patrol from 2/26 was surrounded the evening before and had to fight its way out; a second, from 2/30 this time, had been forced to withdraw. The 17 January was much the same it seems: groups of perhaps 30 men, Japanese and Australians, moving around and through each other—not much that leaves any great impression in official records, a great deal that remains all the same sharply remembered. So Bruce Holland speaks of his 12 Platoon, moving up the railway, past an anti-tank gun and some 2/26 under Captain Swartz, seeing what turn out to be Japanese on top of the cutting, hearing the machinegun back at the rail crossing:

> *So Jim Ambrose talked the officer into going back ... And he ran past me, and he said, 'We'll see some action now'. And he was dead two minutes later; a Japanese mortar got him—and the anti-tank truck. But Swartz he said if we got the position back, he'd consolidate it ... and so we lined up to go across the paddock where the Japs were, and we were about halfway across the paddock, and down come our own shells on it ... So we had to go back and tell Jim's dad. And he abused us for not bringing his body back, but we couldn't. So after the war, when they went up, all they could find was boots and the bones in the boots.*

In that part of Malaya Jim Ambrose was not the only Australian to die that day, nor the day before; to the east though, near Endau, all but one of the dead were Japanese. By evening most of C Company were withdrawing upriver towards Bukit Langkap: 14 Platoon on *Shunan* to the mine itself, 15 Platoon to Lambong to set up a standing patrol on the river, what Brigade saw as 'an ambush force'. And Travers' section over on the coast Wilson had warned to get out—*they come and told us to get out, the Japs were coming:* they were to walk all night, over to the main road, catching what must have been about the last trucks—engineers probably—to go through to Mersing:

> *we thought they were Japs ... until we heard them talking—anyway, they picked us up: they were pulling all the troops out, and that's how we got a ride with them. They thought we were gone, 'Never thought we'd see you again'.*

The grave of Jim Ambrose as the War Graves team saw it in September 1945; his body was later reburied in the Kranji War Cemetery on Singapore Island. AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL NEGATIVE NUMBER 117499

And in Endau itself there's the brief and oddly moving moment when, speaking for the Australians, Jack Mudie makes a formal end:

> *That day I stood on a box in the village square and told them we were going: and the work we've done is finished*—suda habis: kita bale—*we will return.*

In the early evening, as the Japanese began to gather on the northern bank of the river in twos and threes around their small cooking fires, a small group, perhaps seven men, with two 3-inch mortars moved down to the river's edge. And as fast as they could, so Harry Blackford remembers, the gunners fired off the 24 rounds which was all that either gun had: with one gun trained to land on the mass of Japanese at the front of the crowd, the other to the rear: *I never saw such carnage, there were bodies flying everywhere.*

For the Australians, it proved an arduous journey upriver:

Penejar went aground, and though Lieutenant Maddivar found a way of floating her off, she was hit more than once by snags and floating logs and by daylight had to be abandoned. Captain Carter led a small party on a compass march to the mine, a march that meant swimming one creek at least, even paddling some distance in a canoe; a relief tug that he sent back brought the rest of C Company up to Bukit Langkap later the next day. By the evening of 18 January, whether the Japanese knew it or not, the road to Mersing was there for the taking.

6

'To press the enemy back to the Muar River'

I

As Westforce fell back in the centre, as Endau Force withdrew up the river, Nishimura had his Imperial Guards moving on Bakri—and the implications of that are immediately clear. Once these troops had crossed the Sungei Muar, then Yamashita had his forces some 40 miles along the Muar–Yong Peng Road, closer to Yong Peng than the three brigades Bennett had in front of Segamat. If those brigades were to hold, then Malaya Command could not allow the enemy to move in behind. Consequently, to hold in north Johore at all, the Imperial forces had to hold at Bakri: at the village where on a road coming in from the northeast 4/9 Jats could join its brigade again, at the crossroads a little to the east where the road coming in from the coast met the Yong Peng Road. If ever a battle was fought for the road, this was it: precisely as it had been in the north, exactly as it was to the west. Nor could Brigadier Duncan have found a more difficult place to fight a delaying action: no natural obstacles, not once the line of the Muar River had been given up; nor with the troops he had and neither flank safe, had he any great chance of fighting a battle of manoeuvre. Perhaps this was why he was ordered rather to retake Muar, or in Bennett's words, 'to press the enemy back to the Muar River': a three-pronged attack, as Duncan planned it then, which would have 2/29 moving down the Bakri Road, 5/18 Garhwalis along the coast to Parit Jawa, and—perhaps—4/9 Jats from Bukit Pasir.

Precisely how Duncan himself was reading the situation is impossible to determine now: all he could tell Lieutenant Colonel Robertson commanding 2/29, so the War Diary indicates, was that the Japanese had landed 48 hours before, that his troops immediately withdrew, that with the telephone lines cut his Jats were out

of contact. And it seems unlikely that Bennett knew much more. Whatever he had heard from Duncan's Brigade Major late on the Friday night, on Saturday morning he put the Japanese force at 200. But sometime on that Saturday morning—both his DADMS Major Anderson and his CASC Lieutenant Colonel Byrne were at Brigade sometime that morning—he may have come to see the position slightly differently: enough at least after talking with Brigadier Fawcett and Brigadier Key to have 2/19 released from Jemaluang, to go under orders of Westforce early on 18 January to Muar. Admittedly, when 2/29 had arrived, Command knew very little of the Japanese at Batu Pahat, except that a force had come ashore on 16 January; not enough certainly to have placed it as a Guards battalion; nor, of course, to be aware that Nishimura had ordered the other two battalions moving up north of Batu Pahat to hold the stretch of road between Parit Sulong and Bukit Pelandok. A day later Intelligence could report that Westforce was facing a division on the trunk road, and a division of Imperial Guards on the coast—this perhaps from Duncan who heard it just before 1000 hours on 18 January; and further that a larger force of Japanese had been seen north of Batu Pahat. The implications of this are clear enough: from Batu Pahat to the Defile is about twelve miles, to Yong Peng, less than twenty.[1]

In *Go*, as Yamashita explained, the point of using so many counters is to take as much ground as possible as quickly as one can. And on one level that explains very well what Nishimura was about: his counters, the 12 000 men of the Imperial Guards, one regiment to be sent into a frontal attack, a second to the flank, the third into a wide encircling attack to cut the road behind his enemy. And this, the classic Japanese manoeuvre of course, even as it confines his enemy into the smallest possible space, also allows him to claim the surrounding country as his own. Even if Duncan had recognised this, recognised what Nishimura was capable of—and after all, he had been less than a fortnight in the country—he had 6/Norfolks behind him at the Defile: and two days earlier too he'd had his engineers place charges in the Parit Sulong bridge. And this, one assumes, is why he placed all his units well forward, ready—even without 4/9 Jats—to advance on Muar at 0200 on 18 January: a converging attack apparently, with 5/18 Garhwalis to move from Pasir Jawa and 2/29 straight up the road, leaving both the anti-tank guns where they were now, one beside the road near Battalion HQ, the other forward around a bend. About 1800 hours the Indian battalion left for Parit Jawa, a column of lorries packed

with troops, more infantry marching behind. Another 90 minutes, and the Japanese, already in position on both sides of the Parit Jawa Road, made the first move, those near the junction with the coast road firing at close quarters as the Garhwalis got off the trucks, those closer to Bakri attacking the column coming down on foot behind. And then, very much as the Garhwalis turned for Bakri again—400 men and a single officer—Nishimura began his move against 2/29 down the Sipang Jeram Road.[2]

Moving up from Brigade HQ, Lieutenant Colonel Robertson had deployed his 2/29 Battalion into a good defensive position astride the road, a position to move out of at dawn: HQ in a patch of rubber on a small rise, swamp and paddy field behind and to the left, more rubber to the left of the road, his three infantry companies to the left, right and rear. Even then Nishimura was closing in—an armoured car probing forward was to find the road already blocked two miles ahead. And by dusk he had patrols up too, advancing up the road firing; moving in under artillery cover to engage the forward platoons: 'confused fighting' the company commander was to call it, his men going in with grenade and bayonet. About midnight Robertson was asked to send back his A Company—a company only two platoons strong—to protect the guns; about midnight too Duncan cancelled his counter-attack, proposing, it's argued, to concentrate his forces first, just holding Bakri until the Jats could come in. His patrol had gone out by mid-morning when Lieutenant Colonel Anderson came in—a moment he was to remember for the 25-pounder going off on the other side of the hedge: '*What a damned fool you are to come to war again!*' To this point Nishimura was held on his front, the Australian front as well; and content, it would seem, simply to stand along the Parit Jawa Road. Then, sometime towards dawn—'the noise, like the end of the world'—he sent his tanks forward against 2/29 straight along the Muar Road.[3]

In some ways it was another Gemas, as though none of the Japanese forward patrols here either had spotted the two anti-tank guns along the road. At least the tanks came on slowly: the first, the second, the third, slowed but not stopped by the shells slamming into them from the forward gun. In the report the Australian Film Unit filed, the first report to be published—and the first eyewitness account of any of the fighting—it sounded as though this were deliberate, as though Clarrie Thornton had quite intentionally let these through to be handled by Charlie Parsons at the end of the cutting where the tanks could not turn. And this gun, the

This, one of the classic photographs of the campaign, was taken from a few yards in front of the rear anti-tank gun, the Japanese tanks already halted and burning when the photographer came up. The first tank one can see here and the third were destroyed by the forward gun, out of picture some 300 yards to the left of the road; the second, the infantry probably accounted for.
AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL NEGATIVE NUMBER 011298

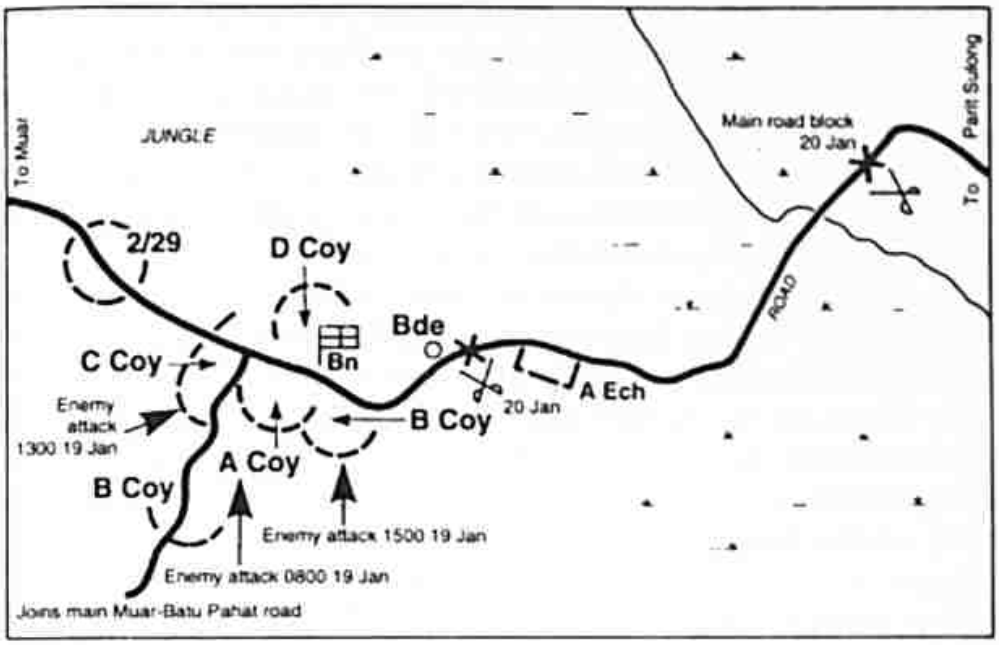
gun they were photographing from, destroyed a tank; the gun sergeant fairly dancing with excitement, shouting to his crew, 'Got him! Now give him another!' A third tank, sheltered by two already burning, these gunners themselves knocked out; grabbing grenades, running up the embankment to throw them onto the tank, breaking the tracks. Any Japanese who ran for cover, the infantry accounted for; the whole action over in less time than it takes to tell. 'No prisoners,' the War Diary noted. In part, this is Bakri read through Gemas: not only the substance, but even the tone is the same, from the cheerfulness of the sappers right to the exuberance of the gunners: 'Got him again. They're still running' from Gemas, 'Give him another' from Bakri. A second ambush this, and a second victory; and one reason at least for the very flourish of the writing. But others, even at the time, were more circumspect. Indeed, as Captain Bowring near the forward gun

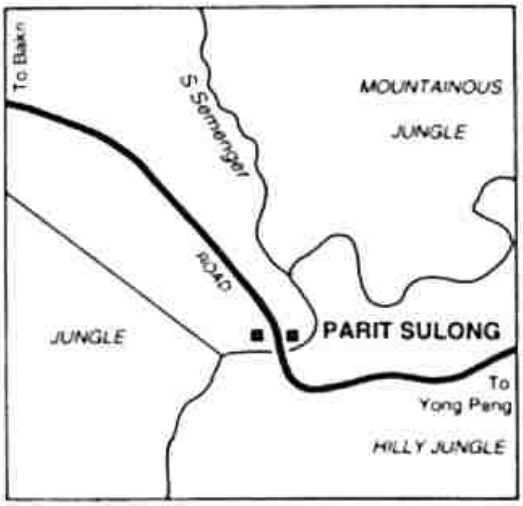
recognised, Thornton, far from simply allowing the tanks to pass, was finding—just as the anti-tank guns did at Gemas—that his armour-piercing shell was no use against lightly armoured medium tanks like these. Still, changing to high explosive took time; time enough when he'd dragged his gun onto the road, turning it around as he did, for Japanese infantry to come within 60 yards. And even then, as another gunner wrote, Charlie Parsons on the rear gun gave no order to fire until the tanks were something like 40 yards away—by then, Thornton suggested years later, 'they had slowed right down and I think had stopped firing': tanks that were so close that the gunlayer had three, it's said, in his sights at the same time. These four tanks Parsons destroyed: a moment the Film Unit caught precisely—the tanks burning, smoke blowing out, trees and bodies slewed right across the road. And a fifth the 2/29 mortars were to claim; and twenty minutes later, some 400 yards in front of C Company, Thornton himself was to account for another three. At the same time, however, even if this had prevented the Japanese breaking through, precisely as at Gemas before—and at Slim River too—the Japanese infantry were moving up, their machinegunners setting up behind them, snipers firing already from the trees. Every time he lifted his steel helmet and raised his head, one of the film crew was to note he would hear the high whine of the Japanese rifle, hear the bullet hitting close by. And since the fire was coming from all directions, then the Japanese even as early as this may have cut in behind. To their front, then 2/29 had perhaps two battalions; about 1000 hours a reconnaissance patrol confirmed Japanese to the rear as well. By noon the road was efficiently blocked: Lieutenant Colonel Robertson riding pillion back to Brigade was shot, to die quietly a short time later. If the film crew were right, then the battalion was preparing for something of a siege: until late afternoon—about 1600 hours—when we 'heard mortar bombs landing in the same position from which the Japanese mortar fire was coming: we thought that sounded cheerful'.[4]

Some 1200 yards to their rear, 2/19 had come up late that morning, its three companies deployed as though to move immediately on to the offensive: one company with a section of anti-tank guns almost a mile down the Parit Jawa Road with what was left of the Rajputs and Garhwalis closer in to Bakri, a second company to the left of the Muar–Bakri Road, the third placed to release the 2/29 Company sent back to guard the guns. Forward, the 2/29 were, Anderson remembered, 'in good heart'; just as well, since

he could do nothing much until the Jats came in, or until Duncan at the very least was able to place them. Even Duncan seemed to read it that way, ordering Anderson to arrange for a company attack. At a conference that morning he'd argued for pushing up the road just after dawn the next day, either to test the strength of the enemy or—more likely—to create some kind of diversion to allow his battalion to reach him. As Anderson says, Duncan already knew that Japanese strength: even so, he prepared to carry out Duncan's instructions, giving his A Company commander Captain Beverley his own orders just before midnight. And that afternoon he concentrated on breaking through to 2/29, who had for the last six hours endured steady sniping, small arms fire and mortars: 'like an earthquake the ground feels like, going up and down, crouching down in the trenches, shells landing each side would be half buried with tops off rubber trees crashing down on top.' A Company 2/29 Anderson ordered forward first at 1300 hours, an action which, even when the company was stopped on the road, at least demonstrated where and how the Japanese were deployed. And when that block was removed, the company was still forced to ground on the right, and stopped to the left by machine-guns and mortar fire from a number of posts, perhaps twenty Japanese to each. It was to take the two platoons of his own C Company, which Anderson sent in immediately, to rout the enemy, reaching 2/29 positions about 1600 hours: 'All the boys said to hell with the sniping, and stood up and waved their rifles and cheered like mad.'

As evening drew in Japanese mortars were firing into 2/29 area, later again heavy artillery: a pitchblack night, one man remembered, a night so dark that the RMO dressing by touch was to find his hands face and clothes in the morning stiff with blood. Twice at least the Japanese moved against the forward company, shouting and screaming, though all that noise served only to point the target for the Australian bayonet: 'The experience cannot have been very heartening as very few of the attackers would ever be much good again,' Bowring wrote. Even so, the enemy came again and again: to be mortared as they fell back. For some hours, quiet; as behind them 2/19 were more lightly engaged. But with the road open, at least for a little, Major White, the Jat second in command, had come out with the wounded to report his battalion six miles northwest of Bakri: *and the Brigadier drinking tea since two o'clock, and nothing done.* Anderson offered two Intelligence scouts: *my*





Muar–Bakri

orders to them would have been, 'Take that bastard back and bring the battalion in.'

But with reports of enemy patrols on the route back, White's departure was delayed, from 1745 to 0400, from 0400 to daylight; and so too was the 2/19 A Company attack. Though the men had assembled, the company had still not gone in by 0800 hours, a moment when Nishimura mounted a heavy attack against Battalion HQ. This Anderson had to turn his company to meet—an hour and a half before they threw the enemy back. And by then Anderson himself was in charge of the force, asked to take over when

Brigade HQ was bombed: the single plane circling overhead for 30 minutes now, swinging around into a straight run, let one bomb go, killing all but Duncan himself and two others of his staff, and seriously wounding Major Julius of 2/15 Field Regiment. His appreciation, as he remembers it now, was based on a simple principle: *if the Guards Divison went through, that would cut off the main forces at Yong Peng; and the war would be over very quickly...*

And the rest of the argument follows with the inevitability of a syllogism. He had no hope at all of re-establishing the position at Muar, not with his two battalions, not even with Duncan's Jats as well. If his task was to hold and to delay the enemy, then the best place to stand would be that open space at Parit Sulong, where he'd already dropped off John Varley's platoon on the way over: both to guard the bridge—*this bridge must be protected in force I thought*—and *to act as a source of information should I need it.* First he had to bring 2/29 through, then, using his own battalion as rear guard, move back; and stand there. But until the Jats appeared, he could do nothing to bring 2/29 in:

> *If I could have pulled it back then and there, it would have made all the difference in the world ... But if I'd pulled it back, how could the Jat battalion come in—it would have been a terrible thing if the Australians had abandoned them. But every hour of delay made the job worse: oh, it was agony.*

What made it worse was, of course, the increasing weight of the Japanese attack, particularly to his south and southwest: attacks that had begun with that Japanese assault about 0800 hours and were to go on throughout the day. In a comprehensive account of this first encounter and of those which followed, perhaps because of the sheer mass of detail, it can sound as though one has to do here with a series of Japanese assaults, increasing severe, increasingly desperate: as though the enemy, thrown back each time, came on again and again. And that, to some extent, is true. But it is not the whole truth and, posed in those terms, it could very well turn out not to be the truth at all.

To begin with, one could argue perhaps that on the 2/29 front the Australians are holding their enemy. But it is equally true that Nishimura has them pinned down, unable to move forward or back. From the evening of 18 January, when he sent in that short wild bayonet attack against the forward company, he'd kept up the pressure, with snipers on all sides, infantry moving on the road in

both directions, and his mortars shelling into the AIF perimeter. And to that extent 2/29 are so completely engaged that it would be difficult to break off; particularly—as Anderson is to find about midday—when Nishimura also has troops positioned between the two battalions. And again, this attack on the flank comes a bare hour after he had one of his battalions thrust against 2/19 B echelon a mile or so outside the 45th Indian Brigade area. Unless this is accidental—coincidental rather—it looks as though one has to do with a beautifully judged instance of a manoeuvre that the Japanese had made their own: sending in troops to drive a wedge into the flank, the 'stab in the enemy's side', as simultaneously troops moving deep into the rear cut off any chance of retreat. If this is true, then the Japanese moves that day are better read as a single attack: one that effectively committed the whole 45th Brigade and both AIF battalions.

Against B echelon Nishimura's troops were successful, forcing those who survived into the jungle in a long and arduous journey to the coast. In his first move near Bakri, his troops were to reach high ground a bare 150 yards from Battalion HQ, but from there 2/19 pushed them back. Nevertheless, patrols following them up found more troops massing to the southeast, precisely where Robertson, 24 hours before, had reported the enemy gathering in large numbers. Each time the fighting was bitter, frequently hand-to-hand and the Australian sections often 'hard beset': most dangerous in mid-afternoon perhaps, with Nishimura sending in, what Anderson reckons, a full battalion against his two small companies—*the only time I got nervous.* Each time the Japanese were beaten back again, their casualties many: 2/19 counted about 140 bodies at the end of the first 90 minutes of fighting, and at the end of the day—as he was to hear in Burma, Anderson remembered—several truckloads of dead went through Muar, stacked high up. For as Anderson said, with the bayonet at least Japanese were surprisingly easy to kill, almost dazed as the point came at them: as if the training they endured on live targets, a training designed to make them indifferent to killing, only made them the more afraid.

Just before this last assault, Major White had come in with two companies of Jats; others had been caught up within 2/29 perimeter. But even as that meant Anderson could begin to bring in 2/29, he had equally to reckon with Japanese to his west as to his south and east: as he'd known since the first survivors reached him that morning, his B echelon had been attacked, and the road

blocked. And as his B Company forward in Bakri itself reported, the enemy were already into the village, not many perhaps, but enough to indicate how closely Nishimura was pressing in.

Nothing perhaps is more characteristic of Anderson, nothing is to show him so well, as the careful preparations he makes to bring 2/29 in. To cover their withdrawal he proposed to use four guns of 2/15 Field Regiment: in the fire plan as Major Olliff framed it, the shells are to fall clear of the road. This meant the 2/29 are to come down the road, on the left he stipulated, where his own B Company were already in place, giving 2/29 transport some chance as well. A Company he left much as it was, on the left flank, to the left and a little forward of Battalion HQ. C Company was to remain as it was, astride and forward of Bakri village, to pass 2/29 through its lines to Bakri; and just as well, since some ten minutes after the guns began to fire, the company made contact with enemy patrols running along the tracks leading to the north. The Rajputs and Garhwalis he sent back; the Jats whom Duncan considered his strongest battalion—*but there can't have been much in it*—he moved to the northern fringe where as yet no Japanese had appeared. All the same, 2/29 found it difficult to break contact, even moving out according to plan at ten-minute intervals; particularly as the Japanese had, as it proved, at least five machinegun posts set up on the road. About 1930 hours the road was cut, a block set up between 2/19 and C Company: Anderson dealt with that by sending a platoon from A Company forward to patrol the road, where from 2/29 positions he could hear confused fighting. This patrol went forward right to 2/29 lines; contacted the battalion and reported back to C Company. And it's about this point that things went wrong.

As 2/29 Diarist remembered it, his battalion was 'to cut its way back'—a phrase heavy with difficulty—opposed by Japanese machineguns, Japanese bombs, Japanese mortars. Both B and C Companies came through with few casualties. But HQ Company and A Company barely made it at all. A Company, for instance, crossing open ground about 300 yards to the rear of the battalion position, lost contact: Olliff was shot on the road, and other men forced wide, wider still perhaps by their own artillery and mortars, lost their way. As many stories now as there are men to tell them, as many different endings: as one finds simply by tracing through the men from HQ Company, for instance, a company which Anderson lost contact with when, as it was fired on, it swung east.[3] Bill Anderson was to reach a British unit just before the Causeway was

blown and, assuming any soldiers they met were Japanese, 'to say "This is it", stick our arms in the air and kept on walking'. And Jim Marr, whom Anderson had been forced to leave near a rubber tree, too weak to carry him any further—Marr got somehow to Pudu gaol in Kuala Lumpur, as did the party that the adjutant led. But Frank Irwin, perhaps in the group that Brand the 2/29 RMO was in, a group guided by Private Cant—a 'man of great ability and courage'—stumbled into the 2/19 perimeter two days later, about 2000 hours, four miles north of the Parit Sulong Bridge. And the anti-tank men too: nothing perhaps indicates more clearly the delicate balance between mother wit and courage and luck—some reached the guerillas deep in the jungle, one to work there for the next three and a half years, while others making for Sumatra were never seen again; another five came into Pudu about the middle of February, about the same time as the fifteen men from the 2/29 mortar platoon they'd met up with reached Australia. Except for two trucks and two carriers, the transport had to be abandoned: a priest in Malacca was to remember those trucks years later, to remember coming out of the jungle to find lorries and ambulances on both sides of the road, men dead at the wheel, paybooks and letters scattered about. And the unit RMO, making a break with the walking wounded in the dim moonlight, was to remember that outburst of yelling as the Japanese dealt with those who'd had to be left under the Red Cross. By 2000 hours, some 200 men and officers had reached 45th Brigade area: Anderson, in his signal early that morning, was to speak of the battalion as 'mauled'.

II

The whole of this 19 January communications with Westforce had been chancy, uncertain: the signallers having trouble either with the sets or with the ciphers, the key lost or altered and Westforce refusing, as Endau Force was to find precisely at the same time, to accept an old—and it said compromised—code. There's no way of knowing whether Bennett's most critical signal, 'Withdraw Yong Peng Ack[nowledge]', arriving so the Diarist notes at 1700 hours, was sent off then for the first time; no way to determine whether this was the earliest he would have given Anderson permission to withdraw. Coming at this point in the story, two hours after Anderson had, as the Diarist puts it, 'advised Westforce of the seriousness of situation', it has to look as though Bennett is speaking

immediately to this, presenting one solution to the plight the Muar force finds itself in. But though the logic of the situation supports this argument, Bennett's response in fact comes at the end of a wholly different argument, the conclusion of a wholly different set of premises.[6]

To begin with, some 24 hours before, Bennett had asked if he might withdraw his forces along the trunk road. If his 2/30 were 'being tired out', as he cabled home, he had no reserve either, with 2/29 at Muar: this and the pressure on 1/13 Frontier Force Rifles was enough to explain what he was asking; that and the sheer difficulty of getting his forces across the Segamat River. And if the Muar force entered into it, it was as his line of communication, a point Anderson had already seized on. This permission Percival gave, ordering at 2145 that evening that the Muar section be transferred from Bennett to Heath. And though the reason he gave for this was that Bennett might have more space to work in, he might also have sensed that the line of communication had wider implications. Sometime that day Heath had been over at Mersing, the area he was already responsible for. The 22nd Brigade he left as it was: 2/18 on the coast, 2/20 facing north where it had been for a few days now, one company near Bukit Sawah, a standing patrol over the river, and another platoon in position three miles up the road to Endau. But what was important now, he argued, were the Jemaluang–Kota Tinggi Roads and the road to Singapore. How far this was influenced by the report that those Japanese ashore at Batu Pahat were now about six miles northwest of the town and moving inland is impossible to say; not without knowing precisely when the conference was held. And how far that intelligence entered into Percival's decision to make Heath responsible for both coasts one cannot be sure of either. But from Batu Pahat runs the only road to cross the peninsula, Batu Pahat–Kluang–Jemaluang Crossroads. For Taylor, of course, this was to mean a radical shift. With his forward troops already committed, with 2/17 Dogras already guarding the long and vulnerable line back to the Island, with detachments from Johore Military Forces on the two landing fields and 5/Norfolks around the Crossroads, he now had to withdraw his only remaining reserve, the company at Bukit Langkap, to guard his western flank, the eastern end of the road from Batu Pahat.[7]

This, while it is to pose some immediate problems, is still comparatively simple: at least it makes it clear why Bukit Langkap is suddenly abandoned. On the west coast, however, the moves that

Percival and Heath are to make the next day suggest they are acutely aware of the position the Muar force is in: not so much in itself, but as a line of communication. Early on 19 January, Heath reinforced Batu Pahat, sending down 6/15th Indian Brigade. And perhaps expecting some kind of attack—though he could have no evidence that III/4 Imperial Guards were already moving to cut the Bakri–Yong Peng Road between Parit Sulong and the Defile—he ordered 3/16 Punjabs to Bukit Pelandok, held only by 6/Norfolks. In the early afternoon, Percival ordered 53rd Brigade to block the Defile, the point on which the whole plan turned: 45th Brigade, the Muar force, was to withdraw through them. If the order in which these decisions are set out means anything at all it is that the Muar–Yong Peng Road is to be closed; and if 45th Brigade is to be ordered to withdraw, then this is simply Percival recognising that blocking the road is better done by 53rd Brigade, and at that geographical point 'from the bridge at Parit Sulong to the high side of the junction of the Yong Peng–Muar and Yong Peng–Batu Pahat Road'. Percival may fear that the Muar force will be defeated; he is more concerned though at this point with the implications of this defeat, an enemy move to the rear of his main forces. This is what Bennett had to pass on to Anderson, not because Muar force is under his control—it was Heath's responsibility, under Heath's orders—but because only Westforce was in wireless touch with Anderson. Even so, one cannot be sure when Bennett sent the signal: until 1700 hours on 19 January, he was out of wireless touch too.

III

A little after dawn, Anderson moves his column off: in the centre the trucks with the wounded, on the flanks platoons from both AIF battalions; as advance guard 2/19 HQ and a troop of guns, behind them the carriers, and to the rear Indian troops, two more 25-pounders, two of the four anti-tank guns. In the first reports of the days that followed, reports released a week later, the narratives are carried through largely by stories from men returning: men, one journalist wrote, with the same quiet tone, the same angry eyes as the men of Crete, and—the one phrase that strikes home—the same quick remoteness: men like the anonymous Australian that the *Straits Times* spoke with, a 'weary tried soldier' now, no longer 'the boy out for adventure' he was a week ago; or men like Frank Johnson from 2/29 HQ Company who moves in a hundred

Lieutenant Colonel Charles Anderson. The official citation to his VC was to speak of his 'brave leadership, determination, and outstanding courage ... without any regard for his personal safety'. More, the award had been immediately recommended by General Bennett, 'so impressed was he,' the Minister for the Army said, 'by the reports of the men themselves'. AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL NEGATIVE NUMBER 100636A

words from that first attack on the Saturday evening—'short and sweet' he called it—to the final break through the jungle at Parit Sulong. Even Johnson's story does not amount to much: just enough to indicate a direction, an arrow rather than a map. And the official material is not much more detailed. Events are ordered into a simple sequence. And except for an occasional remark, like the text beginning with 'every man was fighting mad' in one of the Intelligence reports, these narratives read as a flat statement of obstacles overcome, miles—even yards—plodded out: the advance guard held up a mile from the perimeter, that ambush destroyed; the column pushing forward into the next ambush, six road blocks this time, trees and trucks wired together and Japanese astride the road preventing their passing until the final attack near dusk; the four miles to Parit Sulong. And in private writing, in letters and memoirs, it is not very different: the meaning of events—the suffering and death of friends—is commonly held down to a memory of endurance, of courage, in that slow passage from Bakri to the bridge. The ferocity of the fighting is perhaps only hinted at, suggested in the bare list of names, names of dead and wounded; yet even here it is evident that what clearly shaped the action is Anderson's own sureness of touch.

In almost every account Anderson is there.* Just 30 minutes after the column moved off, for instance, one company pinned down—the enemy well dug in 50 yards ahead—Anderson is forward to bring up two platoons, directing his men to move there, fire here; finally ordering up A Company in an attack to gain more space. And this, as someone else wrote, was when he suggested they go in singing 'Waltzing Matilda', something Tom Vincent, now acting second in command for the battalion, had always argued for: to release the tension the unit historian was to suggest, but also, Anderson himself says now, because he knew his men were coming near to the ruins of B echelon, a hard thing to see unmoved. A little later and he is back to the rear of the column where Japanese tanks are coming up, his very presence as much a weapon in his men's hands as the guns of the Regiment. The wind, he notices, blows from the north; he had 65 Battery fire Bakri, and joined the forward platoon himself, the smoke blowing across enough to stop the enemy tanks pressing in. And years later, he remembered that, not knowing who he was, the people were to complain that the Australians had burned the village: *Did they, the scorpions?* Then he's forward again, where the column is held up by two enemy posts; and this, of course, is where he moves

ahead himself, easing up to put the machinegun posts out of action. At mid-afternoon, he's at the rear again, where the Indian troops are giving way—it's in this counter-attack that Brigadier Duncan is killed. And finally, towards the end of that long day, two hours of daylight left, he comes forward to Tom Vincent again: Vincent whom he'd left on a little knoll, his task to maintain the pressure on the enemy at the front the whole time. One roadblock behind the column that morning, now another: an enemy entrenched, *his flanks in water 700 to 800 yards across, stretching into tree swamp: impossible to fight over, you had to go through, you can't fight into it and you can't get around.* If as Vincent tells him, the Japanese firing is going very high, the enemy have their heads down: *It meant I had to do this thing then—things are right; and I wanted to get onto the treeless plain just on the end of dark.*

Whether Anderson still saw his force as fighting a delaying action, withdrawing to stand in that open ground at Parit Sulong, is not easy to tell. His signal earlier that morning, twelve hours ago now, had used the term 'extricate': 'we need maximum assistance to extricate force [and] maximum air support'. And just before Muar force had reached this very block, Bennett had in a signal used the term escape—'destroy everything on wheels and escape'—to have Anderson reaffirm that he would try to break through. His only concern, was that there might be Japanese beyond the causeway on which the block was placed. But in the signal that came later that day, a signal impossible to time with any certainty, he was to learn that the Japanese—24 hours earlier—had pushed 6/Norfolks off Bukit Pelandok, crossed the road to Bukit Buloh, and so commanded the road to Yong Peng. Consequently, even if the Norfolk platoon was still at the bridge, escape was now, as Bennett saw it, 'almost impossible'. Once Anderson had that message, then the game had to be up. And the assault against this final complex of blocks that afternoon—if the IO has it right—certainly reads like a breakout, the very language of his report suggesting extreme violence: the men 'fighting mad' with rifles, bayonets and axes, walls cut to pieces, roadblocks blown out—the whole passage was to enter the canon less than six months later, inextricably now part of the story. 'It's a case of death or going through gentlemen,' one of the first reports has Anderson say. 'And we're going through.' And this reading every memoir, even the shortest of letters confirms: the tone absolutely, just as the very terms journalists are to use five days later—'courage', 'gallantry'—suggest that endurance beating defeat into victory that

legends are made of. Anderson brought C Company forward: *a good company C, a very solid lot;* and fresh—men who've been under fire for hours, *even men like these, as brave as lions,* do not find it easy to move forward. What Anderson saw was that this new company would give an impetus to his attack: as it went through A Company, for instance, it would pick them up—as it did; and the composite company felt the impetus too, *and went in: Snelling cleaned them up—all the troops got picked up and went through.* Not easy watching it though: *I was going to lead that lot myself, but Tom Vincent wouldn't let me: 'No bloody fear,' he said.*

How much Anderson knew about the plans for a 53rd Brigade counter-attack is not clear either: wireless communication, though the signallers managed to build one set from what was left of others, was still lost, the Diary says, at nightfall. None of those counter-attacks came to anything, not on this 20 January, nor the day after: both 6/Norfolks and 3/16 Punjabs were cut to pieces; 2/Loyals in disarray: so much so that Percival at 2000 hours ordered 27th Brigade to go right through to Yong Peng rather than stop at Labis. And if the Official History is right, even on 21 January when Anderson's position was more desperate still, Brigadier Key was agreeing that Brigadier Duke, commanding 53rd Brigade, might postpone his attack. But even if it had made some gains, the Japanese were still between the bridge and Yong Peng. Sometime on 20 January, the platoon of Norfolks had gone, striking out across country to Batu Pahat, cut off they assumed when their battalion was beaten back at the Defile the day before. And sometime that afternoon, without any opposition at all, III/4 Guards sent some two days before to cut that very road, held the crossing. Thus, as well as the three battalions coming up behind him, Anderson now had III/4 Guards at the bridge, and I/5 Guards at the Defile a few miles ahead.

Sometime after midnight, Anderson heard—from an Indian straggler—that the Japanese held the bridge. Even if Westforce had known that the Norfolks had gone, the wireless had failed again. To confirm it, he sent his despatch riders forward: Ron White, Ted Levick—'I learned from him what heroism is,' George Harding wrote a few months later.[9] Ordering the column into the shelter of the rubber, Anderson went forward himself, finding from a patrol sent on ahead that the enemy held the bridge in strength, though the two Malays that the patrol brought back insisted this was the Johore Volunteers. Whether the enemy were using these men to entice Anderson into a trap is not clear, though that is

what the battalion History is to argue. And since Anderson sent them forward again with his point section, he was himself apparently not convinced, the more so when Japanese concealed on this side of the road opened fire, then charged. That charge his advance guard stopped, leaving the enemy in exposed ground. And Anderson moved very economically to get rid of them, having one company pin the enemy down, a second close up in support, and the third—barely 30 men—swing around to the left and attack the enemy's right flank: simple in training perhaps, carried out here by men close to exhaustion. And once he has his enemy pinned down, then Anderson brings up two carriers. But if that was enough to hold the position to his front, he hears now that his rear is pressed by tanks and motorised infantry, in strength enough to overrun some of the rear gun, to lose two of the anti-tank guns. And it is perhaps this moment that Nishimura was referring to when he wrote four months later that it was not until 20 January that he found a way of dealing with the enemy: using a combination of infantry, tanks and artillery units.[10] Still, this time again, the Japanese were held, with Sergeant Barton firing his 25-pounder over open sights. But Anderson now has barely half a mile to work in, half a mile between the enemy in his rear and the enemy to his front; and the main attack coming through thick scrub on the left of the road. And, as the Diary puts it, that means 'close contact from this time to the end of the engagement'.

That close contact the battalion historian has carefully described: the names of men, the pattern of their movements precisely remembered. The infantry sent into clear the village—supported only by carriers since Anderson could not use artillery—reached the north bank of the river by mid-afternoon; the bombing and the strafing increased—Jimmy Byron the battalion fullback lost both legs when Battalion HQ was hit. And such was the pressure on the rear now that Anderson was unable to bring any troops forward to try the bridge; and his column he was finding, far from holding a straight line as it were right up to the river, was being forced into a kind of triangular shape, the base line stretching perhaps a thousand yards, the whole narrowing to an apex at the bridge. Earlier that morning, Bennett had sent his one remaining Rose Force platoon, the one commanded by David Lloyd from 2/30, ordering it through to Parit Sulong: 'it was considered,' the Force Diarist wrote, 'that a well-armed party could surprise the enemy that were holding the bridge, and in turn hold it long enough for our troops to get through'. And this was all the

outside help that Anderson could look for: 'Look out for Sandy,' Westforce signalled, knowing Anderson would recognise one of his own lieutenants, would know what that meant. By dusk, as the Muar force endured more shelling, Lloyd was on the Yong Peng Road; as Anderson was making arrangements for the wounded, he had reached 3/16 Punjabis, where he learned how things stood from 'a party of English and AIF troops ... come from Parit Sulong', probably one of those groups lost in the breakout from the 2/29 area some days before. The gunfire that Anderson could hear got no closer; Lloyd's party were finding it heavy going through the swamps, up to their waists in mud, moving so slowly that Lloyd sent four men on ahead. Even then it was almost another 24 hours before they got near to Parit Sulong at all. And then it was to meet with men coming out: it was all over.

Those last hours before the final withdrawal every man is to remember differently of course.[11] Purtill from 2/29 for instance, writing just after the Japanese surrender three and a half years later, suggests through the very vehemence of his language how one man felt the violence through his whole body: the artillery pounds, tanks tear down the road, planes roar down, guns loose among us: 'Yes, we were down ... bloody near out too.' And this is the man who had watched one of 2/19 in a charge against the block the day before, watched him carefully enough to note the initial thrust, to see him stop after a few yards, go back, thrust again at the same object, continue on in the charge. And the first reports a few days later, even in the confusion of the details, indicate something of the chaos concealed in a phrase like the IO's 'nasty night', or 'the hellish night' of the commemoration address in Changi a year later. Bingham of Signals for instance, a man in a unique position to know what was happening, is a whole 24 hours out in his reckoning. The 2/19 had been on the road all those five days: other men had come in, like Brand the 2/29 RMO, like Frank Johnson from HQ 2/29 on Tuesday evening. And through these narratives too, Anderson invariably moves. Purtill was standing near him when the Don R returned from the bridge, '"Are you certain it's the enemy and not the Malays guarding the bridge?" he said. And Brand was to hear him say, "It will be a disaster if the Japs get through and cut off our main army". He seemed to be quite unworried in spite of the appalling position we were in.' Usually in movement though: *a CO's job*, he argues, *in action you move around a lot*. He's there in the morning, directing the attacks towards the village; a little later he's at the rear

again, where Keegan is in some trouble: *and he sees you coming and his whole face lights up, 'Thank God the old bastard's here at last'.* And once at least, Anderson at rest:

> *I'd left the road, crossed the paril, and was sitting next to a rubber tree looking at my map and wondering what I would do. I saw the bomb leaving the plane, I threw myself down behind the rubber tree, the bomb fell on the other side, and from where I was lying I could just touch the edge of the crater. Next war, I'm taking a rubber tree with me ...*

If his wounded could be got through, Anderson was prepared to try. But the two ambulances he sent forward to the bridge towards evening the Japanese held as a roadblock, a counter to induce the force to surrender—a proposition Anderson refused to consider. After dark, two men released the brakes, the trucks slid back—Massey Taylor and Dick Austin, one source says; a Captain Worling RIASC another. Perhaps about the same time—so the Diary suggests—he was asking Westforce for morphia, for air support for an assault planned for next morning. And at dawn, as he wrote years later, 'during a short lull in the Japanese aircraft straffing and bombing, suddenly a couple of RAF planes came in and dropped the medical supplies and the morphine into our laps, and then took off smartly towards the south to Singapore'. An hour later, Anderson was preparing one final attempt to break through—his last thrust clearly after a hideous night. His men had dealt with perhaps seven tanks sent into the rear, into the flanks—the guns accounted for two, grenades for perhaps four. Yet by first light, the tanks were moving again into the flanks in close support of their attacking troops, at one point reaching to within 50 yards of the Australians, stopping hull down where the guns could not fire at them. In the village, Anderson sent in his A Company with carrier support in one final attempt on the bridge, through an approach so narrow that only one or two sections—perhaps twenty men—could move at a time. In the first thrust, all the Australians died: two sections absolutely lost. In the second, as Jim Clark moved forward—'I will give it a go'—only five men came out: the enemy were in such strength that Anderson determined to break off, even before any orders came from Westforce: *these men deserved a chance.* All Westforce could signal was that it was unable to help; that there was no prospect of any attack from the other side of the bridge. And as for Lloyd struggling at that moment through the swamps east of the iron mine, it could say nothing except that

'he should have appeared before this'. And though this message was sent, the orders to withdraw given, the Force never got them.[12]

But if Anderson had determined to break contact, it was by no means 'every man for himself', as some accounts suggest; but on the contrary a disciplined withdrawal, the Force moving out as a force, the IO was to write. At 0930 hours the first group left the perimeter, the second company ten minutes later, the third ten minutes later again, the men moving to a rendezvous on the track near Bukit Enas, along the fifteen miles and more to Yong Peng. In another hour, except for the wounded, the AIF had gone; the Japanese did not move into the area for another hour again.

IV

More than once in the years to come, Anderson remembers, he had asked the Japanese: 'What have you done with our wounded?' Never an answer: in its own way answer enough.[13] Shortly after the firing stopped, one of these men was to testify eight years later, the Japanese had closed in: yelling, herding the living into a small shed, then into the two rooms of coolie quarters. Here Nishimura looked them over, 'a well dressed stocky fellow, sword hanging low, kneehigh boots and spurs glistening'. And he ordered that his captives should be executed by firing squad: an order that his ADC Nonaka was to admit passing on to Lieutenant Seizaburo Fujita. About sunset, the guards began to move about the house, setting up machineguns in front of the building. Some set about roping the officers, passing the rope from wrists to chin, around the neck to the wrists again; and then pulling it tight. Others reached for the men, tying their hands behind their backs, or wired them if the rope ran out. If men fell as the line moved, then these they kicked and dragged; kicked again, struck and beat. And once they'd forced their prisoners into a group, then the Japanese fired; and heaping the bodies together, the dead and the living, poured petrol over them and set it alight: one man, feigning death, remembered that smell of burning flesh all his life. A few escaped, perhaps a dozen: four men from the Indian battalions, perhaps those two Tamils picked up in a dugout south of Muar, at least four AIF—one died within the week, one in the jungle somewhere in the next six months, two were caught later and ended in Pudu. Perhaps a hundred Australians died here, perhaps more: none of the casualty figures for the Muar–Bakri action are easy to determine exactly, not between dead and wounded. But one knows at least

A postwar photograph of the Japanese War Memorial along the Parit Sulong Road, erected on the site of that machinegun position of theirs which men of 2/29 and 2/19 had attacked in the early afternoon of 20 January. AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL NEGATIVE NUMBER 117515

that the 2/29 had lost over half its strength—dead, wounded or captured: barely 130 men from that battalion reached Yong Peng. From 2/19, 271 men got out, from 65 Battery 98, from 4/Anti-Tank, barely twenty.

For its part, the Domei agency was to argue that the Japanese had 'wiped out' 5000 British troops, the '15th, 25th and 29th Australian brigades and one British brigade': an odd salute to Anderson's men perhaps, but real nonetheless. And although it would not do to make too much of this—not after Parit Sulong—yet on the side of the road north of the bridge the Japanese were to put up a cross; honoured six months later by AIF and Japanese alike, Australians saluting and Japanese bowing. But on the northern side of the *parit* the trucks and the burnt-out ambulances wrote a different story. And behind him on that road Nishimura had left a company of tanks and infantry equivalent perhaps to one battalion.

7

'Someone's having a go'

I

A few years later when he came to write his *Despatch*, Percival judged the next few days 'the crisis of the campaign': 'you have not much ground behind you', as Wavell was to cable, ground which held the few British airfields on the peninsula. And these Percival had to hold, if Japanese planes were to hold off the ships bringing the British 18th Division in, ships due now in a matter of days. This is why he was insisting on the line Kluang–Ayer Hitam–Yong Peng, even as his troops pulled back towards it. And behind the troops, the Japanese: following more closely even than official sources might admit. The Muar Force may, as Percival was to state, have held up a division of Imperial Guards with all the advantages of air and tank support for nearly a week. Even so, Yamashita was covering so much territory and was placed so beautifully that Command was still desperately situated. On 19 January, for instance, Yamashita already had some men between Batu Anam and Segamat, positioned carefully enough to ambush and capture a group of anti-tankers, withdrawing under orders to Segamat. And an ironic commentary that, on one of the most common exemplary stories: for it was the Australians this time who mistook Japanese for Indians. The Indian Official History notes the ambush 22nd Indian Brigade laid as it pulled back from Labis, 600 Japanese casualties within five or six minutes as the enemy 'came rushing in'. But that in itself only points up how closely the Japanese were following up, and in what strength: enough to be attacking near Paloh further down the railway the day after. Again, the roadblock that the British Brigade and 5/Norfolks took down on the Batu Pahat–Ayer Hitam road: not only did the Japanese have it up again the day after, but they themselves were firmly entrenched on the

inland side. Further north on the same network of roads, though the Guards may not have entered the old Muar force perimeter for some hours after Anderson gave his order to break contact, late that afternoon the enemy was streaming down that road: men on foot, on bikes, a few staff cars, lorries, a number of light tanks—organised chaos, an observer wrote, watching from Bukit Payong, one of the Rose Force that had been sent out on 19 January.[1]

In the north, the pace of the Japanese advance had meant that wherever Yamashita's troops had moved, around them—circumspectly—moved small groups of men: British, Indian, the stuff of the earlier stories. And for some reason, just as Anderson's men were struggling out of Parit Sulong, one finds a new cluster: this time from Johore. And this time it included Australians—'an officer captured on the Gemas Road', probably 2/30's Lance Corporal Hann; seventeen men from one of the Indian battalions, probably 1/13 Frontier Force with seven Australians, one of these—so the context suggests—the 2/30's Lance Corporal Heckendorf; a day later men from what could be a Don Company 2/29 patrol, caught in one of those small actions where the Japanese after one of their characteristic outflanking movements had pushed large numbers of troops through. And perhaps a week after this, when the first reports of Muar had come out, there's a word or two from some of the parties just then stumbling in—from 2/19 B echelon for instance, lost days before in the withdrawal from their own perimeter, who'd tried making for Batu Pahat to find the Japanese there, had found a skiff, found themselves at one point close to an armoured Japanese sloop putting troops and supplies ashore, had come across another skiff 'with four Aussies', had been fired on but 'drifted on, feeling pretty good' until they reached Singapore.[2]

Such stories as these are perhaps not more than a dozen words and rarely reach into official narratives—not often into unofficial ones either, except in the most general of terms: '5 men come in from Endau, estimate a div of Japs.' And if something is preserved in letters home, letters often published later in local papers, that writing is commonly very matter of fact, a catalogue of events, of difficulties faced and resolved in crossing rivers, finding food, avoiding Japanese, a log of men lost, men dying: as though the very weariness of the journey had turned into writing which lies heavy on the page.

For men who fought on the west coast, or on the trunk road, there is a context to speak out of: neither Gemas nor Muar is perhaps a household name, but they count for something. For the

east coast there's almost nothing written, no accepted pattern a story has to fit into, not much that can be taken for granted; no frame already established that a man might feel obliged to place himself in. And this, though it leaves him free to develop his story his own way, also means he's much closer to it, experiencing as much as seeing the events he's talking of.

For instance, those two parties sent out from Endau—the two 2/20 men with T.M. Cope on 9 January, Harry Orme's group six days later; and the section that Alan Oag had led from the beach into the jungle—these men, all of them, were close to the river on 18 January, Alchin and Donaldson already prisoners of the Japanese.[3] Even on the way up the beach Alchin argues there were Japanese around: a footprint in the sand, the peculiar imprint of the Japanese split-toe boot, and somewhere near the mouth of the Pahang River a party of Indians, probably from 22nd Indian Brigade, but one man different from the others, smaller with a small beard. And if he's right, then Japanese troops were already between them and Endau, moving south in those small parties that the journalists had made much of. In a way, that is exactly what one might expect. If Cope left Endau as the evidence suggests on 9 January, then Kuantan had for a week at least been in the hands of the Japanese; and Cope himself, who'd come down from Kuantan on 1 January, should, of all men, have known that. Still, in Kuantan—if it was Kuantan the three men reached—Alchin saw no Japanese for days, days that in the telling seem detached and remote, meals in the local cafe—*bloody flapjacks and chicken*—and Cope arresting those he thought in sympathy with the enemy. In the end they were caught in turn: hands tied, Cope handcuffed, the key thrown into the river—*we knew then that it was only a matter of time before they did us in;* and Alchin remembering the old trick he'd used in the days of cowboys and Indians kept his wrists crosswise and as far apart as possible. They were questioned of course about the Australians at Mersing—so much Alchin admitted a month later. But he said nothing then about the sword running across the back of the neck—*and that bloody adjutant, every time he was lining my neck up 'cos I suppose I was giving him a bit of cheek.* Now, south with Koba's HQ, passing a tangle of bikes on the sand—*and thank God, we said, someone's having a go*—reaching the bank of the river much as Endau Force let off that final mortar barrage. On the south bank the Australians had known that the shells were finding a mark—Jack Mudie talks of bodies flying everywhere. On the north side, it was the enemy panic that Alchin

remembers—*the Japanese like ants through the palms;* that, and the accuracy of the fire:

> *The boys really give it to them: plonk, plonk, plonk—from all along they let them go over. They really scattered the bloody Japs there, they really scattered them. There were Japs coming back on stretchers, and I don't know how many were killed; but—it was in the dark of the night—but they really pushed them back from that river there.*

Somewhere in that twelve hours, three Australians came in—*we abused them, we really went for them*—men, as they saw it, who were still armed, and though out of food still on their feet. After 50 years Alchin still says just *three Australians out of 2/19.*

II

Two days before, after his section had engaged with the Japanese—the tangle of bikes Alchin had noticed on the beach was their doing—Oag had moved his men back into the jungle: his intention, as Fred Wilson remembers it, to find a river, an idea which indicates a real, almost strategic grasp of the topographical realities. And from this point the story is Wilson's, told as he steadies himself against the existential weight of the experience, and the death of three men.[1] At the end of the first day, tracking through creeks, wading through swamps, they reached what was probably the Anak Endau. It took another day to find the kampong Oag had remembered: deserted, and in a hut a jar of rotting bananas too far gone to eat. Now the section separated, Oag taking Len Wilder and Tom Verdon upstream to look for another village; the rest of the men, preparing to make a raft as Oag had suggested—*and if I don't come back tonight or the next day try floating downstream with the current.* What happened to Oag, to Wilder and to Verdon after that no-one can really say now; not until they come into Japanese HQ on the north bank of the Sungei Endau, sold by the Malays. And if the unit history is any guide, officially the battalion still knows nothing about that. As for the others, at the end of the next day they had a raft, about six feet by six, logs lashed together with vines, bark and an old fishing net cut into strips—*Merv Hull was the architect of that.* And about midnight—the third day now Wilson thinks—the four men pushed out of the backwater. In that intense silence before the dawn wind rises, the raft moved downstream,

A group from 17 Platoon Don Company 2/19 somewhere in Johore, either late 1941 or early 1942. Fred Wilson is standing extreme left, John Varley second from right. AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL NEGATIVE NUMBER P0102/59/43

low in the water—so low the men were half sitting in the river—survived a whirlpool, was nearly swept out to sea before coming in on the Endau side of the Sungei Endau; came close in among the mangroves, where the four men perch on the roots until dawn, hearing the chatter of monkeys—in an image with the weight of the next three and a half years behind it—*we thought it was the Japanese.* In the early light of 18 January then at Wireless Point were half a section of 16 Platoon 2/19; across the river a long shout away Merv Alchin, Ken Donaldson, Cope; and to the west of them near the mouth of the Anak Endau, Harry Orme's patrol, woken by Chinese running into the hut—*Nippon everywhere, get out.*

If Oag's section had a hard time of it, Orme's was no less troubled, from the minute they'd set out, four men from 2/19, two from 2/20: ordered, if Jack Carroll is right, to make for Kampong Blading some miles up the river to contact the Sakai, use their canoes *to go up and down river to keep an eye on things.*[3] In what he wrote home perhaps a fortnight later, Orme was to give only two sentences to the first days out of Endau, the boat's breaking down, its burning to the water's edge, the two days after that spent trying to find a way through the swamps until wet, cold and

sorefooted the patrol went back to the kampong the men had set out from. And if that were all one knew, then it would sound simply a tale of misadventure. But as Jack Carroll's story engages with this, then one finds the patrol holding absolutely to its purpose even through its very difficulties: this is, in fact, a large part of what Carroll has to say. Before they'd gone eight miles up the Anak Endau, for instance, the men had heard shouts from the bank, had been fired on, had seen men unfurling a Japanese flag; and at Kampong Blading—empty when they got there—they'd heard more shots from upriver. If Orme's first idea had been to send Carroll and Morgan down to Endau after dark to let HQ know where the enemy were, *now said Harry 'let's go up before we go back and see what's going on up there'*. And that is where the boat blew, *blew back through the carburetor*, caught fire and sank to the waterline, the men now in jungle so thick, that *if you left the track you'd be history*. And that two days Orme passed over: these as Carroll remembers, the men spent first following an elephant track—seven or eight elephants meant one night in a tree—then an old surveyor's trace, and finally the river bank itself to reach Bagan on what was probably the fourth day. In two canoes the Sakai handed over—unwillingly, *Harry had said, 'Fix bayonets'*—the patrol reached the mouth of the Anak Endau, spending that night in a Chinese kampong. And when warned by this cry, 'Nippon everywhere', they'd jumped into the canoes, both boats went straight to the bottom. That meant another boat, 'this big awkward sampan' Orme mentions; it meant moving upstream in the rain, hiding until dark; and then out again, this time straight across the Sungei Endau about one in the morning Carroll thinks, on what was almost certainly Monday 19 January.

The south bank was, in Orme's phrase, 'full of Tojos'. In the village itself, the houses were all lit up and the Japanese inside, Jack Carroll remembers, seemed to be playing some kind of game: an ironic detail to remember this moment through. Just as a forest is the best place to hide a leaf, so in a place full of Japanese *the best way to get through*, a friend of Orme's remembers his saying, *is to go straight up the bloody street as though we were a Jap patrol*. Through a stream, over a bridge: somewhere a sentry spotted the men. Orme was to write of signals coming from behind, being answered from ahead, of a challenge and a volley of shots: these, Carroll remembers, coming from a house about five miles down the Mersing Road. As the enemy fired, apparently in ambush, so did the Australians: Orme hit two he thought, lying by the side of the road.

But in the charge the seven men separated, some to the right, others to the left of the road: two were missing when they gathered again, one 'my best cobber'. Bluey was to make it, coming down the road alone. Jim Wasley, however, was mortally wounded, left with rifle and waterbottle—*but he had only half an hour to live at the most:* it was, he said, his nineteenth birthday.

To some extent even a narrative as straightforward and as open as this proves something of a problem, at least if that node of experience at the very centre is not to be flattened out completely, the whole turned into a sequence of events and nothing more. But as Jack Carroll tells it—like Fred Wilson before him—there is unquestionably a firm point of order: the presence of the Japanese, a presence felt in every line of the narrative, every breath of the narrator. And that, clearly, works as the fixed centre on which the whole story turns. More precisely perhaps, one might see Carroll's story, and Wilson's too, as moving between two poles, as directly opposed and as highly charged as the situation of the narrator and the situation of the enemy. And through the energy such an opposition generates, the narrative gets much of its real impetus. And that perhaps is only another way of saying that even here the sequence of events is not everything. There is the fact that the stories are being told at all, for one thing. And what's in danger of disappearing, of being pushed aside, is precisely the sense of loneliness, the sense of isolation which lies right at the heart of what both men have to say: *I didn't think,* Carroll says, *I'd ever get out.* Some part of what both these narrators have to say—though not the whole of it—lies in what the events themselves do not reveal: in that isolation which, paradoxically, one cannot recognise until one sees these two groups moving through the same time and space, the same moral world. In the dawn of 18 January for instance, as Wilson is moving through the mangroves towards the shore, Carroll's party in the kampong up the Anak Endau is being routed out by the Chinese—*Nippon, he come.* Similarly, four hours later, as Carroll rests somewhere south of Endau, Wasley dead and Bluey missing, so Wilson is down the road, a few hours away from the 2/20 outpost north of the Mersing River—another hour or two here, an hour or so less there: the groups are as close as that, and simultaneously, as remote. And it's at this point perhaps that one grasps more nearly that central solitude: those small points of light moving through an immense darkness.

Yet it says something about the kind of campaign this is, to find in the same dawn of 19 January another party on the river—as

unaware of Carroll or Wilson as those of each other. Precisely as Orme's group rest south of Endau and Fred Wilson and the others press on down the Mersing Road, Dal Wilson's patrol, the patrol Endau Force had placed on the river, is moving from tug to smaller boat a few miles upstream from Endau.* But if these three groups are moving through the same world, a world shaped by the presence of the enemy, for Wilson's men, preparing to engage the Japanese, the implications are altogether different; and their actions so much at odds, apparently, with events around them that from the first, from the time of the Endau Force Diary itself, this patrol has been wrenched out of context, placed in a different time, in a wholly different space. On one hand, there is nothing surprising, nothing unexpected in what Wilson was about, not given the man he was and the unit he belonged to. On the other, to place his action precisely turns in the end on what 'a landing at Endau' means, the phrase commonly used to explain why Wilson went downstream; on whether he was in contact with his battalion at all—in his unit tradition it is always Brigade that Wilson was in touch with.

Nor are his movements easy to trace. If he was at Endau early on 17 January, he was back at Bukit Langkap the next day, probably—so a map in the Force Diary indicates—just downstream from the mine itself, somewhere below the landing stage. And almost certainly he moved out about 1800 hours on 18 January, just—so David Hinder remembers—as Captain Carter was coming in. Oddly enough, months later the Diarist apparently remembered that Wilson had moved: the date is right, and the time. But as he put it down then, it was to replace a platoon as standing patrol at Kampong Lambong. Perhaps that was intended, perhaps simply assumed. When it comes to any of its 2/19 platoons, Endau Force Diary is never particularly accurate, rarely detailed. More to the point, none of Wilson's section remembers it like that. Some time after Endau Force left the village, sometime after he'd heard that the Japanese were in Endau, Wilson got permission from Brigade to shift on to the offensive. And what he intended, one of his patrol remembers, was to take his small force—twenty men at most—downriver, landing upstream from the village; and to attack the Japanese. And in the dawn of 19 January, two miles upstream from Endau, some of these men were trans-shipping from tug to smaller rowing boat, others still on board, when a boat came up from the village: *this boat comes alongside just as we're about to get over.*

One man remembers an Australian on board, *but not one of our lot*, another *a few Malayan chaps*.

> *and the word he's yelling out is to 'Get back up, get out' ...*

calling out something like four transports or 4000 men coming ashore the night before. Admittedly, such a landing is not mentioned anywhere else: nothing but the supposed landing on 16 January, a rumour convincing enough to reach Brigade, even Divisional HQ. But once Koba's men had begun crossing the river late the afternoon before, that would mean some 3000 enemy troops moving openly around on the river banks, troops that could be read as part of an invasion force:

> *so we turn around and went back, to the mine again, and we're looking at one another—'How lucky we didn't get in there—we'd never get out.'*

And by the time Wilson reached Bukit Langkap again, Endau Force—now formally dissolved—was about to withdraw.

Even then apparently, Wilson was prepared to have another go. Robin Henman on *Shunan* objected to Brigade's order to scuttle his boat, asking instead permission to run back through Endau in the dark and head for Singapore. This Wilson supported, even to the point of approaching Naval HQ in Singapore directly. But the orders stood: scuttle the boats, then move towards Robinson's wharf in one of the smaller launches. And as Athol Hill remembers, the platoon moved out probably about 1600 hours, almost as soon as they got back; just as a single bomber came in low from the north. Frank Chaplin, standing near the main office building halfway up the hill, saw the bombs falling, two some 50 yards past the office, a third in the river. And in the mangroves opposite, where the 2/19 tug had pulled over from midstream, another view:

> *This Jap comes over and he's looking, looking; because you can see the gunner sitting out the side—they were sort of fighter bombers. They bombed the daylights out of where we were camped, on the other side of the river. I can still remember Wilson going crook on me—I'm giving a running commentary—I've got my head stuck out of the trees. 'Shut up, Bridey, and get your head down.' 'He's let three go, and they're on the way.' Come around again, and I'd say, 'Another three.' 'Shut up, Bridey.' Woomp ... woomp ... woomp.*

No easy journey to Robinson's wharf either: a small boat, with not much room to move, not much freeboard either: even the Boys anti-tank rifle Brideoake was carrying had to go overboard. And as for the rest of the Force, their withdrawal—at this distance at least—has something slightly Gilbertian about it. Late on the afternoon of 18 January, a few hours before Captain Carter had reached Bukit Langkap, Taylor had been instructed to bring him back, primarily to strengthen his forces around the Crossroads. But just as Brigade could not reach Carter, neither could Carter reach Brigade. As David Hinder says:

> *I can see him now, he's sitting there almost naked, sweat pouring out of him. Papers. This huge parang. And he's saying, 'Come on now, now Davo, we're going to win the war now. Get the code out boys, see what's going on, we're going to send them some messages. And the wireless operator comes back. 'I've got instructions. This code's been compromised; it must on no account be used.' 'Ah ... bloody fools.' So ... there we were.*

That meant the IO's coming up himself, the six-hour journey from Robinson's wharf. And the getting away too proved a tangle. For one thing, all the tugs broke down. And since, as the Force Diarist remarks tartly, the 2/19 contingent failed to send their boat back, that left the *Shunan*, too big it was thought to sail that reach of the river: even Henman and Craig were not prepared to take her down in the dark.

In the early light of 20 January then, first the pigeons were let go: to rise—so one story goes—and to circle; then to settle back on the mast again. Then one of the local boats, ferrying troops out to *Shunan*, broke down in midstream; and *Shunan* herself was ordered upriver about 200 yards to investigate a light which had been seen flashing on and off—the two water transport diggers and their tug had rammed bow first into the bank during the air attack Brideoake talks of. And as for *Shunan* herself, Henman could only move her down by pushing her into the bank and letting the current swing her into the right channel: from below decks, one man was to write, you could hear the boat scraping along the bank, stopping for a while, gradually getting under way again. Still, by 0800 hours she had reached Robinson's wharf, camouflaged with bushes, engines and guns put out of action; the Endau detachment setting out along the eight miles of mud and jungle track to the Kluang Road. And somewhere along there, Harry Blackford

remembers Brigadier Taylor: *things are not*, he was saying, *going at all well.*

The 2/19 sections had gone, straight to the Crossroads; Travers' section was there already; and so too the Japanese planes, bullets burning along the road, burning the bitumen. Another day or so, and Wilson's platoon moved back along the Kluang Road, to guard the bridge at Kahang as the Indian units moved through. And somewhere along there they'd have to have passed Henman and Craig who, so the Brigade Diary notes, reported into HQ on 25 January; and nothing in any official record to show how they'd been engaged for the five days before that. At this point those two men pass out of this story, though only of course to enter into others. One of the four journalists up at Brigade that day was the AIF press conducting officer Athole Stewart, who'd himself got in only the day before; and a year or so later, when he came to write his own account, he remembered 'John' and 'Robin', remembered giving them a lift back to Singapore, remembered they'd been in command of two naval gunboats, and got the rest of it—predictably—slightly wrong.[7] And years later, a little more; enough to say that they'd been ordered out on *Hung Jao* to patrol up the west coast in early February, even as far as Muar; that on 13 February, with Henman in command and a crew largely from *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*, *Hung Jao* had been ordered out of Singapore altogether. In one version she carried some 60 officers from Fort Canning to run the escape route that Colonel Warren had been organising; in another—far more likely—she had thirteen passengers and was bound for Batavia. At all events, though she was bombed and strafed, Henman made the Indragiri River, carrying survivors from *Sui Kwong* as well, the boat the AIF's Lieutenant Colonel Albert Coates had been sent out on; and his passengers reached Padang, most of them, early enough to sail for India on a Dutch ship on 26 February. But Henman himself and Cunyingham-Brown, an old Johore hand and a friend of his, went back through the islands, searching for survivors of other little ships. *Hung Jao* they scuttled in the Indragiri River when her engines failed; and Henman and Cunyingham-Brown were on the run for months before they were caught near Barus, swept back as POW to Glucor. What happened to Craig in the end I've not been able to find out, other than that he was taken near Padang. Nor Henman after that, except that he was sent on the road building party to the north of Sumatra. And as for *Shunan*, the Sungei Endau was by no means the end of her either; disabled or not, the Japanese got her moving, and she was

seen at the Naval Base on 13 August. And it was not the end of *Kelana* either: 'Auxiliary Patrol Vessel: 88 tons: registered 12/39, lost 2/42: salvaged as Japanese Sukei no. 22 (1943)'. And behind that entry, Blackford again:

> *So Craig takes* Kelana *out, steaming up that stretch, flat to the boards; and as he's coming he's firing his 12 pounders or six pounders or whatever ...*

III

When the AIF had first moved up into action, British policy had been to hold Yamashita as far north into Johore as possible, primarily to allow the reinforcement convoys to come in. A few days later and, as his 'secret and personal' letter of 20 January implicitly acknowledges, Percival was forced to recognise that he would have to withdraw to the Island, even formalising that the day after by ordering that, after pulling back from Yong Peng—a matter of days now—his troops should be organised into three separate commands, Eastforce, Westforce and III Indian Corps, to hold the line Jemaluang–Kluang–Ayer Hitam–Batu Pahat.[3] Though Percival himself was to refer to this as 'the 90 mile front', it was a front only in name of course: on that 21 January the troops were rather concentrated into four main areas: Mersing–Jemaluang, Kluang, Ayer Hitam and Batu Pahat. And the whole 'front' was no more a 'line' in the old sense than the earlier Jitra line. Still, it was not an arbitrary sticking place either, following as it does the only road running from east to west, a road just north of the only airfields the British had left on the peninsula. But, even as he ordered his troops to hold on this line—'there would be no withdrawal without my consent'—Percival recognised that the pivot on which the whole defence now turned was Batu Pahat at the western end: Batu Pahat and the coast immediately to the south of that. In one sense, of course, all four areas were interdependent—an enemy capturing one could move very easily against the flanks of the others. But at Batu Pahat Yamashita had troops in strength for about a week now—even aside from those working around Anderson's forces—and troops more menacing than those at Yong Peng or Mersing. This part of Malaya is comparatively dry, with a good many tracks running north–south between the Ayer Hitam and the coastal roads: a terrain ideal for those enveloping movements Japanese troops excelled in. And if Yamashita managed to get around Batu Pahat, then he could go either south or east, or both.

This is why, in any narrative, Batu Pahat has to be central: what happened to the British forces to the east, the decisions local commanders had to take, makes sense only in the light of how they were reading Batu Pahat, of how that provided the very context in which they were themselves working. Otherwise on the trunk road for instance, it can look as though Bennett was just allowing himself to be pushed back, fighting what was simply a series of delaying actions: Ayer Hitam, Namazie Estate; Taylor to his east confining his men to patrolling supported by the guns of the 2/10 Field Regiment.

As early as 19 January, Japanese troops south of Batu Pahat had tried to move across the river. And though they were thrown back, two days later Brigadier Challen was to argue that the enemy could cut both the road to Ayer Hitam and the road south and suggested he withdraw: an argument that both Heath and Percival immediately rejected. Across to the west that day, Westforce had both 2/29 and 2/26 covering Yong Peng on the trunk road, supported by 2/15 Field Regiment and the guns of 4/Anti-Tank. And on the railway, 22nd Indian Brigade was pulling back from Labis through 8th Indian Brigade—the day 2/12 Frontier Force Rifles mounted its ambush near Labis, with an enemy close enough even so to attack later and in some force about fifteen miles north of Kluang itself. Nevertheless, though there is no doubt that the Japanese were pressing immediately down both the trunk road and the railway, for a few days—perhaps until 23 January when it moved back to Ayer Hitam—Westforce was to move comparatively lightly. Lightly, except for the enemy planes attacking with such precision, such care that even the official communiqués have to mention them: even if just as 'considerable air activity', or 'air activity continuing day and night' or 'continuous fighter and bomber attacks'.

What this 'considerable air activity' means just a single report will indicate: the report of an attack on 13 Battery 4/Anti-Tank near Yong Peng. First he lets his bombs go, one falling to the front and another in a well twenty yards away from the tree the men are sheltering behind, covering them with branches, water, mud; then he turns and comes in machinegunning; an hour and a half—and trees uprooted, foliage stripped, the air thick with dust and shouting; and one Australian dead.[3] To the east, where the records note 'frequent bombing and machinegunning', it was much the same of course. At least in the centre, the troops saw a few friendly planes occasionally, like the Hurricanes on 23 January. Over Mersing, only five appeared in as many days—two Buffaloes

on 22 January, turning one way as the enemy went another—*and whether they were dodging or whether they didn't see the Nips you'd never know*—three more on 25 January.[10]

On the trunk road Command had at least a few anti-aircraft guns, like the Bofors at Segamat a week earlier; on the east nothing except what the AA platoons could do with a Vickers mounted on a tripod—the point of Taylor's asking 'jokingly' for anti-aircraft guns. Even more to the point the guns arrived the day after, reaching Mersing on 23 January—and that may indicate how Heath was feeling about the orders he was having to give to the AIF in the east. And with the Bofors came a Lieutenant who will enter into any number of stories. Lieutenant Clark, small, slight, ginger-haired; his gun sometimes on the side of the road with sandbags around it, just as often draped with washing; at the sound of a plane, on with his tin hat, onto the back of a truck, white towel waving—his sergeant was once seen using a mirror—screaming, 'Come on you fookers'. If the plane came in, then he fired as it dived; if it flew off, then he'd climb down, put his cap back on and have a smoke. 'A mad lot,' an anti-tanker wrote; and a 2/20 officer—*Our fellows were going to keep them POW, they weren't going to let them go.*[11]

Nothing like that on the trunk road apparently; no-one at least with the same panache. And here the troops had to deal with enemy shelling too, like the guns ranging on the Ayer Hitam crossroads, exact but methodical with one round landing on each of the four roads in turn: methodical enough, for instance, for 2/10 Field Ambulance to get their vehicles through: 'we lined them up back a bit from the exploding rounds, and one at a time, in gear with the motor revving, as the fourth round landed we raced through as a round landed on the road we had left.'[12] And through this strafing and this shelling, as the convoys moved south, parties of Anderson's men were coming into Yong Peng where the bridge was to be held precisely for this reason until midnight on 23 January: men who'd lived on rice and green pineapples, or rice cooked in tin hats, 'despite the hairgrease sweat and paint, the best meal I have ever tasted', men who'd joined with British units, 'fought with them until I had to take to the jungle again'. Perhaps for each one who came through, another was captured, another died: 50 years later in the unit papers the letters run, 'What happened to my brother' ... 'to Cedric Smith' ... 'to Reg Bedgood' ... 'to Massey Taylor?' And the replies, from those who remember: 'lost on a truck with other wounded'; 'last seen on a raft on the

river, the raft being strafed persistently'; 'lost in the fighting at Coconut Grove on 8 February'.[13]

IV

In the north and centre the very speed of the Japanese advance had meant that any blocks thrown into the way had been hasty, improvised: an affair of men rather than material, barriers covered perhaps by anti-tank guns. But south of Endau, even if Koba had sent his troops on immediately, 2/20 had the road a good two miles north of the Bridge prepared weeks before: preparations centring on an elaborate block which extended from the beach westwards towards Lalang Hill. In part, it was a series of weapon posts about a mile north of the Mersing River, posts made of palm trunks with earth rammed into the four feet between the outer and inner walls; brens set on fixed lines covered the fields outside, fields already set with strong belts of wire, thickly sown with anti-tank and anti-personnel mines. To the north, perhaps a mile away, 2/20 had devised an ambush position, west of the road on top of a cutting where the high ground, well wooded here, commanded a straight stretch; and further north again, a position for the forward scouts. Perhaps these scouts were in position when Fred Wilson's group came through; certainly he remembers the two sections manning the ambush position, remembers their being ready with grenades: *but they came down from the hill and gave us a great welcome.*[14]

To Brigade Wilson's group reported that Japanese troops were in Endau 'in strength'; that they were moving south, 'five miles south of Endau along the Mersing road'. And this news was the more important, one might argue, since the patrols that 2/20 had probing north to the west of the road had found nothing: nothing except for flares late that night about six miles north of Mersing. Yet Jack Carroll remembers seeing a whole company on bikes coming over the hill from Endau sometime after midday that day, 19 January: 'swarms of Japs,' Orme wrote. If this is true, then Koba may indeed—as one Japanese source has it—have had his men 'detouring' through the rough broken country to the west of the road. But it's equally true that those troops, as they came up to 2/20 outpost, came almost casually: about midday on 21 January—*laughing and chattering like monkeys*—the image was even by then, almost conventional: no sign of strain, of hardship, like men with nothing to fear. One of those small, almost inexplicable

moments: behind them, the two scouts, almost certainly dead already, their bodies still in the firing position as they were to be found months later, surrounded by spent cases, ammunition almost gone; and the men who'd killed them, marching as if they'd forgotten it, had lost any sense of danger.

For the Australians, the action was to prove brief, effective, almost economical; and at this point a way of finding out how closely Battalion had read Japanese tactics. To let through as they did the first twenty men—the men on bikes; to fire on the hundred or so troops marching behind: this suggests just a simple ambush. But part of the plan—almost the point of the firing, Frank Ramsbotham is to argue—had been to drive the enemy into the minefields on both sides of the road: in itself a recognition that an outflanking movement was the routine Japanese response to frontal attack. But the mines had been ruined, lying in the wet earth. And the counter-attack was rather more considerable than the platoon might have expected: both heavy small arms fire and mortars; and a small force of Japanese, perhaps those wounded in the first moments, quick enough, tenacious enough to jump Don Abbott's section on the west of the defensive complex. About 1215 hours Ramsbotham called for artillery support. The gunners began dropping shells both forward of the platoon position and also east of the road where—so Frank Ramsbotham thinks—the scouting party, those twenty men on bikes, had gone to ground. And when Battalion gave the order to withdraw, then the gunners brought down fire all round—*the Japs really copped it, Merv Alchin says*—leaving a gap for Ramsbotham's platoon to move through. Two hours perhaps: for 2/20, two dead, both the scouts; for the Japanese, certainly more than the ten that Brigade records, probably even more than the 45 that Battalion allows.

In the next two days, 2/20 patrols were to encounter small parties of Japanese more than once, patrols much like themselves, moving mostly in the country to the west of the road; patrols that have left no trace in any official account. George Jarrett's men still remember: perhaps because of Jarrett's own tactical sense, placing his section just short of a Chinese house which—he argued—the enemy would certainly go into; perhaps because of the way he so neatly extricated his men—holding the enemy off until a wounded man could be picked up—*a remarkable shot Jarrett*—then getting his section down to the bank through a passage he'd built through the swamp while the Japanese were still floundering in the mud.[15] Yet, just as Koba had patrols west of the road, like that one that

Jarrett had bumped, so too he had his troops pressing straight down towards the Mersing Bridge almost as soon as Ramsbotham's platoon had withdrawn. And in four hours he was close enough to the Bridge for 2/20 to move one platoon over as a kind of roadblock, a move completed under enemy fire. And with snipers firing across the river, Koba kept up that pressure, having his troops rush the Bridge before first light next day. That move was defeated comparatively easily, 19 Battery searching up and down the road caught practically all the assaulting force: *picking these Japs off right left and centre, no trouble.*[16] Still, a little later and the Japanese were in trenches at the north end of the Bridge, moving Lieutenant Colonel Assheton to order back the section of B Company he had withdrawn at dusk the day before, either to take the trenches again, or to act as a close bridge guard: a move however so clearly dangerous that Roy Cooper called it 'bloody murder'. Once across the river, the section cleared the enemy out, but ran short of ammunition, and had to withdraw: Cooper had been killed, and two others wounded. One of the wounded made his own way back: Joe Wilson, wounded himself, brought back Corporal Pritchard still under fire—an action worth, so Assheton judged, a DCM.

Checked at the Bridge, Koba may, as Battalion records imply, have been forced west: Brigadier Taylor for one was apparently expecting him to try crossing upstream, since he sent his only reserve—A Company 2/18 less one platoon—patrolling west of the road with a platoon from 2/20 around Hill 160 in the Anglo Johore Estate. But, except for what Brigade recorded as 'minor brushes', the rest of the day was clearly the artillery's, so much so that those patrols that went over the river—the 'active patrols' that the Diary mentions—act as if their orders were not so much to engage as to locate the enemy, almost as if they were acting as FOO for the gunners. Certainly more than one patrol took along an arty signaller:

> First of the Regiment to meet the Japs—
> Norman Garvey Ferrar ...
> swapped his phone for a gun,
> swam the river—high flood,
> left his boots in that river.
> 'No boots!', 'Sergeant Jack ...'
> 'No boots, no food': corpulent Sergeant Jack.[17]

just as another 2/20 platoon—possibly under Arch Ewart—was doing to its south, around Bukit Sawah:

I can see him now—bareheaded, rifle at port, acting as his own forward scout; going in as though he were in one hell of a hurry, and his poor bloody sig who he had borrowed from the gunners nearly having to run to keep up with him, and his men all in perfect arrowhead formation—probably saying, 'What's the bloody hurry, boss?'[18]

Most of that day the artillery caught Koba at almost every move he made: blowing an enemy OP off Lalang Hill, wrecking a mountain battery, firing on direction from an OP set up in a toddy shop across the river into any Japanese moving into Mayang Estate—for those gunners, routine shoots almost:

we had survey pegs all along the road and all through the area north of the Mersing River and around on the rubber plantations on the western flank of the main road, so that when the patrols came through with the messages ... all we had to do was say target PT4, go right 100, five rounds gunfire, and you hit it: simple ...[19]

As one of the infantry put it: *with those blokes you always knew you had a way out.*[20]

And infantry or artillery, as Merv Alchin insists, *the boys at Mersing had given the Japs a hell of a chopping about*: enough for Koba to have his prisoners brought straight down from Endau—*they knew damned well we never give the right information.* Starving and physically abused already, each night trussed hand to foot and tied out to a tree—like animals staked out, prey for the tiger—now the Japanese set upon them, part of the pushbike gang that got chopped *and by Jesus weren't they wild.* Boots and fists Alchin mentions: to head, to genitals, body knocked to the ground—*a hell of a flogging.* Yet it's precisely in what's not said, in that very reticence of description, that one comes closely to grasping something of a high pride and a higher contempt: *we never ever let on.* In the night the guns shelled Lalang Hill again—Alchin tied down in the rain remembers it as *a cow of a night*, a night *we nearly all snuffed it*: the Australians shivering in the open, Japanese in their trenches, shells coming over, *and didn't they lop some Japs.* A counter-attack that night he argues, and the AIF would have driven the Japanese right back.

As Alchin could see, the AIF at Mersing clearly had the measure of the Japanese, and had found a way of holding them off. Precisely at this point, sometime on 22 January, Taylor was given orders, orders that come out of the conference Percival had held at 1230 hours the day before, orders that changed the situation

again.[21] His men he had placed originally all those months before to meet the threat from the north and the east, holding Jemaluang only because of Mersing. Four days before the balance had shifted, enough to make Jemaluang central, Jemaluang and the Kota Tinggi Road—that was why the detachment at Bukit Langkap had come down, to strengthen Jemaluang. Now, with Anderson held at Parit Sulong, Challen perhaps to be slowly encircled at Batu Pahat, the balance has shifted again. If Mersing entered into it now, it was only as an outpost. What mattered was Jemaluang and the Kluang Road, the eastern end of the road across the peninsula. And that placed Taylor very neatly on the horns of a dilemma. On one hand, his orders were clear: he was to pull back those units he had around Mersing, infantry and gunners alike, pull them back right down to the Crossroads. But if the AIF broke contact, then there was nothing to stop Koba crossing the river: indeed, with the Sungei Mersing, Taylor lost his only natural barrier. And again, if he allowed Sugiara, already south of Labis and less than 30 miles from Kluang, to reach that junction, then it was much the same. From Kluang, Sugiara could move either east or west: if west, he would threaten Ayer Hitam and Batu Pahat, if east he would reach Jemaluang.

On the Kluang Road—where the enemy was close enough for 2/10 Baluch to have some contact near Kahang—Taylor's procedure was simple enough: the Jats at Kahang were moved down to Ulu Sedili, where they were to watch for infiltration from the east and to prepare ambushes in the Wang Tengah–Lubol Pusang area; and the one company Taylor had deployed on the Kluang Road, the old Endau Force, he brought further in, pulling his patrols back from Sungei Sembrong and Lenggor: a small force to protect his left flank, but all that he has. In the north, though, he moved much more delicately, ordering 4/Anti-Tank and 2/18—the only units left in anything like a fixed position—to come south; moves they made on the evening of 22 January. At the same time, he left the four guns of G Troop 4/Anti-Tank near the Mersing Bridge, probably because it was still standing, heaven knows why. And that may have been the point of the ambush that Lieutenant Colonel Varley proposed, a proposal that Taylor took seriously enough to have two 2/18 company commanders go over the ground that afternoon. If there were some problem with the Bridge, then what Varley had in mind may have to be read not so much as a counter-attack but as a tactical way of disengaging, an attempt to get over the sheer difficulty he recognised in breaking

contact while Koba had a simple way of crossing the river: another instance again where one can only guess at the shape of a missing piece from those in place around it. As it was, the Bridge went early on 24 January; and a thoroughly professional job it proved, with the middle section falling into the river. And Taylor kept 2/20 patrolling for another three days, into the afternoon of 25 January. As for the gunners, even when the guns themselves moved back—one battery to Nithsdale, the other to Mawai—the Regiment was still manning the OPs on Bukit Sawah, Gibbett Hill and probably Artillery Hill right up to 25 January. And right up to 25 January too, those guns were still bringing down fire on the enemy.

V

On the east coast it could be argued that 22nd Brigade held the Japanese in check, though even there it was probably only a matter of time; and so too, perhaps on the trunk road, where for most of 23 January, 2/30 had been in contact with enemy forces. And here at least, as the Operation Instructions issued about 1920 that evening indicate, things were exactly as Malaya Command had provided for: 2/30 forward of Ayer Hitam, 2/26 guarding the Muar–Ayer Hitam Road, the guns of 2/15 Field Regiment firing on Japanese massing somewhere down that very road. Two days before 27th Brigade group had withdrawn from Yong Peng; first 2/26 and two companies of 2/30, with Galleghan leaving two companies at Yong Peng as rear guard to come up twelve hours later—not the first time nor the last that the road was held by a few men with rifles watching the field pieces and the anti-tank guns moving out in good order in front of them. Yong Peng was to be held until midnight, to let 53rd Brigade and the Muar Force come through. For most of those coming out of Parit Sulong, the journey was cross-country; by nightfall most of them had come in—2/30 had food and cigarettes waiting. On the Muar–Yong Peng Road though Nishimura had at least eight tanks, 53rd Brigade reported, between Bukit Pelandok and Yong Peng. And though these tanks could be held up—the engineers were blowing bridges and culverts in front of them—that meant that not all the men got across, 3/16 Punjabis in particularly being badly hit, 2/Loyals losing two companies. At midnight the Yong Peng Bridge was blown in its turn: 2/30 and the guns of 2/15 Field Regiment moving back to Ayer Hitam, 2/Loyals joining them; 53rd Brigade,

now just four companies strong, was trucked towards Batu Pahat, to go into action almost immediately.[22]

Even on 21 January, though his task as Percival had defined it was to hold the town and keep open the road to Ayer Hitam, Challen had wanted to withdraw from Batu Pahat.[23] To his south, where three days before, British forces had become closely engaged with enemy troops—part of those forces concealed around Bukit Banang—his river defence line had already pulled back over the river. And as the enemy followed up, crossing the river on the night of 19 January, Challen had been forced back into the town; Japanese and British over the next few days clashed both in the town itself and in the country surrounding it. On 23 January, Challen asked again to withdraw, this time even moving out of town before Key could countermand his order. But that day the Japanese finally closed the Ayer Hitam Road, cutting the Batu Pahat force off from the west, and forcing Heath to send his reinforcements—both 53rd Brigade and 5/Norfolks—around to the south to try to reach Batu Pahat up the coastal road. By now, Batu Pahat was a town under siege, the streets deserted, as the Rose Force found next day; bomb craters everywhere, a lorry gutted at the crossroads, and a huge crater opposite the bombed police station that the British had turned into a tank trap with coiled wire and some anti-tank guns; and the Japanese were so active that Challen was already using Bren carriers to escort convoys over the danger area on the roads to the south.

To the northeast, Nishimura had the Guards Reconnaissance Battalion, to the south 5 Guards who had crossed the river and turned west; further south again 4 Guards had joined 1/4 Guards near Senggarang; a double ring of steel as it were around Challen's forces. Thus, when the British Battalion moved out, dropping back some seven miles south to a small airfield near Senggarang, enemy troops could infiltrate easily, attacking from close range. That day the defence line held. But early on 24 January, Japanese troops were reported on the right flank—reported, in fact, right down the east of the coast road from Batu Pahat to Benut. Indeed, a glance at how Challen had his troops deployed on 24 January indicates as clearly as possible what he feared rather than how he was proposing to handle it. For instance, he had 2/Cambridgeshires holding the northeast exits of the town, and as soon as they arrived—about 0700 hours on 24 January—he sent 5/Norfolks to take and hold two small hills half a mile from the junction of the Ayer Hitam and the coast roads. As Challen could see—so he

reported it—the enemy was trying to pin him down in the town, while cutting the road south. Indeed, when 53rd Brigade reached Benut and Brigadier Duke sent 5/Norfolks forward, though the battalion succeeded in dropping off one garrison at Rengit, a second moving towards Senggarang was ambushed half a mile south of the village. This time Key himself approached Percival, twice in fact on this 25 January, to be told—even when he reported another enemy battalion between Batu Pahat and Senggarang—that a decision would have to wait until the conference that afternoon.

To the west that two days had been comparatively quiet, except in the air—fifteen planes moving up and down the road in the afternoon of 24 January, gone by the time the newly arrived Hurricanes got there. And Sugiara had his 21st Infantry Battalion coming up cautiously, even prudently to begin with: which may be what Anderson had in mind when he said, 'They don't come on'. Except for the two 2/30 companies acting as rearguard at Yong Peng, 27th Brigade had been deployed around Ayer Hitam for the last two days; 2/26 and the two rearguard companies of 2/30 south of the river with 2/30 forward; and two companies of 2/30 north of the river in country as difficult as any the battalion had found—swamp and jungle and lalang, such heavy going that it took one patrol marking out a route back to the river a good two hours to reach it. On 25 January, Sugiara's troops began to appear: small parties first coming east of the road, reconnaissance troops probably, moving so freely in front of 2/30 that it might be deliberate, a way of attracting fire—particularly as Sugiara had artillery and mortars searching out the Australian positions. And so too, those twelve cyclists riding straight down the road about noon: these, it would seem, were also designed to attract fire, to force the Australians to disclose their positions. A little more than an hour later, Sugiara's battalion commander moved a much larger party up, right on to the ridge in front of the forward positions. And the attack he pushed in some three hours later on the right flank forced back the 2/30 standing patrol to its platoon positions. This, however, Galleghan's troops broke up some 80 yards out; and so too the one an hour later, the enemy moving this time right across the swamp. To the left, however, Sugiara mounted a heavy attack about dusk, right from the jungle into the Loyals on the rise, forcing the Loyals back in hand-to-hand fighting.[24]

At the Command conference at Rengam at 1515 hours, this was what Percival was looking at: a synoptic glance which had to

take in Eastforce over near Mersing, Westforce in action on the road at Ayer Hitam, with the enemy closing up to the 9th Indian Division units on the railway, and at Batu Pahat, Challen close to surrounded.[25] If Batu Pahat went, then Ayer Hitam would go; once Ayer Hitam went, then so would Kluang and the Crossroads: the Eastforce Diarist recognised that logic immediately and explicitly when the orders reached him. Within a hundred minutes, Challen had been instructed to withdraw, to destroy his guns, move towards Benut, and link up with 53rd Brigade at Senggarang. Westforce, for its part, was 'to withdraw tonight to general line, Sungei Sayong Halt–Sungei Benut'—orders which came precisely at the point where Galleghan had 2/Loyals pushed back, and his own companies in some trouble. For 2/30, particularly those engaged, the move was not easy: three hours trudging back to the river through swamp; the engineers could not blow the bridge for some hours. For the Indian Brigades, Bennett had under command it was a little more complex, since 5/11 Sikhs had been in action the day before at Niyor: an action which the press were to seize on, far more—for some reason—than 2/30 at Ayer Hitam. But even if the situation at Kluang was, as Bennett reported it, 'confused', 9th Indian Division were at this point still holding the Kluang Road: and could be instructed to disengage. As for Brigadier Taylor's Eastforce, its movements and that of 11th Indian Division were, the conference agreed, to conform to those of Westforce, under orders to be issued by III Indian Corps. And that was to cause some problems.

A bare hour and half before the conference, Taylor had already ordered his battalions back, probably because of the pressure to his immediate west along the Kluang Road: precisely that pressure which 5/11 Sikhs were trying to relieve. And at this point just as he had suggested two days before, Varley proposed that, as 2/20 stepped back late that night, 2/18 mount an ambush: at least so the Brigade Diarist remembered. If this is true, then it had to be abandoned. Although Don Company still talk of going into position and having to come out again, the positions 2/18 took up later that evening were certainly not ambush positions, though that is the term the Diarist uses; more certainly still in the light of how Varley was to place his men the next day. What is clear is that, by midnight, 2/20 had moved through back to the Kota Tinggi Road, Frank Ramsbotham's platoon bringing up the rear: *the boys were saying we've drawn the crow again.*[26] Behind them the engineers bringing the bridges down to within two and a half miles of the

Crossroads; and somewhere in there, with not a great deal to spare, Harry Orme's group. Hungry—Orme speaks of coconuts, bananas and an egg; Jack Carroll remembers the chook from the Chinese house they'd stumbled on: *'Grilled' Harry says, it was just charcoal, I've never eaten chook since.* Sick—they were carrying Bobby Morgan, his feet swollen, his body covered with sores. And almost lost—the Bridge down, and the Vickers on the other side opening upon them; jamming; then firing again as they'd come down the road, yelling, cooeeing: *until they woke up and sent a boat across.* The Japanese, they were told, had been lining the bank for days, singing out in English. And Bluey: there's a story that the carriers picked him up, their last trip down the Mersing Road. Certainly the carriers were last out; a Provost on the road telling them to get moving as the Japanese were close by.

8

'The Japanese never fought nor marched by night'

I

January 26. Talk with almost anyone who was around the Crossroads that afternoon and the chances are that he'll mention the planes. And for once not the Japanese either, though they were 'active' as one of the Diaries puts it; so much so that even now more than one edges its way into the story: like a flight passing over at midmorning, or that single plane that came circling back hour after hour south of the Kluang Road, sent—so it seemed from the ground—to search out the guns. True, the Hudsons were still flying reconnaissance out to sea: two had been forced down on 24 January, about twenty miles east of Kuantan, the crews—those who survived—drifting into the next day. And whatever else Far East Command could put in the air—not much more than 100 aircraft all told, even with the new Hurricanes it had sent when they were not escorting convoys in over to the west coast: barely a handful for any action, like the two Albacores, the Shark and the six Buffaloes on the Muar–Batu Pahat Road on 22 January. And for the east coast all that Command could spare were a few Buffaloes: like the two over Mersing about 22 January, or the three Buffaloes on 25 January chasing Japanese bombers back from Singapore. Now late in the afternoon of 25 January a Catalina on routine patrol over the China Sea had reported a Japanese convoy moving south. Oddly enough, no word of that got to 22nd Brigade. But then, in the second half of January, there were Japanese ships all along that coast—south of Camranh Bay, as a United States submarine was to find, the area was dense with ships. None of these is recorded at Brigade either, not the five ships sighted on 20 January, nor the convoy south of Trengganu the day after that, nor the convoy reported somewhere between Singora and Mersing two days after

that again: as though none of them proved to have anything to do with the Mersing force at all. But this convoy was seen again, by a Hudson this time, early on the morning of 26 January when, so the crew stated, the ships were ten miles from Endau: two cruisers, twelve destroyers, two transports, three invasion barges. If this convoy carried fighting troops—and that seemed obvious enough, so obvious that Percival still held to it when he came to write his *Despatch* six years later—then it was clearly critical: perhaps enough to shift the strategic balance decisively, Yamashita closing in now from the east. And at the time it meant rather more perhaps, if Command's ordering HMAS *Vampire* and HMS *Thanet* north is any indication. For these ships were intended not so much to prevent the Japanese coming ashore—that was the RAF's job—but rather to stop any enemy ships placing themselves to fire on the right flank of the AIF. And that may suggest that Malaya Command was expecting not simply the attack on the east coast which it had been predicting for years now, but something more formidable still: a kind of combined operation with the Japanese Army and Navy working together to mount an attack of some considerable weight. And that, if it succeeded—if the Japanese cut through the AIF line around Jemaluang—would mean that the entire Allied line, from the east to the west, was outflanked, the Allied forces cut off from the Island.[1]

That of course is why, even with the few planes it had that day, Far East Command organised a strike.[2] All that it could put in the air were nine Hudsons from nos 1 and 8 Squadrons, 21 Vildebeestes and three Albacores from nos 36 and 100 Squadrons; and as fighter cover, some twelve Buffaloes and a handful of Hurricanes. Even then there was a delay—all but seven of the Vildebeestes had been on a night sortie near Batu Pahat: those planes had to be refuelled, and since the waters near the coast were too shallow for torpedoes, they had to be rearmed as well, with four 250-pounders each, two armour-piercing and two general-purpose bombs. So it was early afternoon before the first flight left, twelve Vildebeestes with their six Buffaloes, flying out in close formation, like a diamond, with three aircraft of the squadron leader's flight to the front, three more to port, three to starboard, and the box flight trailing behind. An hour later the nine Hudsons took off, escorted by the only six Buffaloes that no. 21/453 Squadron could put in the air; and a little later, probably about 1430 hours, the last nine Vildebeestes and the three Albacores. As one of the crew remembers, the first wave were just coming back

in, time enough to hear as another pilot remembers that over Endau it was *not too bad: plenty of cloud.* And around the Crossroads, half an hour's flight away, from the anti-tank wagon lines near the old 2/19 camp; from behind the Crossroads; from a hill in front of the guns, somewhere near an old tin mine, its water blue in the afternoon light: gunner and engineer and infantry, they watched them going up. And remembered: sometimes just 'a significant number of British aircraft'; occasionally the Hudsons, 'Hudsons escorted by Hurricanes'; more often the Buffaloes, vulnerable as pumpkins, *long beetles flying almost on the ground*—so an infantry sergeant remembered, an image catching something of his quick glance up; most commonly the Vildebeestes—*just lumbering along, poor bastards; this great armada, just about airborne;* and in a little while, *hobbling back over the trees.*[3] Now as the first wave reached Endau, the black cloud fell away to bright afternoon. A couple of miles offshore the two transports were lying; behind them, the cruisers and a little further out again, the destroyers; landing craft moved from transport to shore; and in the skies above, patrolling in formation, flew Japanese Zeros, perhaps from Admiral Ozawa's *Ryujo*, and Army 97s. In its communiqué two days later, Far East Command was claiming a direct hit on one of the cruisers, twelve hits on the transports. But even if this is true—and it may be—the Japanese were already ashore; and this even the communiqué itself implicitly admits when it mentions Allied planes attacking stores dumped on the beach or machinegunning the landing craft. Even by late afternoon, it was clear that the airforce had failed to stop the landing, failed against an enemy much faster, much more experienced: Graeme McCabe was to write of enemy bullets striking with the noise of rain on a tin roof, an image that suggests something of the power, something of the careless extravagance of the enemy attack, like a kind of natural force. And Harry Lockwood, in the second wave, remembers that, even with his airgunner belting away at the Zero on his tail, *the enemy stuck so close that I could see the spectacles he was wearing behind his goggles;* remembers the Zero coming up beneath him:

> *and he was so spot on that his cannonshells which came through the engine cylinders were coming through the fuselage of the Albacore; and the machine guns which were in the wings were coming up through our wings ...*

and when he jumped, it followed him down so close at times that:

I had to pull my feet up, hanging on to the parachute shrouds, to avoid having my legs cut off ...

And even as he drifted in, to land in a tree, dangling some 100 feet above the ground, the Zero was still coming in to have a go at him. And that in itself is enough to show how the day went. For the twelve enemy planes that Command could account for, it had lost eleven Vildebeestes, two Albacores, two Hurricanes and one Buffalo: eighteen planes in all and most of the crew. Some died immediately, like Bruce Lee and Maurice Provan, like Squadron Leader Tim Rowland of 100 Squadron, like Sergeant Ewan and Sergeant Hay in Flight Lieutenant Willmott's Vildebeeste. Some came back wounded, losing an eye, a leg. Some, like Willmott, who had come down in the water, were still out to sea. And in the gathering darkness others were moving around in jungle and clearing: like McCabe who had swum the two miles to shore; like Harry Lockwood, watching the Japanese cooking fires not far away; like Dicky Birdsall in a hut near a headland; or Charles MacDonald and his wounded gunner Jock Grant, in a plane that the pilot had landed, with great care, on the road. And in the dark of the same evening twenty miles to the south, the AIF were preparing for the Japanese.

Earlier that morning at 2/20 HQ, Brigadier Taylor had been in conference with his Battalion commanders. And if, as the Brigade Diary states, the Battalion commanders 'completed' plans for an ambush, plans based on a proposal Varley submitted, then it looks as though—even with the two battalions he had left—Taylor proposed moving on to the offensive. Whether the precise form this offensive was to take was his idea or Varley's hardly matters much, not now—but it was Varley's, so 2/18 Diary implies. Nor does it matter whether these plans—the plans now discussed 'broadly'—were the same as Varley had put forward on 23 January and again two days later. The plans were, in any case, simplicity itself:

> to allow approximately one bn of the enemy to pass D Company and B Company in ambush, to be blocked by A Company with C Company in reserve. Then with the application of an artillery barrage ... the attacking Companies were to attack the enemy NORTH of A Company's position.[4]

That is certainly straightforward—a plan for enticing the enemy forward and closing in around him. Varley is, in other words, to

leave the road open, much as the AIF had done at Gemas ten days before; to use artillery when he had a battalion of the enemy in a place which he could close off, with one company of his own forward, two in the rear; and to bring his rear companies in on to the Japanese when the artillery lifted. Ten days later, in the first communiqués, officials were speaking as though this ambush were an episode in a retreat, a way of preventing the enemy from following on, before his troops 'pouring down the east coast'—presumably from Endau—could reinforce their original forces. And historians today, where they deal with Nithsdale at all, read it in much the same way: as an action carried out on the run as it were, to delay the enemy for a short time. Koba, so this interpretation goes, is given a 'bloody nose': the very phrase suggests something minor, a scuffle perhaps; something almost accidental. The Japanese are checked; and in that check Brigade moves down towards Kota Tinggi. And Nithsdale then becomes a way of disengaging; impudent perhaps, and certainly successful, since Taylor withdraws without the Japanese following him up at all. In one sense this is true; but it is by no means the whole truth; and indeed, if the action is interpreted simply in those terms, then it may very well turn out not to be the truth at all. And the immediate question perhaps is to determine just who these Japanese were that Varley was providing for.

Even at this point it is probable that Taylor had the invading troops in mind: probable, but by no means certain. For one thing, about noon Varley sent his IO Lieutenant Solomon north with two ORs to watch the coast, to see whether Japanese shipping had come in to Mersing to unload, or gone even further south. That might suggest that, at midday at least, well before the first flight of British planes had gone up or back, no-one knew just what the Japanese were doing or—perhaps—where they were making for. Even that afternoon, when his companies were going in, Varley was assuming that he had twelve hours at the least—his Diary was to state that the enemy was not expected until the dawn of 27 January at the earliest. And that, it would seem, reflects the only certain piece of intelligence Taylor had: the report from the RAF of 1000 Japanese in column of route on the road from Endau to Mersing: a long day's march. Varley was certainly planning a daylight attack: *We had been told time and time and again that the Japanese never fought nor marched by night.*[5] Admittedly, Taylor still had Koba to take into account somehow too. He was only ten miles away; much closer than any other enemy troops and nothing to suggest

that he'd been ordered to stay north of the river, though until Solomon reported back Brigade had no way at all of knowing whether he'd crossed in strength yet. If he'd still not followed up, it was after all only hours since 2/20 had pulled back to the Crossroads; and he did have some forces, however small, south of the river, those men that the guns were firing on around Bukit Sawah. At the same time, Brigade might have been expecting the new troops to move through Koba's, as the Japanese conventionally did; especially if Koba were, as Command thought, still only at patrol strength. In the Mersing area, it was to say a day or so later: 'East-force up to 25 January had been opposed by only three hundred men.'* If this is right—and at that point Koba had only about two and a half companies at Mersing—then somewhere to his north, whether Command recognised it or not, he had close to a battalion and a half. After all, he'd certainly left some behind, perhaps as garrison troops, when he'd moved south himself; those who'd come down a few days later with Alchin, for instance. And it is probable that in that column on the road Koba had the last of his 3000 men, now finally released from garrison duties at Endau. For Taylor, of course, what mattered were these men marching south. But it was Koba almost certainly that 2/18 met. And if, as the Battalion has always said, as the Japanese historian implied back at Mersing when he talked with the de-mining party sent across in March it was indeed close to a battalion that 2/18 engaged, then Koba by 26 January was at something like full strength. More to the point, the troops just ashore belonged to the 96th Airfield Battalion and its signal unit, a battalion sent to operate the airfields of Kahang and Kluang; and no reason surely to move such a considerable body of men the twenty-odd miles from Endau until the way to those airfields was open, a way that ran through the very Crossroads that the AIF is blocking now.

As the day slowed into afternoon, hot and dry and still, no rain since the day before, Varley took his company commanders across the ground; their job to find their own positions—not as Charles O'Brien, OC B Company, was to stress, the positions that they were to go into action from, positions rather for a reasonable night's bivouac. C Company Varley placed as reserve, somewhere near Hock Tack Estate. Some 2000 yards north A Company straddled the road at a point where the hills which further north had been a thousand yards from the road, come right down to the bitumen. One platoon Captain Johnstone placed to the east, just north of Water Works Road, between the Jemaluang River and its swamps

An embarkation photograph of Arthur Varley, CO 2/18 Battalion in Malaya, later Brigadier commanding 22nd Brigade in the last days on Singapore Island. In the First World War, Varley had been awarded Military Cross and Bar, having been commissioned in the field; he was to die in September 1944 when the *Rokuyo Maru* was sunk by US submarines on its way to Japan. AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL NEGATIVE NUMBER 005515

and the Mersing–Kota Tinggi Road. It was flat, part of it—lalang grass with water underfoot, a solitary tree and a heap of stones. To the north a little small ridge fell steeply into a gully; to the

east, a rocky outcrop dropped, with a boulder or two, six or seven feet steeply down, to a fence of barbed wire, six or seven strands of it running at right angles, close now to the river swamps. On the other side of the main road, past a sign saying Nithsdale Estate, the ground rises, almost directly from the road, higher and much more broken. And north of the 9 Platoon position, the Jemaluang River or one of its arms crosses the road through a culvert. Not quite as far north as that 7 Platoon A Company were very close to the road on the flat ground to the west; and Johnstone placed his 8 Platoon a little back, slightly further west, covering a small feature; behind that Company HQ; and a section across a fence along the spur of a ridge which had a bare patch of ground running up to it and a strong fence with barbed wire on the top: you had, Steve O'Brien remembers, to take off like a snake to get to the top of that hill. Not easy country to move through this; but even with the hills only some 200 feet high, taxing enough to force the enemy, though he had moved into the jungle, right back on the road again. To the west on Hill 167, close enough to 2/18 HQ for the 2/10 Field Regiment Diary to speak of their FOO as being 'forward with HQ 2/18', the artillery placed its OP, behind the Hill 2/18 Mortar platoon, with four Vickers on the Hill for supporting defensive fire. A thousand yards to the north again, B Company went perhaps a thousand yards east of the road into the rubber; three platoons grouped around Company HQ, two sections of 10 Platoon west of the road. As for Don Company: the men walked in, up past the Defile, west of the road, to take up a position near the homestead on Nithsdale Estate. As they went past A Company, George McLoughlin, an original Don Company officer himself, had come down to the edge of the road, to shake hands with both Captain Edgley and Gregg his second in command, *to talk with quite a lot of the boys: they were in great spirits then. Edgley was above himself, he thought he was going to get in among the Japs.* One view of men going into battle; and one is to see B Company for a moment too just on dusk through an arty signaller laying a line: *Bombadier Jukes doing someone a favour. The point is that the PBI used to lay most of their bloody line by hand, and with the van we could do it mechanically, at 40 mph.*[7]

A routine job; a matter of minutes to lay 800 yards of cable to 12 Platoon, to place the field telephone on a mound of earth, to say something like 'Good luck' to the lieutenant's 'Thanks mate'. Lieutenant Sulman: tallish, darkish, baldish; mid-twenties, late twenties—hard to tell in the gathering darkness: precise and cool.

And the rest of the platoon, *just checking their weapons, one bloke opening a box of grenades; they all looked as though they'd been there forever.*

It has stayed very close, that January evening.

Just before dark a staff car went up the road: perhaps Lieutenant Colonel Varley. It was bombed, the bombs falling quite close. And then it was dark; the dark settling down from the tops of the trees as it does in Malaya, sinking heavily to the ground to shut out the light above.

II

No way of telling now just how Koba ordered his advance from Mersing.[8] But already by the late afternoon he had troops in strength south of the river, even as far as ten miles down the road—like the 'small parties ... beating through the rubber trees, firing tommy guns and shouting' that a Don Company patrol was to come upon; and smaller groups even further south again—like the two men running out near C Company, *which we presumed were Japanese.*[9] Like Koba, 2/18 had patrols out: a section from Don Company mentions the Japanese it saw entering the homestead 'just after dark, firing rifles'. And another about the same time, further south, ran into a group of Japanese, 'on bikes', 'on a wooden bridge north of the Pig Farm', where shots were fired, one of the enemy killed. That's remembered, the patrol Lance Corporal Lagettie was in command of; clearly enough to be able to trace it back, first through B Company HQ, where the second in command remembers Major O'Brien trying to calm one of the men; back then down the road, running now; one man Colin Spence remembers, *right in the middle of the road, calling out 'Come here, come here,' he was so excited.*[10] This apparently Battalion took to be an advance guard, arguing—so a later account states—that the first intelligence was wrong and another force had come forward unobserved from Mersing. And so it was thought on the ground too: Charles O'Brien was to say that his company prepared to move then, but—as he saw it—the enemy withdrew. At least other patrols, like Sam Brown's further south which moved out from 8 Platoon A Company in a wide circle to the west of the road, found nothing. Steve O'Brien was to mention the rattle of the scabbard as Brown came back, remembering too someone who knew immediately: *'It's not Nips': you could always tell, a kind of sardine smell, especially at night.*

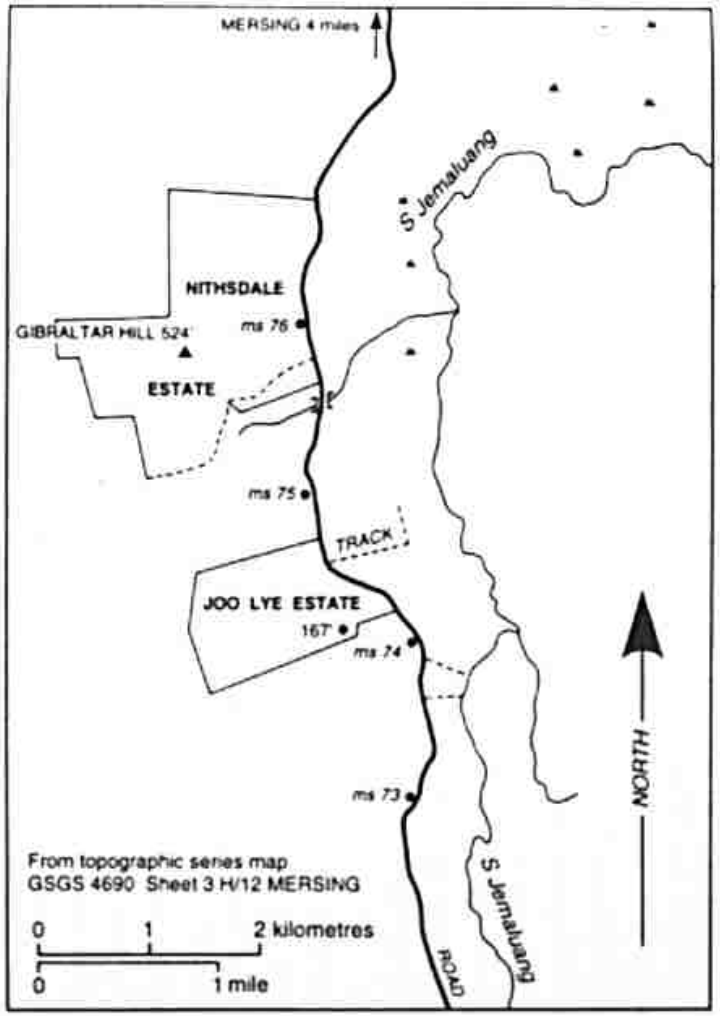
That might suggest that the enemy waited until dark before easing right down into the AIF areas: to move then with a kind of

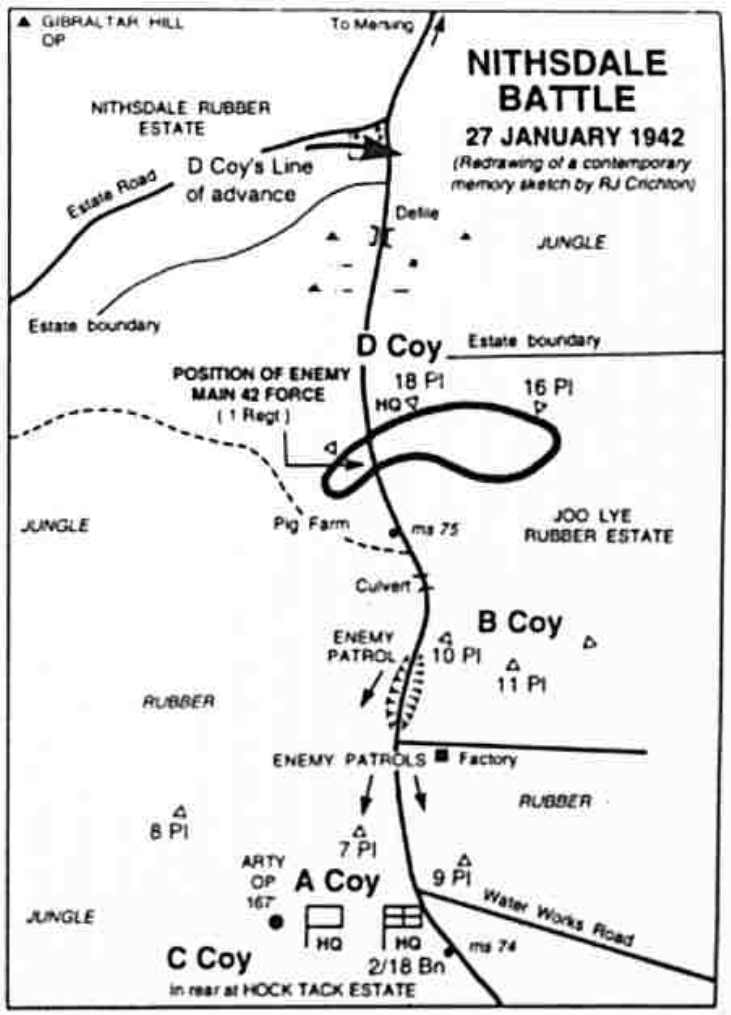
reckless caution. Colin Spence remembers the sound of that motorbike just after dark, coming down the road almost to his position; turning; going back. But the single Japanese who came into B Company HQ, probably just following the line in, simply backed out again: a shadowy figure watched by a sentry forbidden to shoot. Other Japanese, just as quiet, masses of a denser black against the night, were moving down on the west of the road; figures glimpsed uncertainly near the trees—'Keep down you silly bugger,' Steve Goodwin is remembered as whispering, 'you'll draw the crabs', tossing a grenade when he realised who it was. To the north somewhere near midnight, Edgley's scouts watched enemy patrols moving through the Defile: about three platoons the signallers reported to Battalion, edging towards A Company. Tense such moments, as Harry Harris remembers:

> *There was very little talking. But one chap in the distance—we were all within touching distance, it was pitch black darkness in the jungle—I could just hear this fellow murmuring and murmuring; and the bloke next to him telling him to shut up. Do you know what he was doing? He was praying aloud: I'll never forget that. He went on and on—I don't know who it was ...*

On the west of the road particularly, Koba seems to have been pushing for some response—2/18 had orders to hold their fire: the reason for the grenade that rolled into a dugout, for the rifle fire, intermittent but persistent—Alex Priest *stood my blokes to*—especially to the west of the road. Crowey Malone was shot in the wrist, the bullet spinning him right around so the story goes; Maurie Close, accidently, in the chest. And even as far south as the RAP you could hear them the orderly remembers: *I had the Jimmy Brits I don't mind telling you ... you could hear them singing out on the roadway, 'Come on out, Australian soldiers, and fight.'*

In another hour, a second, the enemy was prepared to take risks, closing with Warden's forward section on the east of the road; and no accident either—*they knew where we were*, Madden challenged—*that woke me up. I put another five rounds in the rifle*; but he'd stood, out of cover Madden, to be shot immediately through the forehead—*and that's what saved us*. For the next few minutes, the story is Colin Spence's, a story moving easily on two levels at once. At its most immediate and most accessible, it's the simple narrative of what happened: the twelve Japanese right under the ridge—*you could see the rifle flashes pretty plainly: I'd say about twenty*


MERSING 4 miles
S Jemaluang
NITHSDALE
GIBRALTAR HILL 524'
ESTATE
ms 76
ms 75
TRACK
JOO LYE ESTATE
167'
ms 74
ms 73
S Jemaluang
ROAD
NORTH
From topographic series map
GSGS 4690 Sheet 3 H/12 MERSING
0 1 2 kilometres
0 1 mile


GIBRALTAR HILL OP
To Mersing
NITHSDALE BATTLE
27 JANUARY 1942
(Redrawing of a contemporary memory sketch by RJ Crichton)
NITHSDALE RUBBER ESTATE
D Coy's Line of advance
Estate Road
Dellie
JUNGLE
Estate boundary
D Coy
Estate boundary
POSITION OF ENEMY MAIN 42 FORCE (1 Regt)
18 Pl
HQ
16 Pl
JUNGLE
Pig Farm
ms 75
JOO LYE RUBBER ESTATE
Culvert
B Coy
ENEMY PATROL
10 Pl
11 Pl
RUBBER
ENEMY PATROLS
Factory
RUBBER
8 Pl
7 Pl
ARTY OP 167'
A Coy
9 Pl
Water Works Road
JUNGLE
HQ
HQ
2/18 Bn
ms 74
C Coy
In rear at HOCK TACK ESTATE

Nithsdale

yards away; Barrett's shouting 'John's been killed'; Spence's calling him back since he had only a Tommygun and since he was to hold his fire was quite helpless out there; and Spence moving forward himself, hearing a machinegun firing and a clatter like typewriters: *that would be the rifle bolts*. On another level again, precisely that same narrative indicates how Spence was working. Just as he could hear from the Japanese something like a roll call—a formal device for keeping the formation tactically cohesive—so as he moves forward he is doing much the same: sending Barrett to Platoon HQ in the rear, telling Billy Anderson to roll a grenade down in front, bringing Fenner and Willoughby closer in. And in that minute the section which Madden's death had for a minute turned into a chance scattering of men over difficult ground becomes a military position again, with all-round security and a line of communication:

> *I could see the jets of fire from the machinegun so I calculated the length of the machinegun, fired three rapid shots at where I reckoned the machinegun would be. The enemy fired back—some bullets hit near me; so I thought I'll move on from here. So I moved along toward the road; and the machinegun started again—so I put a grenade down and that stopped that—I bowled it underhand, they were so close. They threw a grenade back—you could see it coming, red: like a cigarette end. It must have been a cracker or something harmless.*

He jumped, ran to the next tree; feeling as he moved out *this crack* along his back ...

> *I looked to the left, and there he was, moving out. I shot him from the hip I'd say. I bayoneted him through the back of the neck, and I stabbed him four times: 'Blow you, blow you, blow you and blow you.'*

On the ground he tried to reload, to find he couldn't close the bolt: *then for the first time I realised he must have hurt me.*

Pat Connell came the few yards over. Bill Anderson and Jack Williamson, Spence sent down to guard the two gullies at the back of the ridge: the officer, he reasoned, had come up that way. Then Noel Willoughby fired: a clang; his tin hat flew. He was close, close enough for Spence to hear him mumble something, to ask Pat to turn him over, to hear Pat say he was dead, to ask Fenner to take the gun. He was reaching then for the officer's sword when he heard George O'Keefe's voice: 'We're going to do a bayonet

charge.' Doug Barrett when he'd got back to Platoon HQ had reported, so Gill Borrowdale remembers, that there were Japanese all around. And to get 8 Section out Lieutenant Warden had thought to use grenades first, and then move in with the bayonet: little else he could do given the orders, orders recently reinforced by Lieutenant McLoughlin, against rifle fire. Borrowdale he put in command; then, in what is almost a formal gesture, putting his compass down near the hut: *'You'll be in charge, but I'm coming too.'* And what Spence was to remember, as he started to drag himself back, was the dull shout, a sort of 'hah' of breath suddenly released as those two sections went down: *I was pleased I wasn't down the ridge.* In that charge, though, Lieutenant Warden was killed—'an excellent platoon commander' Varley was to write later—and Gill Borrowdale wounded; Colin Spence was being carried out as the sections returned from the charge.

To C Company behind, this was just an *indistinct scuffle*, twigs and leaves falling from the trees as the bullets came spinning out; to Advanced HQ though *quite a bit of firing*, enough to send Jim Orr with a section of the newly formed P and E Platoon down to Water Works Road and along it, a journey of some 45 minutes.[11] Nothing was to come of this, though it was remembered clearly enough to become a nexus of personal experience: Warden might have moved, Orr remembers thinking, knowing that the platoon had no word of their coming. And that, for the moment, defines the pattern of the action: clusters of men lost to the sight of one another, groping for some sense of what the enemy is working towards. And on this too, in an odd, almost unexpected way, Jim Orr's section throws some light, and in a way that indicates how, even on the battlefield, in some ways the most lonely place on earth, random events produce a kind of order. If he was as he thinks about 45 minutes down Water Works Road before he turned back, then it has to be another 45 minutes before he reported in to Battalion again. Almost as soon as he'd got there—*next thing*—there's an ambulance up; and his section is moved down to the side of the road as cover. On one hand, of course, the fact of that ambulance, the place it came up to—that surely suggests how information is flowing from A Company at least to Battalion, and from Battalion to the RAP and back. And if this is the truck that took Colin Spence out, then it's exactly at this minute that the guns, some two miles down the road behind them, open fire: Spence was to remember the guns and the ambulance just as clearly; and so too Gill Borrowdale down near Water Works Road on his way,

like Spence, to the RAP. And as for the orderly, it's Colin Spence that he remembers, lying face down on the stretcher, *the muscle completely open and the whole thing quivering, and he's saying, 'How is it Bede?'*

III

In contemporary sources what happens in the next four hours is told very simply, in not much more than 250 words, enough even so to show that the shape of the action was much as Varley had expected: the Japanese move down, the guns fire, the attacking companies move in. But the more nearly one closes with those texts, the less sense that sort of linear narrative makes: except to confirm that 'battle'—'action'—is some kind of literary construct: if it represents 'what happened', then that is only as the line on the graph represents the experimental data. Possibly it does not matter a great deal not to know precisely what plan the gunners were working to, though that determines at least in part how one reads the task that the ambush companies were set. For instance, if the start line were south of the Defile, then probably Varley intended to catch the main body of the enemy in a place it was difficult to escape from, where the very nature of the country forced them to stick to the road; and the job for the ambush companies then—Don Company from the north of the Defile and B Company to the south—was to close in, two jaws of the nutcracker. But if the start line were north of the Defile, then the shells were in part to catch the enemy on the road, in part to prevent any reinforcements reaching them from Mersing; and then the ambush companies are being asked perhaps to mop up. And that raises other questions of course, questions even more pressing: questions about how the guns did actually fire; how Koba was deployed. And even if at this point the argument has to be fairly tentative, nevertheless it seems the only way of coming closer to what happened, of trying to find what holds the action together. For if the sequence of events from now on can be discovered, the relationship between those events—everything, in short, that is meant by causality—is not always so obvious. One might want to argue, for instance, that if Battalion knew about those troops that Don Company reported back on, passing them about 0200 hours, if the FOO called for 'blitz fire' at 0310 hours—more than an hour later—then Varley was pacing them down with cool assurance. And that might be true except that even loaded men can move at two miles an hour and,

on a road, as easily in the dark as in daylight; and some of these Japanese at least were on bikes: those bikes Harry Harris was to find next morning, somewhere near A Company:

> *I can remember trying to bust the spokes, and do you think I could, they were as ... I had my big army boots, and I couldn't even dent them; and so we stuck the bayonet through all the tyres ...*[12]

And if those troops were still moving by 0310 hours, then they'd moved well beyond the Defile two miles to the south when Don Company reported them, perhaps well beyond B Company. But one can place Koba accurately enough, at least by 0430 hours; dug in on feature 42, securely enough for foxholes to be immediately obvious when the demining party went back over the area four months later. It is possible, of course, that the shelling forced these troops of his off the road—an experienced soldier, after all, takes no time at all to scratch a hole for himself. Far more likely though, at least in the frame of this argument, that Koba moved deliberately, especially since all those holes faced the south; that his troops were looking initially towards A Company, to C Company beyond it; particularly if, as a Japanese officer admitted, he was unaware that he had Don Company behind him:

> *they was dug in, thinking all the force was in front of them; they weren't aware that we was over here; and we closed in behind them—and I'd say that most of their fields of fire would have been forward ... they had to leave those positions and come over here, on this side.*[13]

If this is true, then the position the Japanese take up is Koba's so to speak, not Varley's: a position freely chosen, not forced on him. And to press this argument further, it looks as though, far from being pushed off the road by the shelling, Koba might have moved deliberately, intending to use these troops to block and hold the Australians deployed to his south; to move around them with those troops of his already moving east and west of the road, troops Battalion was already very much aware of; troops one might well see as engaged in a conventional Japanese pincer movement; troops that had for some hours been moving over the ground probing, as the fire and firecrackers suggest, for the AIF positions. After all, it's not as though the ground were unfamiliar—though Koba may never have seen it before: familiar at least on paper: from the journey two senior officers took eighteen months before

from Johore Bahru to Endau; from the four Japanese-owned plantations around Mawai and Kota Tinggi, neatly placed on roads or nodal points, the one on Penggerang Point close to one of the Fortress guns. And equally, it's not as though he had to fight for information either, not at least for the essentials. All January the Japanese seem to have been very much aware of the AIF on the east coast; to the point where Penang Radio was asking how 2/10 Field Regiment liked its new 25-pounders, asking 4/Anti-Tank a day or so later whether it had managed to free the breeches of its two-pounders. That may suggest someone in the field, someone with an illegal radio—like the one F.M. Still, secretary of the Royal Johore International Club, was to be arrested for this very day, a set that Field Security had been looking for since 12 January. And more to the point perhaps, precisely at this moment that most formidable of agents Tani Yukata was himself somewhere in Johore: a small and quiet, timid-looking man—so the Japanese remembered him—yet efficient enough to have speeded up the whole Malayan operation. The Tiger he called himself: Harimao. And he left behind the name and the memory of his death in Johore Bahru about 15 February. That, and perhaps the shadow of a reference in a scrap of paper nailed to a tree in a Mersing Estate: 'Beware,' it said, 'of the Tiger'. Thus, from Yukata, from other informers, Koba could have learned how Taylor had his brigade placed, could have moved his men to meet that. And even if he had no direct intelligence, even if he only sensed that his enemy was close, he may have responded in the same way, hoping to force the block in his way with his main body of troops; and simultaneously to take it in the rear with those of his troops who'd gone further south, troops who could come in between A Company holding the road and C Company behind them.[14]

How Koba read the shelling one can hardly say: it had to suggest that his enemy had some idea he was out there, even if the start line was well north of him, and the shells passing further north again—*300 yards north of Don Company, lifting by 100 yards every 2 minutes towards Mersing.* But Japanese sources ignore it altogether, except for one passing reference to 'superior artillery support'. Still, that account seems wholly rhetorical, a chance to speak of the achievements of Lieutenant Matsuno, perhaps the officer Colin Spence killed, charging into the 'pillboxes around Jemaluang', paving the way for the breakthrough even in his glorious death. And as for the rest of that account, as far as it touches Nithsdale at all, it is only in the mention of a 'courageous'—

and surprise—British attack: an echo probably of Don Company in the hours before dawn. To the south though, around the guns, men remember the noise, the flash; woken into alarm, yelling and running, an engineer was to write. Along the Kluang Road it sounded as though the enemy had broken through the 2/18 rearguard: Frank Chaplin as company QM was ordered to load the spare ammunition 'as the situation was very uncertain'. Further forward as the shells screeched overhead—*it's not bloody monkeys*, Shady Chapman was told, *bloody artillery*—sixteen guns of two batteries ranging for seven minutes on the start line, then lifting forward, firing about 900 rounds in all. And through this shelling both ambush companies began to move; ordered quite directly—the lines were in again—'to carry on in accordance with the plan'. Indeed, there's an odd remark in the communiqué ten days later suggesting that this creeping barrage—these distances of 100 yards, phases of fire lasting two minutes—was devised precisely to allow the infantry to advance and keep contact with the Japanese. And one reason perhaps that both companies were positioned so wide of the road was simply to keep them clear of the scatter of shells, to be as much out of the way of the artillery as they were of the advancing Japanese. For O'Brien's men this meant moving west through thick rubber, so thick the sky was blotted out; each man holding the scabbard of the man in front, though even then Charles O'Brien said, he could see nothing of the man whose bayonet he was holding. It took time, more time possibly than had been expected: O'Brien was to speak of it as 'a nightmare journey'.[15] And the enemy close, 'firing as usual in all directions', bullets spinning into the trees around, sensed overhead. But if that indicates Japanese moving south of the Defile, O'Brien insists he saw *no one at all until we got on to the road, probably about daylight.* And to the north, no trace of them at all in Nithsdale Homestead, as Arthur Wright established:

> *I had to go in the front door and another corporal had to go in the back door, and we had to throw a grenade in each and then go in with the bayonet. I threw my grenade and having put my rifle down while I threw the grenade I had a job finding it—I found it and raced in through the front door and damn near skewered the other bloke—there were no Japs in there.*

And none, as Edgley reported to Varley, at the northern end of the estate; though he would, the CO warned, find 'a number of enemy' as he withdrew south. As he rang in, the guns were still

firing, and shells falling close ... *we were all shaking like buggery: shit stirred*; close enough for *one man to panic 'I'm only fifteen, I'm only fifteen', to be grabbed and loosed back straight out of the way.*[16] But at this point the shelling is more commonly *a bit of a noise*, as though still remote, outside; a phrase that might however also suggest men straining to hear the sounds that in the dark of night would be the first they'd know of the enemy.

IV

As the guns stop, Edgley is already close to the road, in what he might see as an empty field. The Diarist puts this at 0415 hours; but his account is so tangled that more than anything else it indicates, even embodies, the confusions of the next hours. Indeed, just as a footprint reveals the movement and effort of the body, so the very difficulties that the Diarist runs into—difficulties explicit in his text but never adverted to—these point to the gap suggested before, the gap between what is written and what is written about. And what happens emerges not from official sources so much as out of the tension between such formal statements and what men who were there have to say: the space filled with those fragments of autobiography where the narrator is not so much recalling as recollecting the past. So, in this space, as it were, Edgley is moving his company onto the road, 17 Platoon, HQ, 18 Platoon, 16 Platoon. And since both sides of the road were swamp, impossible to walk on, then his men came right onto the bitumen. At some point where the telephone line ran beside the road, he tried to reach Battalion again—*I can remember [him] ordering the sig to tap into the line*[17]—but the line was cut: perhaps the shells, perhaps the Japanese. If the line was indeed out, then this may be the reason the Japanese were not immediately alerted if, as Harris says, it passed straight through the command post already set up under the high bank on the west of the road a little further forward, a position commanding the whole approach to the south. Much as 16 Platoon had come on to the road Harris had stumbled over a body:

> *and I didn't know whether it was one of our blokes or a Jap. And I felt him down and I came to this sandshoe with the split toe ... the first dead man I'd ever touched—ever seen—was a Jap; and there he is laying at the side of the road ...*

And there perhaps since the day before; if this is the man Lagettie's patrol had shot some ten hours earlier. As Harris, stooping, hesitates, the forward section was noticing the Japanese working on a wooden bridge, probably the one near Old Quarry Road. Lieutenant Roberts hesitated, uncertain—Arthur Wright remembers his coming back to ask advice—'*Vern, they're repairing the bridge up there, what should we do?*'; Lieutenant Schwenke responded immediately, ordering a section of his 18 Platoon in with the bayonet. In front of them this handful of Japanese. And in the few words it takes, Wright even as he speaks slides from 'the enemy' to 'he', this man at his feet—*there were five or six Japs laying there and I held my bayonet at his throat*: the very thrust of his sentence carrying the same shift in focus, the same narrowing of vision as his physical rush did 50 years ago. A momentary pause: long enough for Schwenke to search for maps, documents. And in that pause, machineguns: firing so decisively that as Charlie Michell would argue, *the Japs knew we were there: just sitting there waiting: dug in God, on this little hill*—Jim Toose now—*we all reckon they must have had advance information.* To Wright still near the bridge the fire came from the left-hand side of the road: his left, as he speaks as though he were still coming down that road, making for the Crossroads. Harris, on the other hand, bending over the dead Japanese, remembers the fire rather as coming straight down the road. And where Wright speaks simply of taking cover, Harris mentions men scudding to both sides of the road, he himself to jump the bank *to land fair on top of a stretcher bearer ... two of them there, late reos ... nearly broke his leg in my heavy army boots; he cursed me half an hour ...*

Both 16 Platoon and 18 Platoon ended on the east of the road; Lieutenant Robert's 17 Platoon on the west. And that may indicate where they are in relation to the guns. If Harris, for instance, towards the end of the file, is still close enough to see the muzzle blast, then to 17 Platoon those guns would have to be almost dead ahead, where the instinctive response would be not so much to duck, to go to ground, as to spin out as far as possible over to the other side of the road. Either in that first moment or in the sustained fire that followed—this gun did stop *eventually*, as Harris put it—some Australians were hit, the first Don Company casualties: Harold Evans the first, it's said, shot through the heart. But if as the men moved organisational unity vanished, that was only for a moment. Next instant—and Edgley's response sounds immediate—even as the gun stopped Harris remembers he had 17 Platoon

on the road, placed across the foot of the hill: *bayonet charge*, an attempt to clear the gun:

> *and the boys back on the hill, this was the first thing they heard, this great screaming roar of blokes yelling and everything opened up ... from then on, for the next hour, you couldn't hear yourself talk for machineguns or whatever ...*

It was dark, very dark: four hours after midnight, and the moon had gone down. Men who were there speak of it now, that dark, as more than an absence of light; as something positive, something with a being of its own; another element like air or water, only more far-reaching, dangerous and unknown. And the dark and the Japanese come together, hostile and intractable: *You couldn't see anything; you couldn't see anything, it was dark, see; and all we knew was we run slapbang into them.*[18] The very rhythm of this sentence carries through—even insists on—the speaker's experience: echoing the impetus of the Australian attack as it beats against the enemy. And for one man at least, for Charlie Michell, the charge itself—*we went up*—becomes part of a wider context, that moment and the moments to come—*war going on round and all around and everywhere*: that, and the dead and wounded:

> *We left two or three of the blokes—we didn't see them anymore, they were hit first go and they were just keeping putting them back in, they were the first aid men looking after them, none of them ever came back neither. And that hurt me a bit, because I had a lot of real good mates there, from Barraba where I was born ...*

Nor, it seems, did the platoon get far up the slope, flung back to the west of the road almost directly opposite the hill. *Well that*, so Harris argues, *is where we mostly buried them all, so they must have been halted there.* Max Skinner—*we buried him with the samurai sword which was under him*; and Shorty Lancaster, *not far away ...*

The end of this first encounter, and 17 Platoon left dead or scattered. Charlie Michell implies that his section at least moved north a little to regroup; and for Don Company as one account put it, 'a fire fight until dawn', with troops, perhaps a regiment strong, entrenched on this hill to their east—'feature 42' Jock Creighton was to call it on the map he drew a few months later. In the first list of its missing that 2/18 compiled some months later, a register of those whose deaths were still not confirmed with

the rigour that Army regulations require, 57 names, all but a handful come from Nithsdale; an indication in itself, particularly after the confusion of the fighting on the Island, of the kind of engagement this was to prove. Of these, ten men remained unaccounted for; listed without comment, both in this and later lists. As for the rest, these are placed with a brief phrase, either anonymously like Lancaster—just 'wounded in leg and thigh'—or more specifically like Gordon Laing—'killed by grenade'—a death both George Funnell and Joe White witnessed. And occasionally in a later list the earlier comment is emended: the first 'machinegun burst' to Max Skinner's name become a flat unambiguous 'killed' from Funnell in one recension, Gemmell in another; and Bill Robinson, simply named on the first list, has an anonymous 'believed seriously wounded' in the second, and a 'shot dead with machinegun fire' from Claude Draper on a third. In such rolls, though the whole action is somehow present, it is present in single isolated moments of time, nothing stretching before or after: random points rather than coordinates, impossible to map the field with. And even what was learned later when, in the phrase that's always used—*we went back to bury the boys*—even that is not enough to determine the shape of the action either. Clearly it was hand-to-hand—*they were right in among the Japanese; tangled, right in among them.* And more than once, 'caught good and proper'. Other evidence, more circumstantial, indicates how closely the two forces were engaged: one man still with the rifle to his shoulder, shot in the back and still lying where he fell; six others slumped where they were, shot creeping around a mound; another again, rifle still resting in the fork of a rubber tree. Nothing there that sits absolutely with those contemporary casualty lists; nothing simply in the lists themselves that will put a name to such men. And if the wounded moved—Cec Stanford did; and if wild pigs had been rooting through the area, then in part some of the evidence from the demining party is more ambiguous than it looks. And some perhaps, like the sword Max Skinner was found lying on, has to belong to another narrative, another story.[19]

Still, these rolls clarify something: like a grid placed over a map. And if, as they show, the Japanese machineguns killed more men from 17 Platoon than from the rest of the company, then this says something about the power of that first enemy burst, especially since four of those men were killed on the road itself: no ambush now, as even the Diarist had to recognise, one of the terms of that equation had changed. At the same time, though, 17 Platoon lost

one man in three, both 18 Platoon and Company HQ, each with three men out of four killed or missing, suffered more severely still: and this has to reflect how after this first shock those platoons engaged the enemy. Further, the comment on almost every man in these rolls comes from one of his own platoon: an indication that the platoons remained cohesive units, something that suggests a high degree of discipline. And on the few occasions when one can trace a man across the field, map out his movements—simply by watching who he comments on—this is invariably quite late, close to dawn, as though the platoon groupings held until then. Arthur Wright, for instance, remembers Harry Thuell, the 17 Platoon sergeant, among the wounded; White and Funnell from 16 Platoon, somewhere behind Wright, saw him killed by a grenade, and when Rogers, also from 16 Platoon, moved that way he was dead. And this suggests that for a good deal of the time, the platoons themselves were no great distance apart: Harris after all remembers Lieutenant Roberts being hit—*they were singing out for stretcherbearers*. Even so, neither he nor anyone else talks much of what the other platoons were doing. And at one point at least the platoons might have been far enough apart to lose sight of who was to left and right: in one confused moment the story has it 16 Platoon fired on 17, or—if this was when Reg Davidson was killed—on 18:

> *but they had moved their position and they came over somewhere about here, I'd reckon. And Edgley said, 'That group there, fire on them'; and we opened up with everything; and we fired on them and we shot the poor bastards I can see it today, yes we shot them, no doubt about it ... things like that happen, I know that, that's always with me; we shot them, and we didn't know until they started screaming, 'Hey, you're shooting us'. So we stopped straightaway ...*[20]

And that, better than anything else perhaps, indicates the kind of problem Edgley was facing in manoeuvring his troops. Essentially his task was to clear the enemy out of his way; that, rather than to work around those he met. And since he was, as a 2/20 colleague remembers, *aggressive, anything but cautious*, then he began with a bayonet charge; and perhaps ten minutes later—17 Platoon, those who were left, moving north a little to regroup—he ordered 16 Platoon at his rear out on to the flank. In the official account, right from this point, the story is 16 Platoon's: as the platoon moves so the angle of vision shifts, other sections of the field gradually

becoming invisible. As for 17 Platoon, it falls quite out of sight, disappearing as it were between one line and the next. And so too 18 Platoon: at a point where the platoon commander is reporting to Edgley that 'his attack is being held up'. One can trace 16 Platoon though comparatively simply: most convincingly through the men who came out. On the flank first, then sent across the swampy ground near the road into a mangosteen orchard, a small hut in the middle, young rubber further east. The men were barely in position, Harris with the machinegun right out on the wing—simply *because you want to keep away from the bloke with the machinegun cos they really draw the crabs*—when snipers in this hut began firing into their rear. And Tommy Gore was sent to clear them out:

> *and I remember this Jap coming out of the side door, and Tommy behind him with a bayonet at his back ... He got three of them in there, he killed three of them with a bayonet ...*

From the hill the fire was directed mostly towards 18 Platoon, closer to the road. But the Japanese had snipers in the trees to the east, machineguns on to a hut as well: concrete that high, *and we were trying to bury ourselves in that concrete*; and machineguns not at all easy to silence either. Harris, now in one of the contour drains, remembers that:

> *he just kept firing and firing and firing; I could see the flash, but I couldn't silence it, I was pouring magazines and magazines into it; and my number two gunner, the only time I ever went crook on him, back in this swamp he must have ended up to here in the water and got all the spare ammo swollen up; but he plonks it on the gun. Took about two minutes to clear it ...*

The enemy gunner—he was to find a few months later—was lying behind a log, grass tall in front of a small opening:

> *and when I went back to bury the boys I had a good look at this—there were splinters and there were bullets in the log—I'd been pouring all this fire into him and couldn't make out why I couldn't stop him ...*

An hour now since that first encounter on the bridge, though the Diarist makes it closer to two hours: in his account time is running slow, as though the observer had slipped into another frame of reference, a 'now' infinitely extended. First light, some 30

minutes before dawn: a Japanese bugle call, *and Tich Burgess yelled out, 'Mess parade, Don Company'.*[21] At this moment precisely, Edgley moved 16 Platoon again, ordering it further on to the flank, around to the south of the hill: perhaps to have them simply come in behind the enemy, easing the pressure on his remaining men, perhaps to make contact with B Company—*I can remember John Edgley saying, 'Hang on boys, B company will be here any minute'.*[22] On a map this looks a comparatively simple manoeuvre—even Jock Creighton left that area blank, flat and undistinguished. But Koba had snipers in the trees: Harry Harris was to remember that sharply enough to mark them in first thing on his own sketch. To the south of the hill the low-lying ground is swamp, dank and greasy; the higher broken with a couple of gullies, one running right down to the road, another along the top of the ridge. Somewhere short of this second gully the platoon ran into machinegun fire—Vic Mirkin places that gun down near the road, in the culvert—and that's where Jack Burrows was killed:

> *we were all coming in, and they opened up and machinegunned him right across the chest; got him; and blew him apart; and he said, 'Don't let the Japs get me'. And he died; they never got him.*

Mirkin himself fell to the ground, to find the Japanese gunner drawing him in the dirt, bullets right around him; and since *that was too hot for me,* dived for the swamp. It sounds rather as though the platoon had bunched together—Jim Toose, for instance, was close enough at this point to ask, '*Are you all right Mirk?*' Remembering those minutes now, what men close up to are not their own experiences, but the men who died: Phil Byrnes, Bluey George shot sheltering in the back of a washout: *the bullet that killed him went fair through a mirror he had in his pocket;* Jackie Bourke, the Gallipoli veteran:

> *he was always reading the riot act to us ... he was standing behind a rubber tree that was about this big. 'Get up,' he was saying, 'stand up and face them'—fanatic he was: the bullet that killed him went fair through the tree and all, and the next thing the whole tree shattered and he's dead ...*[23]

Apart from the dead, the wounded: Billy Ashford shot in the leg, Cec Stanford once in the shoulder and again when he stood up. And if the enemy could send another shot into the handle of Harris' Bren as he went to help Stanford, could shoot Lieutenant

Simmons' mapcase off, then he was fairly close in: perhaps as one early account suggests, in perimeter defence around the hill. Nevertheless, Simmons was to urge his platoon in after the enemy, although to some it was simply moving into a trap, and *there was only a few of us there, you know.* At this point Japanese mortars opened up, probably from the side of the hill, causing further casualties: like Benny Little who was left for dead—*he dropped as though poleaxed*; and probably Jim Logan. As for the rest of the platoon, it was forced to pull back out of range, over into the culvert behind. Moving up the rise, the men came down directly on to 11 Platoon B Company—it was close to daybreak.

V

With 16 Platoon south of feature 42, all that Edgley had to work with was Company HQ and 18 Platoon, now about half its original strength. For some time it would seem the enemy had been moving east, trying to outflank the small Australian force: if Japanese HQ was, as Harris argues, west of the road, then it was in as good a position as any to work out how Edgley was deploying his men to its north and northeast. And it sounds as though this was clear even at the time: Arthur Wright, hearing 16 Platoon move south, interpreted that as their trying to clear their flank with the bayonet. And not for the first time either: Vic Mirkin remembers Edgley earlier pointing to *a mob of Japs coming round this way*—a moment so taut that even in the darkness of that night he has Edgley saying *'You can see their bayonets through the long grass'.* And attack and counter-attack Mirkin sees as characteristic of the first phase of this action, with the enemy making three or four charges:

> *and the Japs'd blow a bugle and they'd charge; and we opened up with everything we had; and we stop them, and back they'd go again. All quiet for a while, and they'd lob a few grenades ... and then they'd charge in. And every time they charged we'd open up and into them, give them merry hell again ...*

Now as Edgley moved 16 Platoon south, the enemy came in again. And if they came in as Wright remembers, exactly where 16 Platoon had been, on Edgley's right flank, then Don Company was held in a tight semicircle, close to being completely surrounded: posing for Edgley himself a tactical problem which, with the numbers he had, he had little chance of solving. Now the enemy came

in, again with the bayonet, straight on to 18 Platoon, now about seventeen men. Hec White, Wright remembers, badly wounded in the leg, propping himself against the stump of a tree, *and he said, 'Well, come on you bastards. I can still use the bayonet'.* Then 18 Platoon attacked again, concentrating on the hill where the Japanese were in strength, their heavy machineguns this time scattering friend and foe alike. And not long after daybreak, Vern Schwenke is hit: *I saw the dust come out of his clothes where he'd been hit by machinegun fire.* Someone called for stretcherbearers; Wright, knowing they had no hope of getting in, tried to stop them; both were machinegunned immediately without reaching Schwenke at all. Another call *and Lieutenant Schwenke pushed himself up on his arms, and said, 'Keep going boys, don't worry about me. Keep going'.*

To the west of the road, clear of rubber, A Company had known that Don Company were heavily engaged: even as Steve O'Brien remembers it, to recognising that initial moment: *a barrage of shots, as though Don had kept on coming and hadn't been warned and run headlong into the Japanese.* But to the east, B Company had heard just the odd shot, occasionally a burst; nothing to indicate what was happening to their north until just before daylight when they reached the road, to move immediately into action. Then 10 Platoon engaged a section—half a section perhaps—of Japanese moving north just off the road, killing them all. And with his 12 Platoon turning north itself, Lieutenant Sulman led his men through the culvert to silence that Japanese machinegun: one of these men, badly wounded, was brought back; Sulman and Don Capel were killed. And further east, 11 Platoon looked up to see 16 Platoon moving down over the rise to join them.

Further south again, Lieutenant Colonel Varley, now at Advanced HQ, was, as a contemporary account carefully phrases it, himself 'now taking command of the situation'. Even the official narrative stresses how completely communication had broken down with the runners unable to get through; and this is why, the Diarist explains, 'the situation was conflicting for some time'. A little before dawn, Varley had sent out a patrol drawn mainly from the Pioneers, with Mack Swaddling as OC, his orders to make contact with A Company or, as Swaddling remembers, with the enemy. It was a fighting patrol undoubtedly, even the dispositions saying as much: one section forward to the east, one to the west and Platoon HQ in the middle. But his task, as Swaddling remembers it, was primarily to make contact with the enemy, breaking off if he became engaged. That patrol Varley recalled, probably about the

same time as he ordered Charlie Wagner north, sending up a runner before Swaddling had gone more than a mile through the rubber on the east of the road. And if Mack Swaddling's patrol was essentially an attempt to locate the enemy, to find out what was happening, Charlie Wagner's purpose was more immediate: not simply to establish, as the citation to his DCM was to put it, 'the disposition of our own and the enemy forces', but to locate the Japanese for the guns.

Traditionally, this part of the story has him going up, taking a bearing on feature 42, then back down the road; and the guns opening up again immediately after: an urgency and a precision caught exactly in one of Steve O'Brien's sharpest formulations:

> *you could hear a motorbike coming up at about 90 mph; it flashed between us and 9 Platoon and flashed right up to the culvert, and came straight back. The sound of that bike was still hanging in the air; you could hear a whisper and then a plonk ... We went flat like lizards ...*

Not just one hit either, but a whole crescendo—*enough to see the red dust rise*—the guns this time firing for some twenty minutes. And it may indeed have been as simple as that. As the 2/10 Field Regiment War Diary confirms, the guns began again about 0635 hours, firing about 1000 rounds 'shortly after first light'. Still, red dust or no, Wagner must have been up there rather longer than the traditional narrative implies: long enough to talk with Lieutenant Simmons, now with 11 Platoon, and to give his machinegun to Jim Toose; long enough to pick up Sulman's dog-tags. And weeks later on the Island Alex Priest remembers his coming up with a crudely made Japanese machinegun, its barrel dented, to ask if it could be made to work; and a wooden box too, something like the pencil case a child might have, with a handful of rice and a pair of chopsticks that he'd got, he said, in the Don Company area; but no time for anything more: *he was always in a hurry, Charlie.*

As for the guns, they were firing by survey again; but with no-one this time to call the fall of shot. Lieutenant Hardie, in the OP on Hill 167, had notified—so the Diary notes—that he was 'in trouble', with Japanese washing around his OP, and was given permission to withdraw. And the Regiment has a story about that: about Hardie's refusing to leave without his wireless set, carrying it out 'on his shoulder through a jungle track'; first to Cemetery Hill, as his unit Diarist notes, finally to come in, as Harry Woods

remembers, through his 18 Platoon of Don Company 2/20, along the Kluang Road west of the Crossroads; close to a troop of the Regiment's guns.

Near feature 42, with Schwenke dead, Arthur Wright had found when he called for support that, except for a corporal and a man already wounded, he was alone, and no-one on his left flank, either; the corporal, as he moved closer in, was machinegunned. Pushing himself to the rear on hands and knees, Wright was making for Company HQ, in a deep ditch behind a hut, when the first shells began to fall *very accurately, both on the Japanese and on us: they could knock a two inch nail right in, those blokes.* Past some twenty wounded men sheltering in a deep depression; past Captain Gregg's body propped against a tree—and the story is told of Gregg too, setting his back against a tree, 'Come on, you bastards, come on'—Wright jumped into a trench, to find Gordon Laing and Billy Poole; Edgley, they said, had gone forward. Five men now, Wright remembers; spreading out in extended order along the road about 100 yards apart, to try to cross to the west. And that's when Harry Thuell was hit; machinegun fire again, again from the hill. Four men, grouping into pairs—one group to move up towards the enemy and to pass out of Wright's story; and, tossing a grenade at the enemy soldiers who appeared behind a hedge, Wright with Joe Carter moved a little north, their only hope, to make for Mersing. Five or six Japanese came onto the road to shoot the wounded Harry Thuell; Wright and Carter could do nothing but watch them retreat north. He himself argued for going back to pick up rifles and ammunition, but there was no way of knowing whether the enemy had now abandoned the position altogether. So they were to lie at the bottom of a ditch, in mud and water, he and Joe Carter, until the evening of 27 January and the fall of dark again.

From this point Wright's story, like others, shifts into another mode, to belong more truly to the 'escape' genre, a genre rooted in the private rather than the public world. As for the rest of the Battalion, it is held still within the structure of public events, a structure determined by Varley's decision, based perhaps on what Wagner had reported, to move into the action area either—as one account suggests—to extricate Don Company, or as a 'counter-attack'. Varley himself, if the Diary is right, was assuming that he had only 'to clean up any pockets of the enemy remaining': this second artillery barrage, as Varley himself put it, was 'to wipe out' the Japanese mortars and machineguns. In the first place this

meant moving A Company; and George McLoughlin, so Steve O'Brien thought, already wanted the company to go forward and attack on its front. Now Captain Johnstone was ordered to assemble his two platoons of A Company on the east of the road; and if the Diarist is right, Varley—almost certainly at Advanced HQ by this time—was proposing to take them forward himself. Alex Priest he had ordered already to see if any Japanese had bypassed B Company. Priest had gone up the road, round past the old tinmine, bashed open every shed where they'd formerly stored rubber; found nothing; and reported back to Varley just as he was preparing with some of C Company to move north. And Jim Orr and his section somewhere about now Varley sent over to Water Works Road again, to hold that and to protect any stragglers coming out. And to the north, B Company who had acted immediately Charles O'Brien had talked with Lieutenant Simmons, were going forward too:

> *as soon as we contacted them, and found out what the position was, that Don Company were held up at the moment, I pulled the platoons out from the road, and we started to move up ...*

the three B Company platoons, with Lieutenant Simmons' 16 Platoon as reserve:

> *not to be used if I could help it, they'd had a pretty bad doing by the sound of it.*

B Company had gone perhaps 200 yards; A Company was extended, so George McLoughlin remembers, on both sides of the Mersing Road—*we were just lined up to get into the trucks*, Alex Priest remembers—when it was cancelled. The order came—again through Charlie Wagner—to stop: 'no more troops to be committed in this action'.[21] About 0800 hours then Varley ordered his troops to pull back. C Company Varley instructed to remain as rearguard, to stay in position until both B Company and Don Company had come through. The Battalion Diarist states that these new orders, orders countermanding those Varley had just issued, came from Brigade; both Brigade and 2/10 Field Regiment Diary imply that the responsibility was General Heath's—as indeed it's commonly remembered. Harris again:

> *Heath had ordered, and Brigadier Taylor had reinforced the order, nothing*

more to be committed, pull out everything you could; the road to the West coast is completely open ...

From then on it was to be straight back, Don Company then B Company withdrawing through C Company; 2/18 through 2/20: on one level merely routine. But there's an odd coda, one that somehow sums up the last 24 hours, a story that seems to mean a good deal more than it says. Somewhere about 0800 hours, right up the middle of the road, a truck came up from the Crossroads:

we had one roll of sig wire, the same worn stuff that we'd been practising with for a year, and we were going to get it back ... Lived by the book did Bombadier Jukes, and probably died by it—oh ... Sandakan ...

So, to B Company to wind in the wire—Sulman's phone no longer there. Then up the road a little: north: *just poking around.* The day before, going in, Rick Haynes remembered, he'd noticed a sign along the side road, 'Nithsdale Estate': no sign this morning, nothing but smashed and twisted rubber trees. And no sound either. Beyond the culvert somewhere, past feature 42, another road turned in; a hut on the corner and rags of bodies:

Jack got out; stirred one or two with his foot. Always sang Jack did, when he wasn't with the two-up game or running telephone wire. But he'd gone quiet then. And Jukes called 'Out of here and quick, Jack, it's too bloody quiet'. Couldn't get out quick enough after that. Looked like a charnel house, and smelled like one too.

How many dead he saw Haynes no longer remembers; and Japanese commanders rarely record their losses in detail. Still, from the beginning Nithsdale clearly meant something to them, enough for one Japanese historian to describe it, in a phrase carefully remembered, as 'the Muar battle of the east coast'; enough for its memory to persist in much the same terms into an account a Japanese civilian wrote 30 years after that. In Shinozaki's memoirs, Nithsdale turns into a fight to the death between 200 Australians from a demolition party on its way back to Singapore and men from the Endau invasion force helped by the Saeki tank regiment from Kluang—an echo of Muar clear in that. And if he is right, then quite early this action had become synonymous with Australian courage: so much so that, as he argues in his discussion of the Rimau trial, one reason that Major Lyon's men were treated

with so much respect was that the Japanese remembered the 'terrific battle at Jemaluang'. The first communiqué released in Australia on 30 January spoke of 250 'enemy casualties'; in another five days that became 'a complete Japanese battalion destroyed' and, so one report has it, a battalion of artillery as well. The Battalion—and Varley himself—put the enemy dead at 600; Shinozaki, at a thousand; the RAE officer on the de-mining party in April is remembered as speaking of 'three to four hundred graves in the area'; the Japanese historian talking with Charlie Wagner is said to have admitted to 1000 dead.

A few months later, on 7 July, Captain Isgar, the Japanese garrison commander at Kluang, gave permission for the Australians he had working for him, lifting mines around Mersing, to send a party out to bury their dead. Even on the way across from Kluang in April, Frank Gaven had noticed the shattered rubber trees, the uniforms on the side of the road: little heaps of clothing, tin hats, respirators and gleaming bones. And over the field itself, as Ginty Pearson remembers *lots of skeletons here and there; bits of rifles and equipment—tin hats, waterbottles—all scattered all over the place.* For some men the experience was to be focused in one sharp image; like the skeleton in the rags of a uniform, rifle still resting in the fork of a tree; like the body of Vern Schwenke, recognised as Harris remembered by those big boots of his—*hard boots, with toes that used to turn up and look at you*; Captain Edgley's mapcase he came upon at the top of the hill:

> *I thought they must have captured him, or that they'd taken the map case off his dead remains and taken it up to their HQ: it was definitely up there ...*

But though Harris does not recall Edgley himself, Frank Gaven spoke of finding him—he and his CSM and another man again—further forward still in a little clump of bushes, not far from the culvert that 16 Platoon had been forced to pull back into: *they were right in among the Japanese, tangled; right in among them.*

Not all the dead could be so surely identified; nor each of the bodies given a separate burial. All that the burial party could do was to place those they found in a common grave, over that a Cross—wood from a hut wrecked in the shelling, letters of the inscription carved out with a penknife and filled in with tar from the road: FALLEN COMRADES, it reads, IN REMEMBRANCE. And although the careful surrounds had gone, the grass grown

much higher when the first Military History team went into the area in October 1945, the Cross was still standing, tall enough still for a man to climb on: not far from the road, one of the journalists wrote, human bones lay exposed; from higher ground a skull grinned down. Nor were all the Australian dead at Nithsdale itself: there are those too who might have died trying to find a way out. Graeme McCabe in hiding south of Endau, heard that twelve AIF had been executed—barbarously even for Japanese—on the jetty at Endau on 12 February, men wearing the 22nd Brigade colour patch which he was given, the same men probably as he'd been hearing about hidden like him in the jungle. So if those that the War Graves teams could find were later exhumed and reburied in the Kranji War Cemetery, others are there still. Not the Cross though: sometime before Anzac Day 1946 it was taken down, to be ceremonially installed, slightly altered, in the Church of St John the Evangelist at Gordon on Sydney's North Shore, the garrison church of 18 Battalion. But even if one cannot determine precisely how each man died, the final total, the roll of the dead is still not the 98 it is commonly assumed to be. From unit rolls, from contemporary notes, from War Graves Registers, one can confidently list the names; and just as confidently—though less meaningfully—the final numbers: six officers, 77 men. 'Fallen comrades, in remembrance.'

VI

Not easy of course that decision to withdraw that morning, to obey orders: and a decision that Varley himself may not have agreed with—he was to gather Don Company together weeks later in Changi to explain why he had apparently abandoned them. And AIF Command back in Johore Bahru may not have agreed either. Even if, as Thyer noted, it was casualties that Taylor was concerned about—'further casualties may have prejudiced the Corps Commander's orders'—'his order was adversely commented on at Divisional HQ when the information was received'. Of course, for the moment Thyer might have been speaking as an Australian rather than as Bennett's GSO1: like Taylor's Eastforce, Bennett's Westforce was under Heath's command, had been since 24 January. But a remark like that, with that authority, does raise the question of precisely what orders Taylor was working with: another question which turns on those tangled matters of timing and communication. Two days before, as Percival's troops withdrew again

The Mersing Cross, as the War Graves team saw it in October 1945, still standing on the side of the Mersing Road facing east; the very formality of the inscription, with its echoes from the monuments from a generation earlier, defines this as similarly a site of mourning, a site of memory. AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL NEGATIVE NUMBER 117912

down the trunk road and down from Mersing, this has been determined largely by the position at Batu Pahat. And in the orders coming out of the conference held on the afternoon of 25 January, Taylor had been instructed to hold the Crossroads until the

night of 27–28 January, just as Westforce in the centre was to hold about ten miles south of Ayer Hitam and Kluang. Although Percival was to cable Wavell that same day that he still had a week on the mainland, he was at the same time instructing Heath as commander of all forces in Johore to draw up contingency plans, with lines of withdrawal, and stopping places sketched in. This Heath had already done, the plan he issued provisionally immediately, probably at the conference itself. Another 24 hours, and he was to issue a firmer proposal, perhaps in the afternoon of 26 January, much as 2/18 was going in. And if Bennett's Westforce Operation Instruction no. 4 is anything to go on—and it is the only surviving text quoting directly from Heath's final scheme—then on the night of 27–28 January Eastforce is placed much further south than on the 25 January plan: 30 miles south of the Crossroads at Ulu Sedili. Admittedly, Percival was not to approve this plan of Heath's until the morning of 27 January, 'when the full significance of the opening of the west coast road to the enemy was apparent'. And when Heath's scheme reached Taylor is not clear either: the Brigade Diary sets the orders sent to Varley at 0930 hours; the formal order to Brigade to withdraw behind the Crossroads at 1100 hours, a time when Brigadier Fawcett, Heath's GSO1, is known to have been at Brigade. If this is true, and if it is true too that the orders countermanding Varley's orders to his own men arrived about 0800 hours, then Taylor, when he sent the orders to pull back, was still working with Heath's 25 January instructions. Indeed, the orders sent forward to Varley—at least as the Brigade Diarist remembered them—are quite specifically those 'as per order of 25 January', orders which had Eastforce holding the Crossroads, the eastern end of the Jemaluang–Kluang–Ayer Hitam–Batu Pahat Road, the northern end of the road down to Johore Bahru.

The Battalion was preparing to move then, even as Don Company were coming out of Nithsdale. First 16 Platoon, a group one can trace right down to the Crossroads: from the time O'Brien saw them in the new light, fifteen or twenty men, walking slowly, rather dispiritedly; past A Company, where Steve O'Brien remembers them:

I said 'Keep on going, there's a big truck behind us'.

Past Water Works Road and Jim Orr's section; past Alex Priest:

I remember one bloke, still carrying his bren—he had the butt shot off you know. I asked 'Where's Max?', and he—Simmons—just ... pointed back, so I knew ...

Past C Company,

We just gave them three cheers as they came back. But they didn't seem to ... seemed to be dejected: not really marching ... in twos and threes.

And behind these men, a single figure, rifle over his shoulder, like a boy coming home from school. One snatch of conversation as he passes Orr:

'Where are you going?'
'There's nobody up there boys: I ran out of ammo, that's why I come back—a bloody mess up there.'

And another, sharply remembered, when he reached the Crossroads. Athol Balston, standing outside the RAP tent, looking up the road:

'Come out of there Harry Harris, and look who's coming down the road; and it's not bloody Japs either.'
The brother.
'I said, "What happened to you?" [The tone years later still familial: anxious, indignant, relieved.]
'I didn't know you'd gone—you blighters wasn't there.'

A little later, some of 18 Platoon; then more men either alone or in twos and threes, anonymous figures now straggling down through the morning: mostly wounded—Harry Blackford remembers; remembers going out for one man, *but someone came from the other side of the road and picked him up.* And later, about 1630 hours a larger group, and since there had been Japanese appearing all day, he ordered the battalion mortars some way behind him to open fire: closer in, he challenged, *'Who are you?'*. The answer, terse, unambigious, *'We are AIF'*. And a few days later down at Kota Tinggi, *I remember this voice demanding to know who was the bloke who set the mortars on us: I went on shaving right in the ditch. I never said a word.*

Others took a more circuitous route. Some moved down the road: like Wright who reached the Straits about 1 February, his

narrative one in which one can trace the retreat: Vern Schwenke's valise in one house, looted probably from the store at Jemaluang, trucks on the road, blood on the seats still. Others trudged down the coast, like some of 17 Platoon; like Claude Draper, who came across some Englishmen, so the story goes, down near the Straits, who wanted to take his rifle, *but he'd not carried that for years just to be disarmed by his own crowd;* like Benny Little, who came to to find the Japanese bayoneting the wounded, shammed dead, reached the coast, and came into Changi well after the surrender; like Merv Alchin, escaping, the only one of the six with the strength to break free, probably on 25 January, and heading for the coast: *here's go now for Singapore.*

From this point paths cross: lives—and stories—edge into one another, into a close and intricate pattern.[25] Alchin runs into survivors of HMS *Thanet.* So does Harry Lockwood, who is to pick up Dicky Birdsall, also shot down at Endau; further down the coast Lockwood is to find a one-man tent on a sand dune, a camp bed and a box; the tent has a Sydney tent maker's name on it, and the small alarm clock on the box is still ticking. And moving south, Alchin, Lockwood, others, are to recognise other signs as well: signs which stand as ideographs almost for other stories again, other lives. For Lockwood, it is the plane, nose in the sand, south of the mouth of the Sungei Endau: he recognises Andy Fleming as the airman flung on to the beach, knows the two other members of the crew dead in the fuselage. Graeme McCabe, a few miles south of Endau with his Malay captors, turned in for $25—no small sum with rice at eight cents a kati and 48 cents for a kati of pork—notices 'numerous' graves where he was told the Chinese had buried Australian soldiers; perhaps Jim Wasley; perhaps the 2/18 men killed on Endau jetty. A little further and he passes under the wing of a Vildebeeste jammed into a cutting on the Endau Road, is to see the body of the gunner, Jock Grant, lying on the bank. Further south still, near the Mersing Bridge, he notes the tail of a Hurricane, a Buffalo on the beach, and a Blenheim and an open grave. And near Jemaluang, along the side of the road heaps of clothes, tin hats, bones. Charlie MacDonald had seen Grant on the side of the road the day the Vildebeeste came down, had seen his body beside the plane next day. In April, when Frank Gaven went up, the plane was still there, but Grant's body had gone. But that open grave near the bridge—a pit Gaven calls it—this was much as McCabe had remembered: close to a dozen bodies, hands tied with wire in the Japanese way. From a

particular ring and a pair of flying boots, McCabe had recognised two men from 100 Squadron, the pilot and the observer from Dicky Birdsell's Vildebeeste; from the tin hats and puttees he assumed soldiers as well. And if it's true that Jock Forbes, MacDonald's pilot, was executed at Mersing, then he may be there too—MacDonald had last seen him near the plane late in the afternoon of 26 January, surrounded by Japanese. And if this is the same grave as MacDonald was taken to see on 30 January, then it held Chinese and British too. Impossible at this distance to determine who the Chinese, who the British might be; the others are almost certainly from Cope's party, executed, as Cope himself had foreseen, after Alchin's escape: Alan Oag, Len Wilder and Tom Verdon from 2/19, Ken Donaldson from 2/20; Cope himself. Alchin himself was to reach Singapore about 4 February: a few days resting in a hut, he and the two sailors from *Thanet*; a few more days in an outpost with Malay troops who had no idea either of the way things were going; finally, into Singapore on a boatload of poultry.

Reduced like that to a few lines, Alchin's experience fits easily into what had been for weeks now almost the standard Malayan story. On one level, this kind of narrative with its spare—almost linear—plot is the very stuff of fiction; on another, it has a meaning far beyond the mere sequence of events. Alchin, for instance, was to be caught again in the general surrender, to work on the Railway with D Force, to be shipped from there to Omuta. No way of evading what that means—his own phrase for it, *a hard brand in the brain*. But without taking anything from the full force of that statement, there is still no need to hear it as the last word either. In almost all the writing which comes of the POW milieu, in the most passionate, the most immediate, the writer is speaking to and out of a different order of apprehension, an order which both includes and goes beyond so single a judgment. In Ray Parkin's description of a burial party at Hintok, for instance: the six men stumbling along a greasy path through towering bamboos, the body on a bamboo stretcher twisting with each lurch of the bearers, in the distance the final notes of the 'Last Post', sounding as though played under water; in a few sentences from Rick Haynes on Tamajoh—a forest of burial mounds and the one cross with Rodriguez burned into it—and Digger Moore, out of his mind with cerebral malaria, like Haynes himself, like almost everyone else, wavering down the hut, falling and rising, and staggering on, 'Eat your rice, you bastards ... eat your rice': at the heart of passages like these

is a refusal to be what their captors were insisting on: objects in their own world. And even when the narrative goes beyond this, as these clearly do, then that note at least an outsider can catch. And it is precisely the same as one hears when an 'escape story' is being told: an assertion of will, an affirmation, a choice perhaps where choice is still valid. And it is this moral quality, the more powerful for being unstated, implicit, which gives so many of these narratives their energy and force. To reduce such stories to flat statements, the kind that can be summarised or extracted, is somehow to miss the point. It is not only the 'plain sense' of what is said that matters, but—here especially—the details, the nuances that point beyond 'plot' and 'character' to the wider context, the time and place out of which the narratives spring. Years later that is precisely what the Malayan memorial is to speak to. An unemphatic memorial: just three figures: one wounded, a second supporting him; behind them, face to the enemy, a third—armed and ready—protects their passage.

9

'They're all around us'

I

By midday on 27 January 2/18 were already pulling back, 2/20 were to withdraw through them by midnight.[1] Not enthusiastically: that night, *a night so dark you couldn't see your hand in front of you*, Frank Gaven goes down onto the road to check the platoon coming through. Very quiet: *you could hear the jungle breathing*, one man remembers.

> *And then all of a sudden, down the road came this noise, like a disabled tank: and the language ... that put an identity on it straight away—fellows groaning and swearing, and hauling along down the middle of the road an old bullock cart, with machineguns loaded on it. I said, 'What the hell are you doing?'* [The orders had been to destroy the guns and get out.] *'We're not going to leave this behind.'*

Still, not even the journalists were talking about stopping the enemy now: 'the troops are fighting doggedly against superior numbers', but they could only 'delay' the enemy now, not bring him to a halt. And on 27 January too, as 22nd Brigade pulled back beyond the Crossroads, Percival was to ask Wavell's advice on the time and method of the final withdrawal across the Straits. From the Diaries, particularly from Taylor's units, one gets the impression of something totally ordered, the effect of so many times and places, precisely noted: 67-mile peg Harbour to Ulu Sedili, Ulu Sedili to reserve position at 29-mile peg. But it was an anxious time nonetheless, for Don Company of course—*I was spewing my heart out, and so were a lot of the other blokes too: I wasn't the only one ...* and for others too, a point made in one of Steve O'Brien's stories.

Jack McLennan's section is in position, in the cover of the jungle on both sides of the road, waiting:

> *McLennan signalled—went forward with a machinegun, out came the binoculars: three men to the left of the road, three to the right, two or three to the rear, rifles slung over their shoulders, moving in military fashion.* [-[Jimmy Orr.] *There were two coves from the mortar detachment alongside of us, one cove had the bomb ready to drop in. 'Hold it,' we said, 'Nobody move, don't say a word, they're trigger happy.' And they came up and past us without knowing we were there.*

By 28 January, 2/18 had moved further south again, 2/20 passing through them that night for Johore Bahru: the battalions are leapfrogging now, almost routinely, with the engineers behind them blowing bridges and culverts. Indeed, by the end of the day, 2/17 Dogras in the Mawai–Kota Tinggi Road junction area are the forward troops, with one of their companies still watching the mouth of the Sedili. But if all one needs at this point to work out how the units move are the official records, these nonetheless say very little about what has to be the urgent question now: what the Force commander expected of the Japanese around the Crossroads.

On 28 January, Taylor was ordered to Johore Bahru to take command of the outer bridgehead, Varley to take over Eastforce. Until his battalion moved through that evening, Varley had three companies of 2/18 positioned in depth along the Kota Tinggi Road, much as they'd been the day before; but A Company he deployed now at Lombong at the end of a side road running to the west. Admittedly this may be his response to the situation to his west where at Ayer Bemban 2/30, 2/26 and 2/Gordons were finding the enemy trying to move around their eastern flank. But the country between Ayer Bemban and Kota Tinggi is very broken, a defence in itself. And it would seem more likely that Varley was thinking of Koba's men to his north.

To begin with, no doubt at all that the day before—even before the second artillery shoot—the Japanese had been pulling back: *the Japs pissed off, back to Mersing, out of the way.* O'Brien himself, when he went up the road to watch for Don Company, remembers seeing up that straight stretch one figure running from left to right, then another, then another again. And Charlie Wagner, even in conversation with a Japanese historian, was more emphatic still—*they turned and ran*, he is remembered as saying: *'and they did*

run, because I saw them'. But if at that point Koba withdrew, how quickly his troops followed up is another matter again: Harry Blackford was to set his mortars more than once on enemy groups that he'd seen on and off, he argues, through the day; and if 2/10 Field Regiment is right, then one of its guns—left to cover the withdrawal of 2/20—was 'firing at irregular intervals' between 1630 hours and 2230 hours. This may have been simply to cover the withdrawal of 60 Battery and so the Battery records imply; but once at least it may have been on real targets. Late that afternoon a section from 18 Platoon Don Company 2/20, placed slightly west of the Crossroads along the Kluang Road, sighted a patrol in some fairly clear ground across the road. One Japanese was killed by rifle fire; a little more than an hour later, what looked like a section of the enemy was seen moving through the trees; and this, forming into an exended line, tried to charge through the rubber, going to ground in a ditch the width of the road away. Harry Woods, 18 Platoon OC, managed to get a message back to Company HQ; from Company word got to the gunners. Whether this is the only time the guns fired that day is not clear; but the artillery sent perhaps half a dozen rounds on to this patrol, the guns pulling over on to the side of the road as they were moving back, Harry Woods was told later. And if those Japanese were not seen again, not after that round of gunfire, early that evening before the platoon pulled out, the enemy could be heard in the country further west, 'Don't shoot Aussie soldier'. And a detachment of engineers working on a bridge just west of the Crossroads was also under fire that morning 'from enemy advance to the north'. Nothing in any Japanese source throws much light on this; if there's no mention of any retreat, equally there's none of any forward movement on 27 January either. Certainly on 28 January enemy officers that Harry Lockwood had run into on his way south were well settled into the Mersing Rest House: Tokyo radio had claimed Mersing as well as Kluang the day before. And the same day their planes were, so 2/18 Don Company survivors had reported, still bombing Jemaluang, as if assuming the AIF was still there.

Still, according to one Japanese source Koba Force had captured Jemaluang at 0700 on 28 January, joining hands two hours later with advance troops from the 'Eastern Advance Force of the Central Group' from Yong Peng at a point 'six kms north of Jemaluang'. On one hand, Colonel Tsuji was to write that 25th Army was to cooperate with Koba by moving the Saeki regiment north from Kluang to draw off some of the enemy troops from

Mersing. But that, as he argues it, precedes the Nithsdale action; so much so that it raises questions about the Japanese troops around Bukit Sawah on 26 January, even about those whom 2/20 had engaged over the Mersing River the day before. Neither of these texts nor any other supports the argument that Koba was so 'mauled' that the Saeki detachment was sent as a reinforcement; and in other places Tsuji himself hardly supports such a reading either. After all, he also writes that when General Mutaguchi arrived at Kluang on 28 January both the Koba regiment and the Takumi regiment were there. Even so, on that argument none of Koba's troops could have come south down the Kota Tinggi Road at all, advancing to Johore Bahru rather through the trunk road with the main body of Yamashita's troops. This may be true of some of 55th Regiment of course. But there were undoubtedly some parties of Japanese on the road, as Arthur Wright was to find; even between 60 Battery wagon lines north of the Kota Tinggi Bridge—so an Indian Don R reported—as early as 1045 hours on 28 January.

On the whole though, if the movement back was comparatively orderly to the east, to the west it proved much less straightforward: complicated first by what happened to Challen, complicated further still by 9th Indian Division. On the coast Challen had begun to pull back from Batu Pahat about 2030 hours on 25 January, almost as soon as Percival's instructions reached him.[2] As he moved south, Brigadier Duke's 53rd Brigade was to move north from Rengit, reaching Senggarang by dawn next morning: both of them, Percival hoped, to cut their way down the coast. At Senggarang, however, Challen found the road blocked beyond the bridge, the village under fire all night, enemy planes in the air next morning. The 2/Cambridgeshires sent in on a very narrow front failed to dislodge the enemy, even with the artillery firing over open sights; and from the single carrier that got through from Rengit, Challen learned that the road was blocked further south. Since he could not, in Percival's phrase, 'brush aside opposition', he decided, before the Japanese—as at Bakri—attacked both to front and rear, to destroy the transport and the guns, leave the wounded with volunteers, and make for Benut through the coastal belt. And a few hours later Brigadier Duke at Rengit was to make the same decision, ordering his men to make for the coast on foot. One of Challen's contingents managed to reach Benut on 27–28 January. But the second, striking southwest through mangroves and jungle, had to lie up near Ponggor that night: one man writes of Challen

himself sitting by the side of the road, 'silent, staring at his feet', and a little distance away the sound of traffic, the high nasal whine of the Japanese motor bike as the Guards moved through. British and Japanese both pressing south: and with the Japanese small groups of prisoners, forced to push the guns; and around them as always, untidy groups of men trying to find a way out—men like Sergeant Major Rudling of 6/Norfolks, who led a party which included two Australians, Australians who'd already survived machinegunning—one to be swept away in a river a little later; of the other no word at all, no name, no unit, no end to the story.

But if this decision of Challen gave his own men a chance, it also opened the whole of the west coast road to the Japanese. And the threat to Westforce became the more real; open as it was now not only to an outflanking movement from the coast, but also to an attack at strategic points like milestone 22 on the Pontian Kechil–Skudai Road: the reason that on 27 January Bennett was to order 2/29 and 2/19 to be prepared to occupy a position on that road at short notice. Much of this, of course, Percival could not know immediately—though he might guess it—since Challen's wireless was out for all of 26 January: nothing definite, whatever the Malayan Volunteer Air Force Tiger Moth might tell him, until the dark of 27 January when the Brigade Major managed to reach Pontian Kechil. For Challen's men, Malaya Command could organise evacuation: HMS *Dragonfly* and HMS *Scorpion* went in over the next three nights, to bring out as many as 2000 men. But the problem on the trunk road proved more intractable; a problem serious enough for Percival, at a conference on 28 January, to advance the time for crossing the Straits one day, from 31 January–1 February to 30–31 January. And mapping the movement of these units in the centre—down the trunk road, down the rail line—proves an intricate business, a matter of continual small adjustments, small fudging movements: movements showing how hard it is to move brigades down the railway say, when all guns and 'wheels' have to be abandoned, everything carried; when patrols report more tracks and link roads than any of the maps show, in an area that the Japanese are familiar with. And it is that, primarily, which makes sense of what happens with both 8th Indian Brigade and 22nd Indian Brigade: their units continually in contact with the enemy, continually engaged. At one point, 8th Brigade goes too far forward, losing contact with 22nd Brigade; and Painter, unable to find a way though, tried a flanking movement over the country to the west of the line. That meant more men struggling through ravines

and creeks in country they were not at home in, first in battalion groups, then smaller parties: lost. And more to the point perhaps, however difficult the country between the railway and the road, the Japanese seemed able to move through it quickly enough to come in on the east flank of 27th Brigade.[3]

In a way, there's little to do at this point but mark the stages: Namazie, Ayer Bemban, Kulai: attacks that were persistent, and tenaciously pressed home, as though to force the troops off the road or to cut the road completely behind them. At Namazie for instance, where 2/26 as the forward unit halted an attack coming through the jungle, the enemy simply tried to work through the rubber and come in on the right of 2/30, deployed perhaps a mile back protecting the right flank, as though to drive a wedge between the units, much as he had done with 2/19 and 2/29 at Bakri. And Lieutenant Colonel Galleghan himself, with an eye to the Defile a little to his west, was concerned, so his unit history says, that he might also use the terrain to push the Australian units off the road. The Japanese had come on here, it's clear, without any concern at all for the human cost; as they would again the next day at Ayer Benbam, the day after that again at Kulai.

On the road then, Westforce was continually engaged, so closely that 2/26 found it hard to break off. And these few days were remembered as a:

> sickening succession of clashes and withdrawals, of nights without sleep, mealtimes without meals, the monotony of hearing that those everlasting enemy patrols had broken through the line somewhere else and were behind us, and the cry of 'they're all around us' which became a grim sort of joke.

To the east, along the Kota Tinggi Road all that last week, civilians had been going south—men, even women in their best silks, stumbling down in front of the Japanese, as a Eurasian priest saw them, bringing reports 'of the gallant fight put up by the Australians at Mersing'. And now others were moving north, into hiding in camps and remote estates. In some of the villages—perhaps all, at Tebrau and at the 11th milestone certainly—the godowns were thrown open: a PWD engineer writes of the tins of sugar piled ten feet high, men and women scrambling up the smooth stacks, young and old pulling bags of rice along the floor. And at Tebrau, Father Ashness records the manager still in his office, busy with papers, bewildered and shaken; in the store the

bags of rice ripped open, the air heavy with rice dust. On 26 January, Johore Bahru had been bombed for the first time; the European women ordered to leave. On 28 January, the planes were over the town twice, the next day once again. John Cross, waiting to go into the jungle with a left-behind party, was watching the files of troops plodding south: orderly, tired-looking and very quiet; and behind them the demolition squads, now the Eastforce rearguard. And as Cross was to hear, as the troops moved back, so the Japanese sent out collaborators from Kota Tinggi who reported the road clear; at Ulu Tiram—about ten miles from Johore Bahru—Japanese flags were out when their troops arrived.

On 30 January Wavell arrived; to find Bennett 'edgy and abrupt', Heath 'white and tired': the day, perhaps, when Percival had refused him permission to leave the Island.[4] And for so critical an operation, the arrangements for crossing the Causeway were, so Bennett's HQ was to argue, less than exact. Still, at the fall of dark, the troops began moving over, Westforce, 11th Division, the troops of the inner bridgehead, the troops of the outer: by daylight it was done. And in the afternoon of 31 January Father Ashness was to watch the enemy coming into Johore Bahru, shirts and shorts and tennis shoes; on bikes; guns slung over their shoulders. Eight hours before, the last of the Allied troops had left the mainland.

10

Epilogue

Formally this crossing brought the Malayan campaign to an end: when the AIF went into action again in the second week of February on Singapore itself, it was at a different pace, a different intensity. That week, as I have argued, is a matter for another place, a place where I can more properly explore the unsupported certainties that determine the traditional narrative, to examine how the story comes to take the shape it does. Enough at this moment to say that by the end of that week Bobby Morgan was dead, killed on the northwest corner of the Island on 9 February; Tom Vincent the same morning; Dal Wilson was dead, too, killed in X Battalion; and Harry Orme, perhaps in the shelling of the Cathay Building. And that section of Noel Willoughby's, ten men photographed a long nine months before: Willoughby himself dead at Nithsdale; Jack Williamson wounded on the day of the landing, his brother Billy Williamson killed; Sandy Croxson and Tom Highton dead that day too; Jack Fenner and Pat Connell the day after; one of the group was to reach Sumatra, George Fenner Ceylon; Merv Mullens, sent out on the *Wah Sui*, was to remember George Fenner—'sunburnt, covered in sores, weak and starving'—visiting him in hospital there. From that whole section only Lyall Montgomery stood with what remained of the AIF in the final perimeter at Holland Road.

At this point the POW story conventionally takes over, as all Percival's command passed into the hands of the enemy, to be scattered to all corners of the Co-Prosperity Sphere. And by the time Japan finally surrendered more Australians had died, nearly 8000 more: George Jarrett of cholera at Shimo Songkurai on 28 May 1943; Tommy Gore the same day; Charlie Wagner in action with guerillas in the Philippines on 21 December; Lyall Montgomery in Changi on 12 January 1944, utterly worn out; Bombardier Jukes

around Sandakan on 23 July, a bare month before the end of the war; Varley himself in the sinking of the *Rakuyo Maru*—an English gunner was to remember him in Singapore, just before he sailed: 'a lonely rather majestic figure, still with his faded red tabs and an air of battered dignity.'[1] Through those names and thousands like them, some part of the years of captivity is spelled out; to write about the Division means explaining those deaths, even as the valley of the Kwai turns into one vast theme park: a recent report mentions a *son et lumiere* of the bombing of the bridge at Tamarkan, another a Thai millionaire's notion of recreating a prisoner of war camp on his estate.[2] Given that kind of evasion, that kind of denial, it is no longer enough simply to record the roll of the dead. Nor to bring together the stories that the living tell. That in the end is to hold the experience to the level of the anecdotal; to act as though history were no more than a set of stories, of transecting biographies. Rather, one has to ask now what sort of history is it that anecdotes construct; and what kind of wider synthesis they might more usefully form a part of.

And that—finally—raises the question of those who were never POWs, who evaded capture precisely as they evaded surrender. Not, it would seem initially, that there is much to be said.[3] After all, out of the hundreds of men moving through the jungle in January and February, just three Australians came out in August 1945: three Australians and six others, two British soldiers, one Gurka officer, three Gurka riflemen. But behind them, through the accounts of these survivors, of the left-behind parties who had gone in deliberately, one can make out the shadows of those who failed to make it. And even piecing this together is to sense—though only in part—what it might have been like for those in jungle camps. For one thing, it meant moving all the time—John Cross for instance, who'd gone into the jungle in January 1942 was in April 1944 living in his 19th camp. It meant being pushed along by hunger, disease, Japanese; with sometimes as many as 200 in one camp, Europeans and Chinese, sometimes as few as twelve. At one place early in 1942 one finds perhaps 30 Australians, mostly 2/29 (including at one point Sergeant Croft), and that group fragmenting left some 21 men camping in a clearing until they died, so weak in the end that they were having to scrape shallow graves before men died, unable to dig them quickly enough after. Others passed through, like Don Robertson 2/19 who, with four others, had got off Singapore in March, or John McGregor and Pen Dean, or Jock McLaren's group: all men the Japanese were to catch again. And

occasionally one heard of others: sometime in July 1942 for instance, Arthur Shephard, cut off in the 2/29 withdrawal from Bakri, was to hear that the battalion's Ron Moorfoot had died of fever in a jungle camp north of Lengga; a year later he was even to get the occasional letter; once he was to come upon the photo of two men he knew, men standing naked in a courtyard, armed Japanese nearby: Mickey Sharpe from the 2/29 Signal Platoon and Corporal Launder from C Company. More often, though, the groups were anonymous: just the 'three English soldiers' and 'six Australians' that Shephard remembers near Batu Pahat; or the 'Australians' around Yong Peng that the party sent to Mersing on 18 April to lift the mines heard of, dying of disease, without food and clothing: rumours convincing enough for the Japanese to send Lieutenant Dobbie over with three other men on 4 July to persuade such men to give themselves up. And there were, it would seem, Australians there; perhaps one of the groups that passed through the country around Yong Peng; perhaps other men who've left no other trace, like the Australians released in a guerilla raid on the police station at Kuala Piloh sometime in the middle of February. An old Chinese man offered to take Lieutenant Dobbie in, then refused when he noticed the armbands the party was forced to wear. These men, one has to assume, died later, the place of their passing marked for a time by patches of intenser green. Or the Japanese, catching them again, simply killed them; as they did those that Graeme McCabe heard about at Endau; as they once at least acknowledged themselves, posting a notice in the Great World sometime before the end of June 1942 about sixteen Australians caught in Johore, forced to dig their own graves before being shot.

How many Australians died in the jungle there is no way of knowing. And one cannot even guess at the desolation of spirit: of Edward Nippard for instance, twenty years old and a lifetime from Dandenong, on that last day in October 1943 when his elder brother died, only four days before he was to die himself. If Rod McCure is open about his loneliness—to the point of tears, he says—still the very brevity of his statement suggests a world of grief. And yet, without denying this very concrete, actual suffering, it is possible that the real significance of what such men went through may transcend, may lie outside the historical experience. To begin with, even in that early December when British troops began to pull back in the north of Malaya, there were rumours of troops in the jungle: 'thousands of British and Australian soldiers hiding in the forested hills'. And if these rumours persisted, it was as the

very sign of hope: early in 1943, in Perak, in Selangor, in Pahang, Spencer Chapman was to hear of the large number of men, 'from a thousand downward ... usually Australians', living with the guerillas in the jungle near Titi, about 50 miles northwest of Gemas. In the end, of course, he was to find not a thousand AIF but three Gurkhas and a single 2/Argyll, Andy Young (who died in 1944); but the very rumour supported the will to resistance. For Jim Wright 6/Norfolks who, like Shephard, like Ron McCure, had spent three and a half years behind Japanese lines, an old Chinese summed it up twenty-odd years later: 'You fought for the good which we enjoy.'

For the living there are no real endings of course; any more than there are real beginnings either: just places to start from. Often one glimpses in those one knows, even in their most characteristic gestures, men one does not recognise, does not know; clearly enough to sense something of a profound dislocation, not of time and place but of the self: in the silence stretching around them, that war goes on:

> *I can't forget even if I wanted to. I dream it, sleep it, do everything else ... I used to get sick in the stomach every Anzac Day. I finish breaking up, every time ...*

But even if there are no real endings, here at least is a place to stop.

Notes

Introduction

1 For a bibliography of writing on this campaign: Corfield, J., *A Bibliography of Literature relating to the Malayan Campaign, and the Japanese period in Malaya, Singapore and Northern Borneo*, The University of Hull, Centre for South Eastern Asian Studies, Bibliography, Literature no. 5, 1988.

2 An account published just the next year: Weller, *Singapore is Silent*, p. 251; cf. Morrison, *Malayan Postscript*, pp. 119–125G.

Chapter 1

References are by short title only, except when this is the only entry; full references are in the Select Bibliography.

If the day and the month only are given, then the year is 1942.

1 **For the arrival:** *ST*, 19 February 1941, 20 February 1941; Gordon Bennett and Murray-Lyon *ST*, 22 February, photos *ST*, 26 February, and passim 8 March 1941 to 13 March 1941, cf. Newton, *The Grim Glory*, pp. 54–55; Uhr, letter 25.2.1941; *SMH*, 8 March 1941, 9 March 1941, 11 March 1941, 21 March 1941.

2 ***All that line of Pommies*:** Richard Haynes.

3 **2/3 Ordnance company:** Bill Ross.

4 ***We could see it*:** Richard Haynes; for a Japanese comment on 'these sons of convicts', Tokyo radio as quoted in *ST*, 15 March 1941, cf. the comment in *SMH*, 21 March 1941.

5 **For the Base:** W. David McIntyre, *The Rise and Fall of the Singapore Naval Base*, Macmillan, 1979; James Neidpath, *The Singapore Naval Base and the Defence of Britain's Eastern Empire 1919–1941*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1981, esp. on British strategy in the Far East, pp. 158–70, and the reinforcement of Malaya, pp. 171–210; for the guns, pp. 223–25, though even contemporaries argued that they were fixed out to sea: Morrison, *Malayan Postscript*, p. 150; Field, *Singapore Tragedy*, p. 243; more generally, J.R.M. Butler, *Grand Strategy* vol. III, OHMS, 1957, pp. 487–507; Kirby, *The War Against Japan*, pp. 1–67 passim; Percival, *War*, pp. 67ff.

6 **'Impenetrable' jungle:** e.g. *SMH*, 8 March 1941 'the jungle presents an obstacle that is all but impenetrable to any but Indian troops'; *Newsweek*, 8 September 1941; Carl Mydans, *More than Meets the Eye*, Harper, NY, 1959, p. 59; Brown,

Suez to Singapore, p. 167, 26 August 1941 quoting Maj. General Barstow 9th Indian Division at Kota Bahru, 'If any enemy made a landing on the east coast ... they couldn't penetrate inland to any depth because of the impenetrable jungle. They would have to work their way down the coast'; for the IJA moving down the west coast, no-one apart from C.A. Vlieland, seems to have considered this, see his 7 July 1940 appreciation in Allen, *Singapore 1941–1942*, pp. 288ff; nothing in Percival, *War*, cf. Bennett, *Why Singapore Fell*, p. 44: 'it was considered improbable that the Japanese would try to fight their way along these 66 miles as the opportunities for ambushes and delaying tactics were numerous'; though Kirby, *Singapore*, p. 106, considers 'there was now [August 1941] no doubt that Japan's next step ... would be to invade northern Malaya ... with the intention of advancing on Singapore down the west coast of Malaya'.

7 **For the AIF on the east coast**: 'Appreciation of task of the Mersing Bde', War Diary 22nd Bde August 1941. And for the battalion deployments, the Unit War Diaries, with some further detail in the Unit Histories esp. 2/19, 2/20, 2/30, 2/26; for Force Y, Operation Order no. 1, War Diary 2/29 Bn 30 November 1941; contemporary reports: 'Australian role in Malaya', *SMH*, 27 August 1941, 'new defence section', 30 August 1941; O'Brien, 'Interview'; Harry Woods, MS; Colonel Koba as in Tsuji, *The Japanese Version*, pp. 206–7. For the mapping, Newton, *The Grim Glory*, p. 128; Hodel, *The Battalion Story*, pp. 43ff, with the huts at 63; and cf. Bennett quoted in *SMH*, 28 September 1941.

8 **Intelligence summary from 20 Bty, 2/10 Fd Regt**: in 'Intelligence reports from units of 22nd bde'—November, War Diary 22nd Bde, 2/19 Bn.

9 **'Shock troops' trained for a 'jungle campaign'**: *SMH*, 27 August 1941; 'experts in jungle warfare', *Australasian*, 6 September 1941; for the Argylls as jungle trained, some suggestions in Rose, *Who Dies Fighting*, p. 11; a 2/Argyll reference to the march down from Mersing in Gibson, *Highland Laddie*, p. 65; I.M. Stewart, *History*, pp. 1–7, with his comment on the march on p. 4, 'really of no outstanding merit'; the phrase here from his 'The Loss of Singapore—a criticism', *Army Quarterly* LVI, 1948, p. 197; and cf. Brooke-Popham's comment that Stewart had 'trained his battalion to a very high pitch for attacking in the type of country one gets near the coast', citation in Allen, *Singapore 1941–1942*, p. 53; other contemporary references in Morrison, *Malayan Postscript*, p. 99; Weller, *Singapore is Silent*, p. 236, and through them into K. Caffery, *Out in the Midday Sun*, p. 85; for AIF training: Bennett, *How Singapore Fell*, pp. 12–18; Newton, *The Grim Glory*, pp. 69ff and passim, the Jelebu patrol, ibid., p. 98; Brigadier Taylor's comments, *Diary*, 24 November 1941; the AIF with the Sakai, *SMH*, 11 July 1941; *Pix*, 20 September 1941.

10 **The Kluang exercise**: *ST*, 27 October 1941, with photograph; Penfold, *Gallegban's Greyhounds*, pp. 49ff; TEWTS 27 October 1941 for 22nd Bde, War Diary 22nd Bde 28 October 1941; exercise proposing a Japanese invasion from Thailand, War Diary 2/29 27th Bde 13 November 1941; the TEWTS on 16 or 18 November is probably the 'very comprehensive TEWTS' that *The Grim Glory* mentions at p. 137 which all six battalions spent a week on, described by Capt. Curlewis in P. Poole (ed.), *Of Love and War*, Lansdowne, Sydney, 1982, p. 83: 'an imaginary war of landings on the coast'; Zeigler, *Men May Smoke*, p. 22 mentions a [22nd] Brigade tactical exercise on 24 and 25 November 1941, though there is nothing in the War Diary of either Brigade to support this.

11 **'Tucked away in dugouts'**: Pte Cyril Harris 2/18, 'The Rabbits of —', *Gunnedah Independent*, 15 January.

12 **'We have had enough of travelling journalists':** Uhr, letter 13 August 1941; 'fascinating Malaya', *SMH*, 15 February 1941; Adele Shelton Smith, *AWW*, 5 April, 12 April, 19 April, 3 May, 24 May 1941, and cf. 8 March, 22 March 1941; for an outside view, see *Newsweek*, 20 August 1941; for a report on one district farewell, *Barraba Chronicle*, 16 January 1941; for the unit papers see particularly, 2/20 issue 2; 2/10 Fd Regt, 'Action Front'; for some of the letters home, *Glen Innes Examiner*, 5 July 1941, *Inverell Times*, 12 November, 21 November 1941, *Barraba Chronicle*, 19 June, 17 July, 27 November 1941, 29 January, *AWW*, 10 January, 27 January; memoirs, as for instance, Waterford, *Footprints*, p. 12; Shrimpton, *Soldiers in Bondage*, pp. 8ff.

13 **Figures from the A Company roll:** McLoughlin papers.

14 **The Australian journalist:** 'Andrea', cf. her account, based on her November article in the Sydney *Sun* in *Darlings I've had a Ball*, Ure Smith, Sydney, 1975, p. 175; the American journalist, Vincent Sheehan, *Between the Thunder and the Sun*, Random House, New York, 1943, pp. 363–64.

CHAPTER 2

1 **For *Time*:** *Time*, 24 November 1941.

2 **For contemporary opinion:** 'the Thai consul in Singapore', in Brown, *Suez to Singapore*, p. 255 (entry for 11 November 1941); the Magruder Mission: Stowe, *They Shall Not Sleep*, A.A. Knopf, New York, 1944, p. 57; 'the Chinese Foreign Minister' in Chungkai: Stowe, op. cit., p. 53 (for 17 November 1941); A. Eden and the JIC: R. Parkinson, *Blood Toil Tears and Sweat*, Hart-Davis MacGibbon, London, 1973, esp. p. 309, 'an attack on Russia'; Churchill and the War Cabinet: Parkinson, op. cit., pp. 303–7, 326; 'one of them wrote': Stowe, op. cit., p. 53.

3 **For Japanese troop movements:** from Japanese sources, Craven and Cate (eds), *The Army Air Forces in World War II* vol. 1, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1948, p. 201; in contemporary sources, e.g. *Time*, 14 November 1941; London *Times*, 5 December 1941; Clark Lee, *They Called it Pacific*, John Long, no date, p. 13; Tolischus, *Tokyo Record*, p. 203.

4 **General Murray-Lyon's remark:** as cited in Brown, *Suez to Singapore*, p. 170.

5 **Air Chief Marshal Brooke-Popham at a press conference 3 December 1941:** Brown, op. cit., pp. 277ff; cf. the account in Gallagher, *Retreat in the East*, pp. 84–85. For the rest I have followed Gillison, *Royal Australian Air Force 1939–1942*, pp. 195ff.

6 **'A poor chance of escaping complete ruin':** *ST*, 3 December 1941; cf. *Argus*, 28 November 1941, 5 December 1941; *Daily Telegraph*, 4 December 1941; *SMH*, 8 December 1941; *Melbourne Herald*, 8 December 1941; apart from Tom Fairhall whose byline is on the *Daily Telegraph* story and Douglas Wilkie for the *Melbourne Herald*, quoted from the *Sunday Times*, I have not been able to identify the correspondents; the tours are not mentioned in any of the 22nd Brigade War Diaries; but the following correspondents for Australian newspapers were in Singapore by 2 December: Ian Fitchett, Tom Fairhall, Douglas Wilkie, Colin Fraser, Ray Maley, Mel Nicols the offical cameraman for the Australian Department of Information.

7 **Captain Carter at Endau:** Wall, *Singapore and Beyond*, p. 32; *I remember him standing there stark naked*: David Hinder; *I can still see him*: Harry Woods.

8 **For 2–8 December 1941:** cf. Gillison, op. cit., pp. 197–204; the one observer: Brown in his cable to CBS for 7 December, op. cit., p. 286.

9 **For the landing at Kota Bahru:** from the Japanese side, a convenient summary in Allen, *Singapore*, pp. 116ff; Major General Takumi, as quoted in A. Swinson, 'Defeat in Malaya', *Purnell's History of the Second World War*, Campaign Book, No. 5, London, 1969, p. 50; *Japanese Land Operations*, pp. 24–25; Tsuji (himself with the Saeki detachment in Thailand at the time), *The Japanese Version*, pp. 93ff, Tsuji gives the IJA dead as 320, wounded 538, but Allen, op. cit., p. 119, gives: KIA 179, wounded 314; from the British side the most complete account is in Bhargava and Sastri, *Campaigns*, pp. 119ff; cf. Kirby, *War Against Japan*. The news that the Japanese were shelling the beaches reached Singapore about 0115 hours local time (according to Shenton Thomas's diary, as published in Brian Montgomery, *Shenton of Singapore*, Leo Cooper, 1984, p. 83); the communiqué issued at noon on 8 December gives the time of landing at 0130, 0215 in Tokyo time and consequently some Japanese accounts; for the RAAF attack: the 21 sorties flown by No. 1 Squadron at Kota Bahru, a chronological listing in Hall, *Glory in Chaos*, pp. 61ff; ibid. for sorties flown by the 12 Hudsons of No. 8 Squadron, pp. 87ff; and for the Vildebeestes of No. 36 Squadron and No. 100 Squadron, pp. 339ff. And cf. Douglas Gillison, op. cit., pp. 207ff, Shores and Gull, *Bloody Shambles* vol. 1, pp. 75ff esp. pp. 80ff; one man: Don Dowie cited in *Bloody Shambles*, p. 81, quoted without acknowledgment from *Adelaide Advertiser*, 2 July 1983; 'the story that was around Singapore': Brown, op. cit., p. 357.

10 **Description of the first raid on Singapore:** Mel Nicols, *SMH*, 18 December 1941; 'dare to twist the British lion's tail': Field, op. cit., p. 103; 'the woman woken by the noise': versions in Gallagher, op. cit., p. 79, Glover, *In Seventy Days*, p. 79; with slight variants, Ken Attiwill, *The Singapore Story*, Frederick Muller, 1959, p. 23, the immediate source since quoted verbatim (though not acknowledged) for Noel Barber, *A Sinister Twilight*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1968, p. 21 (whence into K. Caffrey, *Out in the Midday Sun*, Stein and Day, New York, 1973, p. 63) and R. Holmes and A. Kemp, *The Bitter End*, Anthony Bird, Chichester, 1982, p. 84; for comments from the official in the Radar Filter Room, Montgomery, *Shenton of Singapore*, p. 79; indirectly from Shenton Thomas himself, ibid., pp. 83–84.

11 **For the sailors** from HMAS *Vampire* and HMAS *Burnie*: Jones and Idriess, *The Silent Service*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1944, p. 210; from AIF in Singapore: *Gunnedah Independent*, 15 January, T.H. Hadden, *AWW*, 31 January; 'She's on': Sapper E.L. Fauntleroy, *AWW*, 31 January.

12 **For General Percival's published account of the first hours:** Percival, *War*, pp. 111ff, which follows his earlier *Despatch*; for the reconnaissance Beaufort: Shores and Gull, ibid., p. 89; ibid., p. 90 for a photoreconnaissance Buffalo, flying, its pilot remembered, with a map from a World Atlas, 'the RAF did not have a map of any area outside Malaya'; ibid., p. 46 for his description of the method of photographing, 'all taken by hand of course'; a statement from the (unnamed) pilot of the Buffalo, *Argus*, 13 December 1941, under the heading 'heroic defence of Kota Bahru'; the Thai consul: *ST*, 9 December 1941; on Yamashita's intention to make one further assault in the east: Tsuji, *Japanese Version*, p. 199; 'a correspondent was to write': H.A. Standish, *SMH*, 19 December 1941; 'considerable forces in the endeavour to obtain control of

North Malaya': comment on the first official communiqué, *ST*, 9 December 1941.

CHAPTER 3

1 **For the Operation Order no. 1:** the War Diaries, with unit positions detailed in their own copies, e.g. for the guns, copy 25 in War Diary 2/10 Fd Regt, December 1941; a convenient printing with 2/19 positions detailed: Newton, *The Grim Glory*, pp. 146ff.

2 **'Another attempted Japanese landing ... north of Kuantan':** *Argus*, 11 December 1941; 'as quiet as a wet Sunday morning': from HMS *Express*, Middlebrook, *Battleship*, pp. 155–56; 'not even a dog track': Hall, *Glory in Chaos*, p. 121. For the airforce at Kuantan, Air Vice Marshall P. Maltby, *Despatch* #203, #204; for the bombing of the airfield, beginning 9 December, Hall, op. cit., pp. 107ff; more generally, Bhargava and Sastri, *Campaigns*, p. 225, where the 'one source' of this text is given; Shores and Cull, op. cit., p. 100 (with an account of the evacuation of the field, cf. Hall, op. cit., pp. 107ff, esp. p. 115 for the findings of the Court of Inquiry). For the supposed landing, Captain Collins mentions the night of 9 December 1941, *As Luck Would Have It*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1965, p. 103: 'a Major on the telephone to the War Room described assault boats coming in'; Bhargava and Sastri, op. cit., p. 225 gives the time as 1900 hours; for comments from the Kuantan force, D. Russell Roberts with 5/11 Sikhs, *Spotlight on Singapore*, p. 35, with detail on the boats riddled with bullet holes, 'it seems probable that the Japs were probing our defences', and on the Japanese prisoners; more recently Eric Lomax with Royal Corps of Signals, *The Railway Man*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1995, p. 63, who notes that the guns of 5th Fd Regt fired over a thousand shells. 'An officer from 2/20': Frank Gaven; for Thyer, his comments in Newton, op. cit., p. 54, dated 16 December, but clearly for 10 December since they refer to the supposed landing at Kuantan.

3 **'Here we are':** *Daily Telegraph*, 10 December 1941; for further reports on the AIF in the first week, cf. *SMH*, 12 December 1941; *Melbourne Herald*, 12 December 1941; *Argus*, 13 December 1941.

4 **For 14 December 1941:** Bennett, *Why Singapore Fell*, p. 70; 2/30 Diarist: War Diary 2/30 14 December, which notes on 15 December that four boatloads of the enemy had landed north of Kuala Pahang at 0300 hours, for the unit moves in response: the War Diaries.

5 **Paratroop assault:** for some of the early rumours at Singapore: Diana Cooper, *Trumpets from the Steep*, Rupert Hart-Davis, London, 1960, p. 128; at Kroh on 8 December 1941: Harris, *'G' Strings and Bangkok Bowlers*, p. 33; on 9 December 1941 at northern dromes by IJA disguised as Chinese and Malays: War Diary 2/30, 10 December 1941, War Diary 2/30, more fully Penfold, *Gallaghan's Greyhounds*, p. 61, attack on Kluang expected next day; at Penang on 10 December 1941: Intelligence Summary 4; at Alor Star on 11 December 1941, M.K. Durrani, *The Sixth Column*, Cassell and Company, 1955, p. 10, cf. Newton, op. cit., p. 153 noting the report from Brigade at 2200 hours on 16 December 1941 that paratroops had landed near Nithsdale Estate; for the unit movements: the relevant unit War Diaries.

6 **'One Japanese source':** *Enemy Publication No. 278*, p. 78.

7 **Sister Cullen:** in *AWW*, 28 March.

8 **For the civilian evacuation,** from Mersing beginning ?11 December 1941, from Jemaluang ?12 December: the fullest account in Newton, op. cit., pp. 150ff; press reports: *Argus*, 13 December 1941, cf. *SMH*, 12 December 1941, *Argus*, 17 December 1941; the comment on the troops having to find the civilians: Penfold, op. cit., p. 64; on the evacuation and burning of Mawai: Magarry, *The Battalion Story*, p. 57. And for the 'one letter at least': Cpl D. Faircloth 2/19, in *AWW*, 31 January; *old Tub*: J. Orr.

9 **For the scrounging:** details from letters home: Pte H.E. Brown in *AWW*, 31 January; Sgt H. Mortimer, ibid.; Pte V. Boston, ibid.; J. Lloyd letter, 21 December 1941; Bray, 'Have another spoonful of rice': 'our Harbour looked like something out of a storybook, with chiming clocks hung on trees, also food-safes and tables 'neath the trees, and all this in the jungle.'

10 **'Some of the fellows':** A. Priest, *Scone Advertiser*, 13 January.

11 **'Here we fight; here we stay':** *Argus*, 18 December 1941.

12 **Details of moves**: Unit War Diaries, esp. 27th Bde for 8 December 1941; 2/29 for 8 December, 10 December, 11 December, 13 December, 15 December 1941. For the guns, Whitelocke, *Gunners in the Jungle*, mentions D Troop in the text, F Troop in the summary; in fact the former Don had become F Troop in the early December reorganisation: for this movement to Bukit Langkap, a characteristically brisk, and equally characteristically not very accurate account in Braddon, *The Naked Island*, pp. 53ff.

13 **Reinforcements to Endau:** not from 2/30 as is commmonly assumed (Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust*, pp. 153–54); but the argument is complex. The 2/30 did move, its Don Company went to Nithsdale Estate with a mortar detachment, Lieutenant Clarke 2/30 as LO with 22nd Bde and General Bennett clearly had that in mind when he reiterated that he wanted 2/30 as a mobile reserve—it was in fact the role laid down for them: Bennett, *Why Singapore Fell*, p. 67; cf. Lodge, *The Fall of General Gordon Bennett*, p. 71; but those reinforcements to 2/20 detachment at Endau (OC Capt Carter) stayed there, OC reinforcements: G.H. Blackwood.

14 **'Dumps of rice':** Athol Hill, letter; 'lights': J. Orr; wireless: G.H. Blackford; 'nothing turned up': Jack Mudie.

15 **'For the patrol everyone remembers':** details in War Diary 2/26, War Diary 2/18; other references in order, 'the 2/18 soldier': Pte George Siebert, letter *AWW*, 31 January; Sgt E. Sullivan: in Patricia Shaw, *Brother Digger*, Esplanade Books, 1989, p. 45; Bennett, op. cit., p. 93; Scott, *Fair Crack of the Whip*, pp. 95–7; for Ringer Edwards' own account: Magarry, op. cit., pp. 59–60. And for Edwards up the line, see R. Wilson in Connolly and Wilson, *Medical Soldiers*, p. 235; A.V. Chamberlain in Wall, *Singapore and After*, p. 175.

16 **For the Japanese:** 'young and dejected': Waterford, *Footprints*, p. 16; 'crying like a child', and below, 'crying and whingeing': Siebert, loc. cit.; the interpreter: James, *The Rise and Fall of the Japanese Empire*, p. 207; the 2/30 soldier: A.N. Rowe, *The Boys Write Home*, p. 105; from 2/18 milieu, Sgt W. Nugent, *Northern Daily Leader*, 24 January.

17 **'A man singing':** e.g. Sgt Eric Turner 2/10 AGH in Wall, op. cit., p. 191; Padre Foster Haig 18th Division, Connolly and Wilson, op. cit., pp. 237, 245, and in Magarry, op. cit., p. 244; Herb Smith in Parkin, *Into the Smother*, p. 210; Sgt Jim Anderson 105MT in Hall, *Railway of Death*, Armadale, 1981, p. 7, in Rohan Rivett, *Behind Bamboo*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1946, p. 99.

18 ***They bashed him all night*:** Bede Macfarland, remembering Billy Singer.

19 **'Three correspondents':** War Diary 2/18, 4 January, which names 'Ian Fitchett (Aust. Ministry of Information), Mr Mant of Reuters and a representative of the London *Times*'; Mant, *You'll Be Sorry*, p. 141 gives the third as Ronnie Matthews of the London *Daily Herald*. And for Ian Morrison's use of the story, see op. cit., p. 139.

20 **For *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*,** most conveniently in Middlebrook and Mahoney, op. cit.; a contemporary account from HMAS *Vampire*, not used by Middlebrook, in Jones and Idriess, *The Silent Service*, p. 210, a second in John Moyes, *Scrap Iron Flotilla*, Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1944, p. 188. For Colonel Moorhead and Krohcol, Bhargava and Sastri, *Campaigns*, pp. 153ff; 'one of the Australian drivers': Harris, *'G' Strings and Bangkok Bowlers*, pp. 32–34.

21 **'The former British Resident in Perak':** W.P. Hume, London *Times*, 24 December 1941, 'with Kuala Kangsar in their hands, the enemy can press on towards Ipoh, while at the same time passing troops down the Perak River on boats and rafts'.

22 **The phrase 'local patrol encounters'** from the communiqué of 10 December 1941; 'heavy and confused fighting ...' from that of 13 December 1941; for press comment on the first fortnight, see for instance, *Argus*, 16 December, 18 December, 22 December 1941, quoting 'Cassandra' from the *Daily Mirror*, *Times*, 20 December 1941; for these early criticisms of the official communiqués, *Melbourne Herald*, 19 December 1941, 'marked chiefly by brevity and lack of information', *Argus*, 22 December 1941, the 'one observer': Brown, *Suez to Singapore*, p. 347; for 'the men of affairs', cf. Alan Brooke, c. 15 December 1941, in A. Bryant, *The Turn of the Tide*, Collins, p. 285; 'I doubt whether Hong Kong will hold out a fortnight and Malaya a month'; cf. Harold Nicholson, Diary for 17 December 1941; and for civilian reaction generally, most usefully perhaps Glover, *In Seventy Days*, pp. 103ff. and throughout, Maxwell, *The Civil Defence of Malaya*, esp. pp. 73ff; 'every day in that first week seemed a month', Field, *Singapore Tragedy*, p. 112; and for the 'stories that break into such narratives': Japanese parachutists as Buddhist monks, Diana Cooper, op. cit., p. 128; for the German pilot killed by the Gurkas, Reid: *Malayan Climax*, p. 22; the Japanese coming down the Perak: Field, op. cit., p. 125 who attributes it to an American, Mrs James from Ipoh.

23 **Correspondents to the front:** Douglas Wilkie in *Melbourne Herald*, 13 December 1941; first despatch 'from the front': 16 December 1941; the party was back, if Cecil Brown is right, on 19 December 1941, cf. his comments in *Suez to Singapore*, p. 350; for an indication of the range of those later, exemplary, stories: the Argyll 'tin hat' story, at Kuala Dipang, Weller, *Singapore is Silent*, p. 235; in the Ipoh district, *Guardian*, 1 January, Glover, op. cit., p. 138; watching the railway approaches at Kota Bahru, seven miles west of the rest of the battalion: Stewart, *History*, p. 56; in southern Perak about 29 December 1941: *Argus*, 9 February. For the 'escape' stories: the East Surreys: *Times*, 27 December 1941, *Age*, 28 January, *ST*, 27 January; the Dogras: *Times*, 27 December 1941, *ST*, 1 January, *Age*, 15 January; senior Gurka: *Times*, 27 December 1941; four officers of an English regiment: Weller, op. cit., p. 103, Mant, *You'll be Sorry*, p. 132, dating the recovery as 25 December 1941.

24 **Argylls in action mid to late December:** Stewart, op. cit., pp. 53–62; for the voices of the wounded, Gibson, commanding a platoon of reinforcements, *Highland Laddie*, p. 96.

25 **For the 'We are Indian' stories:** in Kuantan: Sydney *Sun*, 27 January; at Kelantan: Brown, op. cit., p. 423; near Lenggong c. 20 December 1941: Stewart, op. cit., p. 40; at Gemas: *ST*, 19 January, *Argus*, 20 January, *Age*, 21 January, *SMH*, 21 January, Field, op. cit., p. 186, cf. Penfold, *Gallegban's Greyhounds*, pp. 136, 138, though there is no mention of 'Indians' in the account of the same incident in the 2/26 unit history; near Muar 19 January, Newton, *The Grim Glory*, p. 369.

26 **For Norman Fisher:** Brown, op. cit., p. 238, Mant, op. cit., p. 129, Weller, op. cit., p. 90.

27 **'Men in file':** AWM neg. 7182, the men identified by Pte Merv Mullens 2/18 as A Company, 8 Section, 9 Platoon: Noel Willoughby, Jack Fenner, Tom Highton, George Fenner, Doug Barrett, Sandy Croxton, Mullens himself; the other attributions, *Australasian*, 13 December 1941; *Sun News Pictorial*, 4 February; Morrison, *Malayan Postscript* (Aust. ed. only), facing p. 83; Tahu Hole, *Anzacs into Battle*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1942, p. 432; Sidney Mayer, *The Rise and Fall of Imperial Japan*, Bison Books, 1976, p. 155.

28 **For the Japanese material of the film shown to newsmen in Tokyo:** Tolischus, *Tokyo Record*, p. 266, 'a moving picture of the Japanese Army in action in Malaya', and cf. the note in the *Syonan Shimbun*, 18 October, and the reference on 13 February 1943 to 'The great Battle of Malai', 'a pictorial record of the Nippon forces' southward thrust' advertised for 15 February 1943 (the Japanese 'heroic' language from that trailer, the description of the AIF moving forward from *ST*, 16 January); another film, 11 September 1943; and similarly in Hong Kong, before March, where Gwen Priestwood notes 'a film of Japanese soldiers triumphantly marching into conquered cities, one of them, we were told, Singapore': Priestwood, *Through Japanese Barbed Wire*, Australasian Publications, Sydney, 1944, p. 65. For the re-enactments: in Malaya, *On to Singapore*, see remarks in David Nelson, *The Story of Changi*, Changi Publication Co., Perth, 1973, p. 54; casual remarks on the making of such films as, e.g. Bray, 'Have another spoonful of rice'; at Pulai Brani, a ship in the channel 'set alight for a film', *The Diary of Edgar Wilkie, All of 28, and More*, Brisbane, 1987, p. 96 (13 February 1943); Douglas McLaggan, *The Will to Survive*, Kangaroo, Kenthurst, 1995, p. 74: 'scenes were taken of Japs dressed up as wounded, rallying round their mud-stained flag, stalking in the bushes, etc.' (c. February 1943); Charles Huxtable, *From the Somme to Singapore*, Kangaroo, Kenthurst, 1987, p. 110 (c. February 1943); very probably most of the conventional 'battle' photographs of the IJA come from such films: e.g. shots of the entry into Kuala Lumpur (in reality undefended), similarly Johore Bahru; others are more likely taken in China, e.g. like the photograph in *How the Jap Army Fights*, facing p. 97, taken in China but often said to represent the Japanese moving up to Gemas.

29 **For the new Field Service Code,** issued early in 1941, the version in Tolischus, op. cit., p. 157; Tsuji from his pamphlet, *Japanese Version*, p. 330; the exemplary stories, *Enemy Publication No. 278*, pp. 133, 146.

30 **For the early popular notions of the IJA:** see for instance, Field, op. cit., pp. 113ff; for tactics, *Melbourne Herald*, 16 December 1941, more esp. 18 December 1941; *Times*, 27 December 1941, reprinted in Morrison, *Malayan Postscript* which makes considerable use of his despatches to the *Times*; from there, often verbatim, into *How the Jap Army Fights*, esp. pp. 70ff, an indication of how complex the lines of attribution commonly turn out to be; similarly Brown, op. cit., pp. 365ff (broadcast 24 December 1941); ibid., p. 375 (broadcast 27 December 1941), with the phrases 'thousands of ... self-sustaining,

independent armies': 'infiltrate', 'guerilla' already key terms in these analyses; against this, Weller, op. cit., esp. pp. 134ff, 138.

31 **For Brigadier Paris,** quoted from War Diary HQ 12 Indian Brigade, 24 December 1941, in Bhargava and Sastri, *Campaigns*, p. 194; for Brigadier I.M. Stewart: the interview of 16 February, the earliest statement I know; more fully in *Army Training Memorandum (War)*, 11 June 1942, which, though anonymous, is either written by Stewart or heavily based on his material (it quotes Slim River, 12th Indian Brigade); for 2/Argylls at Titi Karangan (Batu Pekaka), again his earliest reading, *Times*, 19 March, cf. Stewart, *History*, pp. 19ff, cf. the account in Weller, op. cit., p. 233.

32 **For Percival's orders:** see Percival, *War*, p. 157, the text of the paper in Appendix D to *Despatch*, 23 December 1941, with the phrases about a 'guerilla war, to be fought with guerilla tactics'; Bennett's letter, as printed in *Why Singapore Fell*, p. 75; ibid., for the details of the next few days; Major Dawkins' account, in the Intelligence Summary for 21 December (attached to War Diary 27th Bde, December only, though signed J. Lloyd).

33 **For the IJA moves down the east coast:** Bhargava and Sastri, op. cit., pp. 226ff, 'combined attack ... against Kuantan ... likely'; Percival, *War*, p. 190; the AIF unit movements from the relevant War Diaries; for B Company 2/20: Wall, *Singapore and After*, p. 67; for D (or F) Troop 2/15 Fd Regt: Whitelocke, *Gunners in the Jungle*, p. 59; orders to 10th AGH and 2/4 CCS, from Bennett, op. cit., p. 80; a few details of the exercises: Penfold, *Gallegban's Greyhounds*, pp. 67ff, Newton, *The Grim Glory*, p. 160. For Percival's orders: HQ Malaya Command Order no. 28 of 23 December 1941, *Despatch*, Appendix C; for the AIF Operation Instruction #11 of 24 December that followed, with the phrase 'responsible for holding': Percival, *Despatch* #207, p. 1281. It should be noted that this involves only 27th Brigade, pace Lodge, op. cit., who has perhaps confused the conferences of 27 December 1941 and 4 January.

34 **'As 2/30 remembers it':** in Penfold, op. cit., pp. 71–73.

CHAPTER 4

1 **The biographer's story of Yamashita:** Potter, *A Soldier Must Hang*, p. 202; ibid. For the reading of Yamashita's plans that immediately follows, with the phrase, 'breathing the air of the south' supposedly quoted from his diary entry for New Year's Day; passages from Yamashita's 'diary', a commonplace in writing on this campaign, are invariably quoted from Potter, usually without acknowledgment, though Potter himself has no such document in his bibliography; further, I have found no passage quoted as 'diary' which is not in Potter, and no passage quoted as 'diary' other than those in Potter. For Yamashita's change of plan: Tsuji, *Japanese Version*, p. 199; his comment 'inexperienced and untrained in landing operations' at p. 170.

2 **For Brigadier Key's withdrawal:** Bhargava and Sastri, *Campaigns*, pp. 136–38; 'dropping back' he calls it: as quoted in Sir John Hammerton (ed.), *The Second Great War*, vol. V, p. 2041, the original in the *Daily Mail*. For Takumi's advance: Bhargava and Sastri, *Campaigns*, pp. 225ff.

3 **The AIF at Kuantan:** *Times*, 7 January; Larut Hills, 'a battalion of Australian infantry': *Japanese Land Operations*, p. 29; at Perak, 'the 8th Division must be

considered destroyed': *Argus*, 6 January; General Bennett's 'capture' as reported *SMH*, 14 January.

4 **For the idea of guerilla action:** Percival, *War*, p. 157, cf. Rose, *Who Dies Fighting*, pp. 48ff who claims it as his idea, a notion that got into the canon even before the publication of Rose's own book, see Weller, *Singapore is Silent*, p. 117. On the Rose Force and the action at Trong: War Diary Rose Force; Rose, ibid., pp. 83ff; Gordon Bennett, *Why Singapore Fell*, esp. pp. 86ff; F. Spencer Chapman, *The Jungle is Neutral*, p. 37; Lewis, *Changi*, esp. pp. 28ff; R. Pool, *Course for Disaster*, London, Les Cooper, 1987, pp. 72ff; Sgt H.J. Donaldson 2/19. And for the press reports: the Rose Force action at Trong: *Argus*, 6 January, *Age*, 9 January, 10 January, cf. *ST*, 8 January, with other reports of 'guerillas', *ST*, 10 January, 13 January, 14 January; the 'real guerillas', and their blackbearded leader, *Age*, 15 January. For the action at Bukit Berjuntai, with the Independent Company and the Rose Force: *ST*, 9 January, 10 January, 13 January, 14 January, cf. *Times*, 14 January, *Age*, 15 January. Here I have followed the only full account I know of, in Lewis, *Changi*, pp. 37–40, and cf. the remarks in Elphick, *Singapore*, pp. 251–53.

5 **There wasn't much action when we left:** H.J. Donaldson.

6 **A naval officer attached to the force:** Pool, *Course for Disaster*, p. 80.

7 **'Soon after breakfast':** Lewis, *Changi*, p. 41.

8 **For Luke Harris:** *'G' Strings and Bangkok Bowlers*, p. 40. In fact, 2/3 RMT had formally gone into action earlier, in nine armoured cars at Grik, cf. the account in *Smith's Weekly*, 7 March, written 2 January.

9 **'The most sceptical commentator':** Brown, *Suez to Singapore*, p. 394; AIF splitting into silent marauding bands: *Argus*, 17 January; the British trader from the east coast: *Guardian*, 13 January. And for the staybehind parties: Percival, *Despatch* #266, a brief account in Cruickshank, *SOE in the Far East*, pp. 62ff; for the Dutch guerillas, Air Marshal R. Brooke-Popham, *Despatch* #149; Percival, *Despatch* #333; and for a 2/26 glimpse of them going in: Magarry, *The Battalion Story*, p. 82.

10 **For Percival's thinking c. 2 January:** Percival, *War*, p. 194; with his 'I did not contemplate giving up Kuala Lumpur', at p. 207; Bennett's, *Why Singapore Fell*, p. 92, cf. Percival, *Despatch* #290; Rose, *Who Dies Fighting*, p. 82 for General Heath's conference of 3 January; for Percival's instructions to Heath on 4 January, I have followed Bhargava and Sastri, *Campaigns*, p. 215 which quotes from War Diary Malaya Command; Percival, *War*, p. 208 for his instructions to Bennett, where the AIF were made responsible for 'the defence of the east coast': Kirby, *Singapore*, p. 176, reads this as 'eastern Johore', Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust*, p. 199 as 'the east of the state'.

11 **General Wavell on General Allenby:** in his *Generals and Generalship*, Penguin edition, 1941, p. 25 and passim.

12 **Plans for the AIF:** details of the reorganisation of positions from the War Diaries, as are the movements in the days following; the remark about leaving 'fixed positions', from War Diary 22nd Bde 4 January; about 'possible threat from the north and northwest', War Diary 2/20 4 January; the exercises, Newton, *The Grim Glory*, pp. 162ff, for 2 January on; for 2/18, 2/20, the respective unit War Diaries, esp. 5 January, 8 January; patrols: brief entries in the War Diaries; for 2/19 more extensively, Newton, *The Grim Glory*, pp. 163ff.

13 **For Endau Force:** formed on 7 January, War Diary 2/20; on 8 January, War Diary 22nd Bde; no contemporary written evidence except for the Force War

Diary, itself not always reliable, e.g. it gets the 2/19 Don Company platoons wrong, reading 16 Platoon for 18 Platoon, 17 for 16, 18 is never mentioned; similarly the unit histories, e.g. Wall, *Singapore and After* follows Newton, op. cit., in placing Dal Wilson's platoon forward at Pontian rather than John Varley's, and Dick Austin's on the river rather than Wilson's. For what follows here and below, I am deeply indebted to the following: from 2/19: Alan Brideoake; Roy Digger Dowd; Athol Hill; Allen Page; Keith Rathmell; Keith Tunney; John Varley; Fred Wilson; Jim Winbank; from 2/20: G. Harry Blackford; Frank Chaplin; Jack Carroll; Gus McDougall; Jack Mudie, Don Wall; 2/30: H. Clayton; 2/9 Fd Ambulance: David Hinder.

14 ***Wet most of the time:*** Jim Winbank.

15 ***Our job:*** Digger Dowd.

16 ***The Sakai Malays:*** Jack Carroll.

17 **Lt Clayton's patrol:** noted in War Diary 27th Bde 8 January, even more briefly in War Diary 2/30 8 January, cf. Penfold, *Gallaghan's Greyhounds*, p. 77; the details here from Harry Clayton.

18 **For Robin Henman:** listed in *Directory of Malaya* (1939) as assistant supervisor of Customs and Excise, representative Kluang and Mersing; S. Cunyingham-Brown, *Crowded Hour*, pp. 96ff, a convenient summary with more material from Colonel F. Dillon in Kennedy, *When Singapore Fell*, pp. 122–24. For C. Windsor listed in *Directory* as member Sanitary Board, managing proprietor C.J. Windsor Padang Lalang, managing director of May Rubber Estate Kuantan and merchant (p. 257) Gutta and Refiner (p. 199), the only one in Kuantan; as German born, Lt Colonel Varley, Diary 12 January when he was asked to organise and pay the Sakai for information (see below), though Elphick, *Odd Man Out*, pp. 48–66 and supporting notes, states that he was born in Hereford, christened Cyril Joseph Winckle; Elphick also notes that Windsor himself built *Kelana*, that he was arrested for a short period after the loss of *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*, that with his wife he escaped to Sumatra just before Singapore fell in a small auxiliary sailing craft that he'd bought; Elphick has nothing about Windsor's involvement with Endau Force or 22nd Bde; as the Chicle king: Ros Bulcock, *Of Death But Once*, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1947, p. 34. I have found nothing on T.M. Cope.

19 **Looking as though:** David Hinder.

20 **Slim River:** the figures on casualties from Mackenzie, *Eastern Epic*, p. 330; for the OC 36 Field Ambulance: Crew, *Medical History of Second World War*, Army Medical Services, *Campaigns* vol. II, pp. 79–80. And for General Wavell's immediate reaction, his signal to the COS, as given in Connell, *Wavell Supreme Commander*, p. 85; his ADC, Reid Scott, ibid., p. 84; Percival's formulation of the orders Wavell handed to him on the evening of 8 January, Malaya Command Operation Instruction 33, *Despatch*, Appendix E, dated 1220 hours, 9 January.

21 **Some indications of an east coast landing:** the convoy at Singora, 'making a seaborne attack on the east coast likely', War Diary 22nd Bde 12 January; the 'flag ship at Kuantan', War Diary 2/18 13 January; *ST*, 12 January; the lifeboats: Newton, *The Grim Glory*, p. 169 (for 10 January); the Japanese dressed as Malays: official communique 12 January, cf. *Age*, 13 January; the beach beacons: details War Diary 2/18. And see Percival, *Despatch* #345/346. For Yamashita's plans, see below.

22 **For the movements 27th Bde:** all units moving on 10 January except for 2/30,

which moved on 9 January to Batu Anam; the details: 2/29, 2/26 War Diaries, but more fully in three of the Unit Histories, for 2/15 Fd Regt: Whitelocke, *Gunners in the Jungle*, pp. 60–61; 2/30: Penfold, *Galleghan's Greyhounds*, p. 78; 2/26: Magarry, *The Battalion Story*, pp. 67ff. In contemporary reports of the Australians moving into the front line, it is not always clear whether the journalists are describing the move west to Batu Anam, or the move two or three days later into battle positions, e.g. 2/30 were three days at Batu Anam; the well-known passage in Mant probably refers to 10 January, the move of 2/29, 2/26 and the gunners, since 2/30 moved at night. For Mant, *Grim Glory*, p. 38; the newspapers: *ST*, 16 January; more fully *SMH*, 17 January (with dateline 14 January, 'delayed in transmission'), 'one of the great stories of Malaya'; *Age*, 17 January with phrases about the gales of the Armada, mists of Dunkirk; ibid., 'AIF's new station'; *Argus*, 17 January, with the statement from Bennett about no hilarity, used later in his *How Singapore Fell*, p. 103.

23 **As for Yamashita**: some indications in Falk, *Seventy Days*, pp. 163–64 citing post-war Japanese replies to questions concerning operations, cf. Tsuji, *Japanese Version*, pp. 199, 207, but not easy to interpret. And the IJA movement south on the east coast: from Domei, *Age*, 16 January, from the review issued by Imperial Headquarters, *Guardian*, 16 January, cf. *Enemy Publication No. 278*, p. 42; for the footprint: Wall, *Singapore and Beyond*, p. 34, and see below; those who fired on an Australian patrol: Harry Orme's patrol, for this, below; Jack Mudie for the detail given to the AIF officer; for the scouts ashore, see above, Tani Yukata, see below.

CHAPTER 5

1 **For Lieutenant Colonel Galleghan:** Arneil, *Black Jack*, esp. p. 61; Galleghan and the troops back from Thailand, ibid., pp. 121ff, cf. Snow Peat 2/18 in Burfitt, *Against All Odds*, pp. 154–55; *We felt guilty*: Doug Turnbull; for Les Hall, Arneil, *Black Jack*, p. 91; 'the Australian blackjacks': Hamilton, *Soldier Surgeon*, pp. 152–53.

2 **For Gemas:** Percival's directive: *Despatch* #301. For Bennett's understanding of the plan, both what was intended and what happened, his account in *Army Training Memorandum (War)* no. 10, May 1942, pp. 12ff, his comments here from *How Singapore Fell*, pp. 113ff; for Galleghan's, who may have seen his companies as the 'mobile detachments to harass and delay the enemy' of Malaya Command Operation Instructions 33 n.7, cf. the account in Penfold, *Galleghan's Greyhounds*, pp. 82–84, and for his insistence on the 2/30 position as a 'defensive position', his note, written 1942 or later, in AWM 553/5/13. For the action itself, I have followed the outlines in Penfold, *Galleghan's Greyhounds*, pp. 85ff (itself the immediate source of the account in *The Japanese Thrust*), though I have not accepted that interpretation; for the A Company patrols: Stan Arneil, 'According to Plan', pp. 7–18; the Don Company patrol: Les Perry in *The Boys Write Home*, pp. 97–101; the arty sig: Sydney *Sun*, 18 February, printed without acknowledgment in Mant, *Grim Glory*, p. 39 where it is attributed to a 'young gunner'; the sapper: Sapper Castle 2/12 Fd Company, *AWW*, 25 April; for Ray Brown, below. For 2/15 Fd Regt, Whitelocke, *Gunners in the Jungle*, pp. 64ff (which reprints the 'gunner's' account); for 4/Anti-Tank: some details from the unit history Smith, *Tid-Apa*, but this is not very reliable (the author has

already (p. 44) confused 22nd Indian Brigade with 22nd Brigade AIF; Harrison, *The Brave Japanese*, pp. 20ff, the source of the remark that Galleghan 'did not believe that tanks would be used against his men'. For the first news releases mentioned below: the first official account, *Argus*, 17 January; another, *SMH*, 17 January including confused details about enemy attacks 'further west', clearly Muar; more fully *ST*, 17 January, *SMH*, 19 January; Bennett's remarks in *Argus*, 19 January; an IJA interpretation: Tsuji, *Japanese Version*, pp. 190, 192, 193.

3 **The explosives were already in place:** Keith Stevens pointed out that 3 section 2/12 Fd Company laid the charge under the bridge, all connected up with the sig. wire and covered with mud.

4 ***We walked up in the rain*:** Bruce Holland, also the remarks following.

5 **'The specially trained guerrilla band':** Bennett, *Why Singapore Fell*, for 14 January, p. 112, cf. War Diary The Rose Force, 14 January, with the phrase quoted, and the time 1800 hours; Bennett, ibid., 'About 1630, I received a message from Maxwell ... that his 2/30 Battalion had contacted the enemy'. The order to General Barstow to move 2/Loyals: Bennett, 'during the afternoon'. And for the IJA entry to Malacca: Ashness, MS; and to the east, Tsuji, *Japanese Version*, p. 203.

6 ***Gemas no good*:** Bruce Holland.

7 **For Mukaide:** Tsuji, *Japanese Version*, p. 193; other units: Falk, *Seventy Days*, p. 168, quoting from *Malay Operations Record*, pp. 60–80.

8 **For Ray Brown:** 'in the next bed', A. Rowe, *The Boys Write Home*, p. 105; 'CO of the 2/4 CCS': Hamilton, *Soldier Surgeon*, p. 61; 'later in battalion writings': Arneil, *Black Jack*, p. 88.

9 ***We were to go down to this point here*:** Jack Carroll.

10 **A Japanese account of the journey south from Kuantan:** *Enemy Publication No. 278*, p. 42; seen crossing the Rompin River on 14 January: War Diary Endau Force, more fully War Diary 22nd Bde. For Endau 14–16 January including all references for Harry Orme's patrol and Alan Oag's section, see below.

11 ***About 60 or 80 we reckoned*:** Fred Wilson.

12 **The 'one observer':** G.H. Blackford.

13 **Muar, 14–15 January:** Bhargava and Sastri, *Campaigns*, pp. 258ff, with 'the situation appeared well in hand on 15 January' at p. 258; Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust*, pp. 222ff the 'one source' mentioned; Whitelocke, *Gunners in the Jungle*, pp. 79ff; War Diary, The Rose Force, 15 January; Lewis (a member of the Tangkah platoon), *Changi*, pp. 45ff. For the signal diagram: eds J.W. Jacobs, R.J. Bridgland, *Thorough*, Sydney, 1950, p. 8.

14 ***As soon as Black Jack walked over*:** Keith Stevens, and below.

15 **'No sport being shot at from the air':** Gosling, letter, *Northern Daily Leader*, 10 March.

16 **RAAF and RAF details** from Gillison, *Royal Australian Air Force 1939–1942*, pp. 329ff; 'Limping Lily': Penfold, *Galleghan's Greyhounds*, p. 68; 'the old lady': Horsley in *The Boys Write Home*, p. 101; 'does your mother know you're out?': Hamilton, *Soldier Surgeon*, p. 89. For the Moth sent over Endau: Roy Dowd, cf. Wall, *Singapore and Beyond*, p. 39 (but placed on 17–18 January); Shores and Cull, *Shambles*, p. 299, placing it (also I think wrongly) on 14 January; Chaplin, MS, confirming that the pilot was injured, the observer unhurt.

17 **For Endau:** War Diary Endau Force, War Diary 22nd Bde and units, no entry more than one or two sentences; War Diary Lt Colonel A. Varley, written c.

April 1942 (for this, see below); Oakes (at the time second in command 2/19), *Singapore Story*, written c. 1947, on textual grounds the immediate (though unacknowledged) source for the account in Newton, *The Grim Glory*, pp. 177, 178; Gosling, letter, *Northern Daily Leader* 10 March; Chaplin, MS; Hill, 'The Bukit Langkap Incident', in Newton, *The Grim Glory*, pp. 375–78. For events after 14 January, more particularly: Fred Wilson (particularly for Alan Oag's section); Alex Priest; G.H. Blackwood (the boats on the river); Athol Hill; Alan Brideoake; Keith Tunney; Allen Page; Digger Dowd (Travers' section); Keith Rathmell (2/19 Platoon action, and Bill Ferguson's death), expanding and correcting the confused account (the 'one version' of this text) in Newton, *The Grim Glory*, pp. 177–78; details re the sigs: Oakes, *Singapore Story*; blowing the bridge: War Diary 2/10 Fd Company; 'an anti-tanker wrote': Christie, Diary. For the withdrawal of the Force, below, I rely particularly on Alan Brideoake, Frank Chaplin, Digger Dowd; for Carter at Bukit Langkap, David Hinder.

18 ***You'll hear a lot*:** Athol Hill.

19 ***There was a lot of discussion*:** Keith Rathmell.

20 **2/Loyals at Segamat:** Wade, *Prisoner of the Japanese*, pp. 26ff, at Ayer Hitam, pp. 27ff; Johore Volunteer Engineers on the Yong Peng Rd: Archer, *The Way it Was*, p. 81; the 2/29 Company patrolling: War Diary 2/29 16 January; the two Rose Force patrols: War Diary, Rose Force 16 January, cf. Lewis, *Changi*, p. 45.

21 **'Corporal's war of small detachments':** Mitchell, letter, 9 October 1941.

22 **The 12 Platoon B Company 2/26 action:** Magarry, *The Battalion Story*, pp. 76ff; the seven AIF deaths, from a reading of the Registers of the Commonwealth War Graves.

23 **IJA movements around Muar,** 15 January and following: Bhargava and Sastri, *Campaigns*, pp. 257ff, cf. Percival, *Despatch* #352ff; Kirby, *War Against Japan*, p. 306, for Brigadier Duncan's reports to Westforce, Bennett's response: Bennett, *How Singapore Fell*, entry for 16 January, pp. 125ff. For the movements of Percival's units which follow, the usual sources, primary and secondary (Bhargava and Sastri, *Campaigns*, pp. 260–61 being particularly useful), through a close collation of the times of conferences, the times that decisions were taken, times these arrived at unit HQs, times the subsequent orders were issued.

CHAPTER 6

1 **For Muar–Bakri** I have followed particularly Bhargava and Sastri, *Campaigns*, pp. 257ff, cf. Kirby, *The War Against Japan*, pp. 357ff; Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust*, pp. 222ff, Compton Mackenzie, *Eastern Epic*, pp. 337–48, noting on p. 346 that the charges had been placed in the Parit Sulong Bridge on the night of 15–16 January, were still there in 1947, Mackenzie, *Eastern Epic*, p. 346 n. 1; details of 2/29 move, and subsequent deployment, War Diary 2/29 17 January: where, against Bhargava and Sastri, *Campaigns* which places time of arrival at 2000 hours, 'Bn arrived Bakri 1500 hours ... Informed by CO that landing had been made on Thursday and Indian tps immediately withdrew some 15 miles and were out of contact'. Duncan's plan: from Bhargava and Sastri, *Campaigns*, p. 261. Bennett's response: as in Bennett, *Why Singapore Fell*, p. 127; Duncan's Brigade Major, Major H.C. Jones, was brought into 2/4 CCS 'on the night of 16 January ... [he] refused an anaesthetic or opiates until he

... had obtained a promise that I would send to Australian headquarters for a staff officer to take notes on the disposition of his brigade': Hamilton, *Soldier Surgeon*, p. 78; Bennett himself notes conversation with Fawcett and Key who were with Percival, 'after lunch' 17 January; 'at his rear headquarters ... on the Paloh Road': Percival, *War*, p. 227.

2 **For the action, 17–22 January:** for 2/29: War Diary; W.B. Bowring, OC C Company, 'The Muar Road Battle', pp. 1–7, reprinted, without acknowledgment, in Christie, *A History of the 2/29 Battalion*; 'The Diary ... of Captain Victor Brand M.C., RMO 2/29'; Christie, *A History*, pp. 63–85 (whence many of the geographical details here); Bill Anderson HQ Company 2/29, 'Detained by the Enemy' (esp. for details of initial deployment, AT guns, mortars); Purtill, MS. For 2/19: War Diary; 'Narrative' (? written by IO) attached to the Diary, 18–23 January; Newton, *The Grim Glory*, pp. 184–251; Lt Col. C.G.W. Anderson VC, MC, and his account of the dropping of supplies at Parit Sulong, 'The Second Nineteenth', vol. 24 no. 3, Sept. 1983, p. 11. For 4/Anti-Tank: Harrison, *The Brave Japanese*, pp. 42–91; Thornton, in Finkemeyer, *It Happened to Us*, pp. 31ff. For 2/15 Fd Regt: War Diary; Whitelocke, *Gunners in the Jungle*, pp. 78–96; Braddon, *The Naked Island*, pp. 56–99, though the details are often blurred, and the names inaccurate. And for the first press reports: Lloyd's platoon (unnamed in the text), *SMH*, 24 January; 'an Australian Commando unit': *ST*, 26 January; official release: *SMH*, 26 January, 27 January; *Argus*, 26 January; Sig. Bingham ('as told to Ray Maley'), *DT*, 26 January; a survivor of Capt Newton's B echelon, *DT*, 5 February, *Northern Daily Leader*, 5 February.

3 **'The noise, like the end of the world':** Bill Anderson, 'Detained'; ibid., 'like an earthquake the ground feels like'.

4 **For the anti-tank encounter:** Film Unit report: *ST*, 20 January, cf. *Age*, 21 January, with 'all the hows said to hell with the sniping': attributed to Hedley Metcalf, *SMH*, 21 January; W.B. Bowring, 'The Muar Road Battle', p. 2; 'another gunner': Harrison, *The Brave Japanese*, p. 44.

5 **'As many stories':** Bill Anderson, 'Detained'; Frank Johnson, *SMH*, 26 January, *ST*, 26 January, a slightly longer version in *Gunnedah Independent and Advertiser*, 5 February, where it is attributed to Frank Irwin 'the son of Mr and Mrs Frank Irwin, formerly of Goulburn'; there is, however, no Frank Irwin on the nominal roll of 2/29, there is a Frank Johnson (HQ Company); Victor Brand 2/29 RMO; Christie, *A History*, pp. 71–76; the Anti-tank men: see Harrison, one of the five who came into Pudu, Smith, *Tid-Apa*, p. 101 notes 11 Anti-tank men captured in the January fighting ended in Pudu, the Nominal Roll ex Kuala Lumpur in AWM 54 553/5/13 notes 12; the parish priest: Father Rene Ashness, Father Louis Ashness' brother, in Ashness, MS; and for the 2/29 mortar platoon, Frisch, *Heroes Denied: the Malayan Horror Conspiracy*, Marlin Publications, Wheelers Hill, 1990, pp. 17ff.

6 **Communications with Westforce, for 19 January:** on the timing of the withdrawal order, it has to be c. 1700 hours when War Diary 2/19 notes 'communication with Westforce re-established'; 'Narrative', which gives what is probably the complete text of the order, mistakenly dates it 20 January, being throughout a day out in its chronological ordering: 'Messages had been received from H.Q.A.I.F. per 109 set, in high grade cipher but cipher destroyed. Finally received in syllabic, 'WITHDRAW ON YONG PENG'; cf. Bennett, *Why Singapore Fell*, p. 135 noting it was acknowledged 'at once'. Newton, *The Grim Glory*, p. 204 and passim consistently notes how and when communications

broke down and were restored; tabulated, this is the only way one can judge what was known at either HQ.

7 **Transfer of Muar front to III Indian Corps:** Percival, *War*, p. 229, evening of 18 January: Heath on east coast, War Diary 22nd Bde 18 January noting he was at Bde HQ at 1230 hours, and according to War Diary 2/18 at some time that day at Mersing in 2/18 Bn area; nothing relevant in War Diary 2/20. The conference at Yong Peng, 1420 hours 19 January: Percival, *Despatch* #356, with the phrase quoted. The movements of units to Batu Pahat and the Defile, and action there, Bhargava and Sastri, *Campaigns*, pp. 260–66; Kirby, *The War against Japan*, pp. 307–13.

8 **Anderson's movements:** primarily from Newton, *The Grim Glory*, pp. 208ff, esp. the personal narratives from p. 233; the 'one man' in the first story being Chick Warden, B Company 12 Platoon, ibid., p. 233; the phrase, 'every man was fighting mad', from 'Narrative', and from there into Mant, *The Grim Glory*, p. 57; cf. 'one of the first reports', *Malay Times*, 26 January.

9 **George Harding's poem on Ted Levick:** *The 2nd Nineteenth*, March 1985; Harding died in Thailand 15 October 1943, the poem was brought back to Australia by Peter Wellington, Postal Cpl 2/19.

10 **For Nishimura:** quoted in *Syonan Times*, 29 April.

11 **The last hours before the final withdrawal:** Purtill, *Narrative*, the 'Commemoration Address', 24 January 1943; Cpl Bingham, *DT*, 26 January.

12 **For 21 January,** Newton, *The Grim Glory*, p. 218, noting a message received 'during the morning' that help was coming; another c. 1700 hours (p. 219); 'as Anderson wrote years later': in *The 2nd Nineteenth*, September 1983, p. 11; Bennett, *Why Singapore Fell*, p. 142, places his final message—permission to withdraw—at 1100 hours on 22 January.

13 **The massacre and Nishimura:** an account in Mant, *Massacre at Parit Sulong*, based with some omissions (unspecified) on the MS of one of the survivors, Lt Ben Hackney 2/29; Hackney was not however, as Mant thinks, the only survivor; Mackenzie, *Eastern Epic*, p. 347, names four men from Indian units, R. Braddon, *The Naked Island*, p. 101, another Australian, 'Jimmy', possibly Mant's Reg Wharton, since Braddon consistently or deliberately gets names wrong, e.g. Iceton for Ison; Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust*, pp. 248, 249 mentions two other AIF, one Sgt Croft 2/29, and an Englishman; Croft lived at least until mid-April. The account here, from Hackney's statement to the War Crimes Trial at Los Negros, *Courier-Mail*, 23 June 1950. The Domei figures: *Argus*, 26 January. The memorial Cross: Frank Gaven, as one of the demining party in July 1942, *The Nineteenth*, September 1960, cf. his account in Wall, *Singapore and Beyond*, p. 126; Father Rene Ashness also mentioned to me once the burnt-out trucks, bodies still in them.

CHAPTER 7

1 **'The crisis of the campaign':** *Despatch* #373; the Muar force holding up a division of the Guards for a week: Percival, *War*, p. 232, *Despatch* #367; Wavell's cable: Percival, *Despatch* #372. For the 22nd Indian Brigade ambush at Labis: Kirby, *Campaigns*, p. 270; Anti-tank men captured, *Tid-Apa*, p. 101; the observer: Lewis, *Changi*, p. 56.

2 **'The wounded Australian':** *SMH*, 21 January; the Don Company 2/29 platoon,

SMH, 24 January; 'seventeen men from one of the Indian battalions and five Australians': *DT*, 23 January; 2/19 B echelon: *DT*, 5 February, *Northern Daily Leader*, 5 February; '5 men come in from Endau': Christie, Diary, 26 January.

3 **For Merv Alchin:** *Argus*, 5 February; Wall, *Singapore and After*, p. 38; Bowden interview 'Survivors'; see below for a note on Alchin's movements after 24 January.

4 **For Alan Oag's section:** I follow Fred Wilson, now the only survivor, who established this section as initially, Alan Oag, Fred Wilson, Tom Verdon, Ned Litchfield, George Robbins, Sam Langham, Merv Hull.

5 **For Harry Orme's:** Harry Orme, letter *AWW*, 4 April, more fully in *The Boys Went Home*, pp. 102–105. Jack Carroll (now deceased), in 1985 the only survivor; unfortunately I can name only five of the six: from 2/19, Harry Orme, Jim Wasley, Len Thomas (Bluey) (so Dave Redgate, *The 2nd Nineteenth*, December 1968); from 2/20, Jack Carroll, Bobby Morgan. As for the difficulties in dating Orme's movements: Orme, letter, does not mention when either of the two patrols he led out left Endau; Carroll thinks that the second, the one in question here, left before Felix Brault was killed in a bombing raid at Endau, that is, before 16 January; and reading Orme's account with me, he agrees with its general direction, even to the number of days away, though it is, he argues, too long ago to be absolutely certain about some details, e.g. how many days they took from Endau to Mersing: we think the whole patrol took ten days. If as Carroll and Orme agree, the bridge over the Mersing River was blown when they reached the river, then that gives a *terminus ad quod*, after 0500 hours on 24 January (so War Diary 2/10 Fd Company, though War Diary 2/18 notes 2300 hours on 23 January, some five hours earlier). However, it is impossible to establish when they reached Endau: Jim Wasley said as he was shot, so Carroll remembers, 'It's my nineteenth birthday': his file in War Graves however has Wasley born on 22 January, and this 22 January would have been not his nineteenth but his twentieth birthday. But if Orme's patrol moved through Endau on 22 January as that suggests, then it took only two or three days to reach Mersing, and that does not square either with Orme's written account or with what Carroll remembers now; and further if the patrol left on 15 January, and if—as Orme's account makes clear—it was away only four days before it reached the village up the Anak Endau, then it had to come through Endau on the evening of 19 January.

6 **For Dal Wilson's patrol:** Hill in Newton, *The Grim Glory*, pp. 375ff and conversation; Alan Brideoake; the withdrawal to Robinson's Wharf: Chaplin, MS (particularly the journey of *Shunan*), Gus McDougall (the pigeons), David Hinder (Capt Carter at Bukit Langkap); the War Diary 2/9 Fd Ambulance notes for 25 January that 'Capt Hinder has by this time rejoined A Company'.

7 **For 'Robin' and 'John':** Stewart, *Let's Get Cracking*, p. 54; Cunyingham-Brown, *Crowded Hour*, pp. 96ff, a further account in Kennedy, *When Singapore Fell*, pp. 122ff; for the gun boats: R. Gough, *The Escape from Singapore*, William Kimber, London, 1987, *Hung Jao*, p. 204, *Kelana*, p. 210, cf. H. Lenton and J. Colledge, *British and Dominion Warships of World War Two*, Doubleday, New York, 1968; *Shunan*, as in David Nelson, *The History of Changi*, Changi Publications, Perth, 1974, Appendix B, p. 233.

8 **Percival's 'secret and personal letter':** mentioned in Kirby, *War Against Japan*, p. 316, not in Percival, *War or Despatch*; for the conferences of 21 January at Yong Peng, 23 January at Rengam: *Despatch* #370ff, with details of the orders:

from the conference on 21 January: troops in the Mersing area were 'to hold Jemaluang with detachments forward in the Mersing area'; from that of 23 January, text of Malaya Command Instruction of 23 January, *Despatch*, Appendix F: Commander III Indian Corps was to take command of all troops in Johore; the general line Jemaluang–Kluang–Ayer Hitam–Batu Pahat would be held, no withdrawal without Percival's permission: consequent deployment of units, as in the Official Histories, with more detail from the unit histories; final interpretation, mine.

9 **Air attack on 13 Battery:** Smith, *Tid-Apa*, p. 61.

10 ***And whether they were dodging*:** Frank Gaven.

11 **On the Bofors:** Kappe, *Lectures*, note for 23 January 1942, with Brigadier Taylor asking for AA; these guns are possibly from 3 Bty, 6 Heavy AA (which had fought in the Battle of Britain), and which had arrived 13 January; RHQ, 13 and 15 Btys were sent late in January to Sumatra; War Diary 22nd Bde 23 January gives them one enemy plane. An anti-tanker wrote: Christie, Diary, 25 January; our *fellows were going to keep them POW*: Frank Gaven; other comments, Roy Dowd, J. Orr.

12 **2/10 Field Ambulance:** Connolly and Wilson, *Medical Soldiers*, p. 53.

13 **Anderson's men:** Ron Rudd, *The 2nd Nineteenth*, March 1984; 'despite the hair-grease': Sgt K. Thompson, 65 Bty 2/15 Fd Regt, *Gunnedah Independent*, lost date; 'fought with them': Gosling, letter, *Northern Daily Leader*, 10 March; a long account from a letter home, not quoted directly here, Leonard Stewart, *Australian Pensioner*, May 1982.

14 **For the 2/20 outpost and the action two miles north of the Mersing Bridge:** Flares sighted, War Diary 22nd Bde 2200 hours 19 January; action of 21 January, War Diary 2/20; for the guns: map indicating gun positions, War Diary 22nd Bde 21 January; fire details, War Diary 2/10 Fd Regt; the ambush, Ramsbotham OC 7 Platoon A Company, 'Mersing A Company defensive position'; '7 platoon A Company Mersing action', and conversation; Wall, *Singapore and After*, p. 41; the one Japanese source: *Enemy Publications No. 278*, p. 154 (61 in translation).

15 **For George Jarrett's patrol:** Frank Gaven.

16 ***Picking these Japs off*:** Don Ross Kerr.

17 **'First of the Regiment':** Richard Haynes.

18 ***I can see him now*:** Richard Haynes.

19 ***We had survey pegs*:** Don Ross Kerr.

20 ***With those blokes*:** Steve O'Brien.

21 **Percival conference:** *Despatch* #370, the orders were to make Brigadier Taylor OC all troops in the Mersing and Kahang areas, 'to hold Jemaluang with detachments forward in the Mersing area', cf. War Diary 2/18, 22 January: 'CO received instructions for a plan of withdrawal of bde, owing to the serious situation on the West Coast'; for Batu Pahat, below; AIF unit movements from the War Diaries, for the Indian units, Bhargava and Sastri, *Campaigns*, p. 270; and for the proposed 2/18 'offensive operation against the enemy', War Diary 2/18, 23 January.

22 **Operation Instructions for 23 January:** Malaya Command Operation Instruction no. 35, Percival, *Despatch*, Appendix F.

23 **For Brigadier Challen and Batu Pahat:** Percival, *Despatch* #377ff, Bhargava and Sastri, *Campaigns*, pp. 271ff, Kirby, *War Against Japan*, pp. 320ff; 'a town under siege', Lewis, *Changi*, pp. 62ff.

24 **For the Muar–Yong Peng Road**, Kirby, *War Against Japan*, p. 321, Bhargava and

Sastri, *Campaigns*, p. 270; for the AIF on the trunk road, Ayer Hitam: Penfold, *Gallegban's Greyhounds*, pp. 148ff; Hodel, *The Battalion Story*, pp. 93ff; the Sikh action at Niyor: Kirby, *Campaigns*, p. 277, with [the Japanese] 'cut to pieces by a brilliant sortie by a Sikh battalion', *SMH*, 2 February, cf. *Age*, 26 January, cf. Russell-Roberts, himself with 5/11 Sikhs, *Spotlight on Singapore*, pp. 56ff.

25 **The conferences of 25 January:** the 22nd Brigade conference at Brigade 1400 hours; Command conference at Rengam, 1515 hours: text of the orders in Percival, *Despatch*, Appendix G. The idea of the ambush, proposed for the second time, explicit in War Diary 22nd Bde 25 January; not in War Diary 2/18; presumably rescinded when orders coming out of the Rengam conference reached Bde; for instance, War Diary 2/20 notes at 1530 hours that the Bde was to pull back 'in conformity with Westforce'; the unit movements as set down at 1530 hours do not in all particulars coincide with those noted at 1400 hours, which suggests some change in the orders.

26 ***The boys were saying:*** Frank Ramsbotham.

CHAPTER 8

1 **For RAF and RAAF sorties from 21 January:** P. Maltby, *Despatch*, esp. #326ff, with the note that 'there were days when the protection of convoys took precedence, and little was available to help [the Army] then', cf. Shores and Cull, *Shambles*, vol. 1, pp. 222ff; Hall, *Glory in Chaos*, pp. 304ff for the Buffaloes, pp. 348ff, for the Vildebeestes, pp. 131ff and pp. 150ff for the Hudsons; the Japanese aircraft over the east coast: the War Diaries, personal accounts, e.g. O'Brien, 'Interview', Christie, Diary; for the ships along the coast: Blair, *Silent Victory*, Bantam Books, NY, 1985, p. 170; the '2 cruisers, 12 transports, 3 invasion barges' of the Endau invasion fleet, reported by Flight Lieutenants Diamond and Colquhoun, were in fact two transports, thirteen smaller craft escorted by four cruisers, an aircraft carrier and six destroyers: see Kirby, *War Against Japan*, p. 210.

2 **For the Endau raid,** I follow the most comprehensive account, Shores and Cull, *Bloody Shambles* vol. 2, pp. 17ff, which uses a good deal of material from those participating; further information, particularly on the crew, which I initially collated to establish planes and crews, also important in the text below: Lamb, notebooks; McCabe, *Pacific Sunset*, pp. 9–48, letter (10/1/1986); Lockwood, tape, and letter (3/5/1986); McEwan, IO for the Vildebeestes from 13 January, letter (10/6/1986), noting *inter alia* that his original reports have apparently not survived; Hall, letter (4/3/1986). For the aircrew mentioned in this text: Sq Ldr Willmott was picked up by HMS *Thanet*, then when it was sunk, by *Giang Bee*; for the others, see below.

3 **'Significant number of British aircraft',** Chaplin, MS. 'Hudsons escorted by Hurricanes', Christie, *Diary*; *long beetles* ... Steve O'Brien; *just lumbering along* ... Richard Haynes; *this great armada* ... Frank Gaven.

4 **Plan of the ambush as quoted here,** as in War Diary 2/18, 26 January.

5 **'We had been told time and time again':** O'Brien, 'Interview'.

6 **For the AIF as opposed up to 26 January by 'only 300 men':** Westforce Operation Instruction #4, Kirby, *The War Against Japan*, Appendix 24, p. 541, cf. Wavell, *Despatch* #21.

7 ***The point is:*** Richard Haynes, and immediately below.

8 **For the action at Nithsdale:** Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust* follows not the War Diary, but Oakes, 'Singapore Story', a narrative which either circulated widely enough to be copied before 1945, or which incorporates earlier material, since there is an identical version in George McLoughlin's papers, written in Changi. What Oakes is using I have not been able yet to determine, nor the immediate source of the Kappe/Thyer 'Report on Operations', which was also written not much later: neither of these coincides with the account in the 2/18 War Diary nor with what is substantially the same account in Lt Colonel Varley's own Diary, reconstructed some time after 14 April, buried 30 May 1943 in the grave of TX4217 Pte D.A. Eyles 2/4 CCS, recovered by the War Graves team 25 September 1945; the one major variant between Varley and the War Diary proper is noted below; oddly, *Men May Smoke* published in 1948 as 'the final edition of the 2/18 Bn AIF Magazine' reproduces simply the first press report, as in e.g. *DT*, 5 February, probably through the 1944 version in Mant, *You'll be Sorry*; the recent unit history *Against All Odds* is also very generalised, and seems to use only the War Diary with comments from men there. For Japanese versions, *Enemy Publication No. 278*, cf. the brief reference in Shinozaki, *Syonan—My Story*, p. 77.

All these accounts are at right angles to one another, much like different words to the same tune, differing for instance in the time and reason for the second artillery barrage; the details of the action, except for the general direction of movement, are not clear, nor precise in any contemporary account; nor in those depending on them. The same is true of the casualty lists: nominal roll of Don Company, and casualty list dated 11 November 1942, both attributed to Sgt J. Finley 2/18; casualty list, January to October 1942, AWM 127; narrative and 'list of those identified on Jemaluang battlefield by Lt Chas Wagner': George McLoughlin papers; casualty list, Second Echelon Changi 12 August 1944, AWM 54 171/11/2; Registers of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

In what follows I depend on: from 2/18, Arthur Hence; Frank Adams; Gill Borrowdale; Jack Carey; Vic Evans; Frank Gwynne; A 'Harry' Harris; Bede McFarland; George McLoughlin; Charlie Michell; Vic Mirkin; Arnold Nicolls; Charles O'Brien OC B Company; Steve O'Brien; Jim Orr; Ginty Pearson MID; Alex Priest; Colin Spence DCM; Mack Swaddling; Jim Toose; Arthur Wright, transcript. From 2/10 Fd Regt: Richard Haynes; D. Ross Kerr acting CO 2/10 Fd Regt.

9 ***Which we presumed were Japanese*:** Ginty Pearson.

10 **Lagettie's patrol:** omitted in Varley, *Diary*; the bridging passage reads simply 'the remainder of the afternoon was quiet'; the Japanese who came into B Company HQ: Jack Carey, cf. Brian James in Burfitt, *Against All Odds*, p. 47.

11 ***Indistinct scuffle:*** Frank Adams; *quite a lot of firing*: Jim Orr.

12 ***I can remember*:** Harry Harris.

13 ***They was dug in*:** Harry Harris.

14 **For the Japanese-owned plantations,** see the list of plantations in *Directory of Malaya*, 1939; for the two senior officers, Shinosaki, *Syonan*, p. 1; Tani Yukata, pp. 9ff; the paper nailed to a tree, James, *Rise and Fall*, p. 207. For F.M. Still, War Diary 8th Division Signals, 27 January, cf. the Signals Report printed in Elphick, *Singapore*, p. 61.

15 **'A nightmare journey':** O'Brien, 'Interview'.

16 ***Shaking like buggery*:** Vic Mirkin; *A bit of noise*: Frank Gwynne.

17 ***I can remember him ...*:** Harry Harris.

18 ***You couldn't see anything*:** Charlie Michell.

19 **For what follows, the casualty lists, see above:** for Jock Creighton's map: George McLoughlin papers; accounts of the demining party: Bray; 'Have another spoonful of rice', Frank Gaven, and in Wall, *Singapore and After*, pp. 122ff; Gilmore, letter, with the detail of the skeleton, rifle still resting on the fork of the tree: Harry Harris; C.H. Pearson; for the Military History Team in Johore, November 1945: Ryland, MS.

20 ***But they had moved their position*:** Vic Mirkin.

21 ***And Tich Burgess yelled out*:** Jim Toose.

22 ***I can remember John Edgley*:** Harry Harris.

23 ***The bullet that killed him*:** Harry Harris, and below.

24 **For the withdrawal:** orders coming out of the conference on 25 January, issued 1515 hours, Percival, *Despatch*, Appendix G, Westforce to withdraw 'tonight', movement of Eastforce 'to conform', under orders issued by III Indian Corps; for 27 January, Westforce Operation Instruction no. 4 issued at 0200 hours, Kirby, *War Against Japan*, Appendix 24, p. 541; War Diaries, esp. those of 22nd Brigade HQ and 2/18; Percival, *War*, pp. 245ff; Thyer's comment, in Kappe/Thyer, 'Report on Operations'.

25 **For what follows:** McCabe, *Pacific Sunset*, pp. 14ff with the twelve AIF executed at p. 31; Lockwood, tape; Charlie MacDonald, in Shores and Cull, *Shambles*, pp. 11, 39ff; Alchin, Bowden interview, 'Survivors'; Parkin, *Into the Smother*, Hogarth Press, 1963, p. 143; Haynes, 'Kin to the Undefeated'.

CHAPTER 9

1 **For the movements of 22nd Brigade,** the War Diaries; for the Japanese: evidence from G.H. Blackford; Harry Woods; Frank Hole, *Memoirs*; *The Japs pissed off*: Vic Mirkin; Charlie Wagner; on the demining party: Frank Gaven; from the Japanese: the 'one source': *Enemy Publication No. 278*, p. 61, cf. Tsuji, *Japanese Version*, p. 209; the sighting around 60 Battery lines around 28 January: 60 Battery attachment, in War Diary 2/10 Fd Regt.

2 **The task of the commander at Batu Pahat,** Percival, *Despatch* #375, with listing of battalions engaged; survey of the next four days, Kirby, *War Against Japan*, cf. Percival, *War*, pp. 234ff; Ramli, 'The Malay Regiment 1933–1942', *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* vol. 38, pp. 224ff. For Brigadier Challen near Ponggor: Chippington, *Singapore: The Inexcusable Betrayal*, Hanley Swan, 1992, pp. 160–61; the Australians with Sgt Major Rudling, Kennedy, *When Singapore Fell*, p. 147, cf. Hamond, *A Fearful Freedom*, pp. 30–31.

3 **For the movements of Westforce:** Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust*, pp. 273ff; 'a sickening succession of clashes and withdrawals': Jack Egan 2/30, MS, on the Kota Tinggi Road: the PWD engineer, D. Bailey, *We Built and Destroyed*, p. 77; the refugees: Ashness, MS; John Cross, *Red Jungle*, p. 26.

4 **Wavell on Bennett and Heath:** Connell, *Wavell*, p. 129; on Heath's asking permission to leave: Smyth, *Percival and the Tragedy of Singapore*, p. 259, quoting a letter from Percival to Woodburn Kirby.

CHAPTER 10

1 **For the AIF casualties:** dates of death from the Registers of the War Graves Commission; causes: George Jarrett, in Wall, *Singapore and After*, p. 171; Lyell Montgomery, 2/18 Roll, McLoughlin papers; Brigadier Varley at Singapore, A. Allbury, *Bamboo and Bushido*, Robert Hale, London, 1974, p. 134.

2 **The recent reports:** *Barbed Wire and Bamboo*, August 1991, June 1994.

3 **For the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army,** some suggestions in Chin Kee Onn, *Malaya Upside Down*, Singapore, 1946, pp. 108ff; for the thirteen left-behind parties, and the later SOE: C. Cruickshank, *SOE in The Far East*, OUP, Oxford, 1983, esp. pp. 61ff, with the Australians released at Kuala Piloh at p. 66; Richard Gough, *Special Operations Singapore 1941–1942*, Heinemann Asia, Singapore, 1987; more particularly, Cross, *Red Jungle*; Spencer Chapman, *The Jungle is Neutral*, with the rumours of the AIF at p. 219. For the 'evaders', Jim Wright 6/Norfolks in Hamond: *A Fearful Freedom*, his return in 1970 at p. 166; for AIF: Ron McCure in Finkemeyer, *It Happened to Us*, Arthur Shephard in Finlay, *Savage Jungle*, letters from Bennett and Stewart, both 2/Argylls, ibid., p. 293, Cotterill, ibid., p. 302, the 'six Australians', ibid., Mickey Sharpe etc., ibid., p. 301. Finlay prints a nominal roll of 26 names, from camps that Wright was in, which includes perhaps twenty AIF, including 2/19 Don Robertson; and a list given by Arthur Shephard with another seven AIF, including Ron McCure (wrongly given as McLure) and H.R. 'Bluey' Ryan 2/29. Other accounts, from those who escaped from Singapore Island, but were later retaken: Jock McLaren, in H. Richardson, *One Man War*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1957, pp. 1–24, cf. the account of another member of that party in W. Wilkie, *All of 28 and More, the Diary of Edgar Wilkie*, pp. 64–66; John McGregor, *Blood on the Rising Sun*, Bencoolen, Perth, no date [1980], pp. 31–97, mentioning nine AIF with the guerillas, p. 80; Don Robertson, *The 2nd Nineteenth*, September 1984; for the rumours of troops in the jungle: British and Australian in early December 1941, S. Kathigasu, *No Dram of Mercy*, Neville Spearman, 1954, p. 58; in West Johore in March, E.J.H. Corner, *The Marquis, a Tale of Syonan-to*, Heinemann Asia, Singapore 1981, p. 66; at Chaah, Bray, 'Have another spoonful of rice', p. 27; the notice posted in the Great World: Haynes, 'Kin to the Undefeated', p. 50.

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A NOTE ON SOURCES

War Diaries

Almost all surviving texts are the Changi versions, since the originals were destroyed before surrender: this is evident occasionally in the paper used—both 4/Anti-Tank's and 2/30's are written on the back of naval message forms scrounged from the Base; or more obliquely in the text: the 2/20 Diary, for instance, has Captain Thompson signing as adjutant, a position he was appointed to only after Captain J.M. Lowe was killed on the Island; the CO Endau Force signs the Force Diary as Lieutenant Colonel, a rank he held only as CO of 2/19 from 7 February. Most seem 'compiled from recollections', the phrase Lieutenant Colonel Pond used at the end of the 2/29 Diary; much as Brigadier Varley noted in his own Diary (entries for 24 March, 12 April), as Major Kerr stated recently for 2/10 Field Regiment:

> *we just sat there and wrote and then checked with as many as we could to try and get the thing in order. It wasn't a Diary really, it was more or less a narrative of what did happen; because we couldn't tell how many rounds we fired here or there.*

The texts are very spare, closer to *aides-memoires* than to conventional diary entries, 2/19 covering the five days at Bakri in 600 words, 2/29 in even less, probably because records were lost: 2/19 lost all its records of that five days—its signals from Westforce, intelligence reports, whatever its Intelligence section had put together—when its HQ truck was bombed at Bakri, and the account Colonel Anderson wrote as a POW does not survive either. The gaps in the texts are significant by any standard: 2/15 Field Regiment does not even mention its 65 Battery, the one in action at Muar, nor 4/Anti-Tank the sections it sent across; Endau Force Diary almost ignores the 2/19 platoons. No surprise then that, even where Diaries cover the same incidents, incidents as public as the blowing of the Mersing Bridge, these can be placed very differently, in a different context, even at a different time. It is worth noting here that the other forces are no better off: in the two pages he gives to Muar–Bakri, the Indian Official Historian uses only the Diary of 5/18 Garhwalis, presumably all he had to work with, particularly with so many senior officers killed. Brigadier Duncan, all the battalion COs, their seconds in command, two of the three adjutants, most of the HQ staff and all the signal detachment.

Associated material

Very little of the associated material survives either: only one Intelligence summary from 22nd Brigade, attached to 2/19 Diary for November; only one copy of the Intelligence that Division was circulating, a unique copy attached to 2/30 Diary. This means that a sustained narrative like the Kappe–Thyer *Report* becomes more significant than it might otherwise, probably more significant than indeed it should, particularly since it is constructed on the same conventions as the Diaries: quoting no authority it is its own authority; wholly impersonal, wholly detached, it reads as though there were no narrator at all, as though the distance between the teller and the tale were absolute; and the third person narration makes it sound like pure reference.

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Men I have talked with, written to:

Frank Adams
Charles G. Anderson, VC, MC
G. Harry Blackford
A.G. 'Gill' Borrowdale
George Bray
Alan Brideoake
Jack Carey
Jack Carroll
H. Clayton
Frank Chaplin
Ray Connolly
H. 'Bert' Donaldson
R. 'Digger' Dowd

Vic Evans
John Fairley
Bill Fraser
Frank Gaven
Frank Gwynne
Tom Hamilton
Reg Hardie
A.H. 'Harry' Harris
Rick Haynes
Arthur Hence
Athol Hill
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Merv Mullens
Arnold Nicolls
Charles O'Brien
Steve O'Brien
Jim Orr
Allen Page
C. 'Ginty' Pearson
Alex Priest
Frank Ramsbotham
Keith Rathmell
Bill Ross
John Rowe
Colin Spence, DCM
C.H. 'Spud' Spurgeon, DFC
Keith Stevens
Mack Swaddling
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